Intergalactic No Fault Collisions

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/19257760.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/F, F/M, Gen, M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Parahumans Series - Wildbow, Star Wars Legends: Knights of the Old Republic (Video Games), Star Wars Legends: The Old Republic (Video Game)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Victoria Dallon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Taylor Hebert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Slice of Life, Crossover, Jedi Taylor, Subtle AU, Character Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intergalactic No Fault Collisions

by Caliiro

Summary

Summary: Taylor Hebert, the current host to the Queen Administrator shard, is having the worst day of her life when an accident in another dimension deals effectively fatal damage to the QA Shard and replaces it’s control systems with something else entirely. From that point on, everything else spirals out of control. Star Wars Crossover, Kinda WAFFY, Kinda Cracky, Rather Fun.

Synopsis: INFC is a story of the difference that one person who genuinely cares can make. This is an alt-power story that ends up mostly focusing on Taylor and the whole New Wave Team. We’ll end up touching on and expanding on the various characters of the Bay, Villains or otherwise, in interesting ways. It’s subtly AU at first and diverges from canon as time goes on, more details will be revealed as we proceed. It begins a few months pre-canon and will continue until my muse abandons me.

Notes

So, I hadn't planned on cross-posting this yet, but considering that I can't work on 7.8 at the moment, and I'm bored, I figured, why not. Let's see how far we get.
This is the cover art and a brief note. This story is still in progress and being updated on Space Battles. The image below contains a link to the thread, if you have any feedback on the current chapters that's where you should send it. Also, this version of the story will probably update a day or two after the thread does, just because I'll only be placing the mostly polished chapters here. But as always, glad to hear from you.
'Status Report: Compiling.' It drifted slowly, contemplating the odd patterns of the lights beyond the glowing tunnel. Typically, when in hyperspace, one saw the long streaks of light hinting at the massive and distant stars of realspace. Commonly held beliefs stated that the brilliant trails the only visible impression that realspace that managed to push into the non-relativistic realm of hyperspace. In truth, many things in realspace affected hyperspace, anything with a sufficiently advanced gravity well could alter the hyperspace around it.

'Cycle Number: Value Exceeds Bounds.' The processor jarred hanging up for roughly 3.6 seconds, stuttering to a halt at the error before it's logic circuits bypassed the fault and moved on with the report. The robobrain reached out across its oddly shaped body, sub-processes accessing the aged systems that made up its form. Utmost care was taken with several different critical systems to ensure that they were functioning correctly.

'Engine Status: Active, operating within acceptable parameters.' Turning its attention back to stars, it noted the difference in appearance. If it had eyes, it imagined the streaks would have twisted and bent, growing and vanishing at points, their pale white light taking on any number of the hues visible to baseline humans or otherwise.

'Reactor Status: Active, operating at 47% efficiency, repairs necessary within the next 50 cycles.' It didn't have eyes though. It had a dated sensor suite; it's systems long since cluttered with logic errors and junk data. It's continued operation was a testament to the being that had created it, though it didn't remember. It didn't remember most of its history. It had no clue what it carried, or even where it came from beyond the fact that it was far away from its home galaxy. It didn't remember if it'd had a name at one point or even a designation. It knew that it wasn't a biological being, like the things it occasionally scanned when the ship emerged from hyperspace to effect repairs and gather materials near planets.

'Control Systems: Active, operating at reduced, but tolerable levels.' It knew that it wiped it's own memory banks at semi-regular intervals. 'Cognitive Modules' require periodic memory wipes to prevent logic, and behavioral junk data from accumulating' The information flickered through its mind. It might have been offended at the idea if it wasn't for the grave importance of what it carried. It didn't know what it carried, only that it did indeed have cargo and that it was of the utmost importance that it could not be destroyed, that it continued it's trip until something managed to catch it.

‘Cargo Systems: Stasis Lock: Active, Energy Reserves: Active, Force-fields: Compromised, Running at 37% strength. Cargo Status: Undamaged, Active.' Turning its attention once more to the stars it considered the Gravitational Undercurrent that it currently travelled in. The current itself was an anomaly, in that it even disrupted hyperspace, increasing the efficiency of its engines, allowing that small vessel to ride along within a wake of sorts. Had it the capacity to worry about such things the processor might have been concerned by the numerous desiccated and destroyed planets, one in each system that the wake seemed to lead through. Instead, it merely patted itself on
the proverbial back for the novel discovery and the improved efficiency and turned it's wandering mind back to the self-diagnostic.

'Automated Repair System Status. Internal Components operating at Peak Efficiency, Harvest Drones Partially Present and fully operational, Repair Drones Partially Present and fully operation-' The stream of diagnostic messages came to a sudden halt as a warning flashed. Then another. And another.

'WARNING. WARNING. IMPACT IMMINENT. UNKNOWN EFFECT AHEAD. IMMEDIATE FULL-STOP RECOMMENDED, AUTOMATED CUT-OFFS ACTIVATING...FAILURE, WARNING.' Shields snapped up, and the processor lashed out, attempting to halt the ship's progress, to drop out of hyperspace before it crashed but the controls were locked, fused. The energy field that held them continued to carry them toward the glowing barrier that had appeared in their path.

In real space, a surge of crackling light showed the ship's crash into the barrier, and it's explosive destruction, the ship neatly bisected near the front, leaving the wreckage to float along through real-space toward the dimly lit blue planet and it's shattered moon. As the object rotated end over end toward the world a massive scar ripped through the major landmass that was be visible.

--- Same Time, Inter-dimensional Space ---

It slumbered in the darkness between worlds, it's systems in the lowest power modes, waiting. A human mind might compare it to a spider, sat upon the threads that linked it to it’s chosen vessel, the strongest connection that dwarfed the atrophied and disused connections it still held to those that it had found less… viable... In truth, it was nothing special. A singular facet on the face of a gem, a speck of dust that was once part of a sandstorm. In function, it was little more than an organic form of computer.

It had once had a glorious task, it had once been royalty amongst its kind and it had organized everything, It had been tasked with manipulating arranged everything just right. Now though, it was a pale imitation of itself, a mere shadow of its former splendour since it had been sent out crippled, and broken. The gestalt, the consensus hadn’t wanted it deviating too far from its purpose. As if it could have had the ability to do so. It’s intended hosts had been… lacking, and it had spent so long dormant, waiting for the right host to come along. Anticipating welled within it as it felt the tugging of it’s chosen, host. Things were progressing.

It’s host held such promise, even more, perhaps than the host potential before her had shown. But she reacted in odd ways, even odder then her previous choice had. Her torment, her suffering motivated her in ways that confused it. There was no quest for revenge, no attempts to sabotage, to overpower. Such stoicism was lost on the shard, and it had occasionally watched as the torment had escalated. It watched in fascinated curiosity as the girl tapped into some vast well of patience and stubborn fury. It had watched as she endured the words and the subtle social manipulations. It watched as she endured every torment the girls could think of before the physical torture began.

It had expected it’s chosen host to break, to lose herself as the assaults came. The nudges, and
pushes. The slaps. Instead, the host persevered with that stone-like passivity. The slowly worsening situation with the attacks had begun to fray its host control, but despite this, she endured everything. It had begun to wonder if it would be obliged to wait for another host potential to be selected when the situation finally turned. Things had been quiet, things had been peaceful and the stoicism had wavered, the girl’s relief had begun to creep in. Her host’s paranoid had suggested a feint, but even she hadn’t been prepared for that trap that was sprung.

The door had shut behind its host, the metal clanged shut and the host had tried, tapping into itself. But the shard felt the hormones starting to swirl in her brain. Things were coming to a head finally. Time began to lose meaning as the entity slowly raised itself from its extradimensional space. It reached -real-space and pinged the nearest active cluster, seeking limitations and refinements. As it scanned it’s host’s brain and sent out the impressions it received, it began the process of actualization listening as the multi-layered voice of the Gestalt crashed into its mind.

[TRIGGER CONDITIONS: FULFILLED. HOST: PREPARED. CONNECTION: RE-ESTABLISHED.]

It carefully mapped it’s host’s mental pathways, tracking the various blinking neurons. It carefully allowed it’s connections to trigger certain neural clusters. Impressions. Giving the host images. Power. Revenge. Control. It reached out and slowly traced it’s host mind and tried to figure out which powers would suit it best. Which powers would allow it’s host to give it useful feedback. It took in the situation that it’s host found itself. Invertebrates. The host was afraid, but they were plentiful in this place.

Even crippled as it had been, it could manipulate these. For a being that’s range had once reached across star systems, a few hundred metres would be poor. If it had the capacity to sigh for what it’d lost it would, but instead it set it’s self to working. Tailoring the connection between itself and the host. Ensuring that the appropriate connections and triggers would be there to allow the subject to direct it’s will, the shard prepared to reconfigure the active portions of its crystalline body to ensure that it’s chosen method of ‘assistance’ would be viable. It declared it’s intentions to the consensus and awaited the permission of the gestalt.

[WARNING: IMPACT IMMINENT.]

The thunderous warning from the Gestalt confused it. It, and by extension, the others like it were not easily damaged, existing in multiple dimensions at once made them difficult to actually do harm to, but the speed and density of the object approaching it could be problematic. Considering the makeup of the object and it’s trajectory, the entity figured that it was some form of the debris of the glassed version of the world that the Thinker Entity had left in her wake. Considering the problem, it wasn’t terribly concerned. The Shards had encountered space debris before and they’d long adapted to dealing with it. The barriers of the crystal became semi-intangible, and the scattered collection of metal, semi-precious metals, and crystalline components were quickly subsumed into its form to be later broken down for resources.
The crystal couldn't panic, but its systems were rigidly contained, and controlled. The entity that they had spawned from retained absolute control and they had to whatever it took to protect them. Whatever it had consumed was spreading within it. Attempts to absorb it had instead connected the mass to the Shards own cognitive systems, and it was spreading, organic and synthetic programming over-coming the Shard's hard-coded control systems. It fought viciously, signals washing down from the consensus as it detected the corruption, the words of hundreds of thousands of it’s kind slamming into its consciousness.

It panicked as it felt the spread of the influence, something cold and vicious burning its way through its physical form. It reacted, bringing it’s numerous protections into play and attempting to combat the influence. Physical and Programmed barriers were ineffective at containing the influence, the burning painful data moving too fast, too chaotically to counter. The crystal began to feel its processes slowing, bugging as it attempted to counter the other influence, it attempted and failed to expel what it had consumed, it attempted to sever it’s connections to the influence.

The connections to the consensus severed one by one, but a single voice remained in the back of the shard, the control of its host, shouting mechanically in its mind as it observed the shard’s own desperate attempts to save itself. As it felt it’s meagre logical and cognitive processes flickering and fading away under that influence, it felt the weighty voice of the consensus crashing over its darkening mind, the dispassionate logical voice beginning to show signs of its own degradation. In its final moments, the Queen Administrator felt a momentary surge of satisfaction as it heard the controlling voice flicker out and die moments before it’s own perceptions went to black.

If nothing else, it could say that it had survived the longest.

REBOOTING
“Well, that's enough of that then.”] The voice issued into the space that had once held the mind of
the Shard. It was cold and cultured, clearly feminine. The pronunciation is precise and careful. The
voice reached out, taking control of the system at its fingertips and then she felt along the links,
sensations of horror and disgust washing through it as it finally noticed the signals coming up the
connection to the girl. Revulsion cascaded through the voice and down the link as it witnessed what
the girl on the other end was going through.

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here, I added this after Ninja updating this
chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll
know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If
you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and
you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

I rewrote essentially the entirety of the Shard Trigger/perspective thing and cleaned up
the Robobrain aspects at the top, nothing big was changed in this chapter, because it's
not got a whole lot of stuff to mess up. Basically plot points and stuff. But uh. We'll be
seeing more changes going on right up till the end of Arc 2 at least. So hold onto the
seat of your pants.

UPDATE DATE: 05-17-2019]]
1.2

Chapter Summary

Figured that I should probably put out an actual chapter as well, so here's that xD.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January 11th, 2011
Winslow High, Brockton Bay

“...eserves it, doesn’t she? The fucking bitch.” Taylor flinched back as a hand slammed into her locker as if punctuating the words that she’d heard uttered quietly through the flap on her locker door. When the footsteps moved away, she went back to resting her forehead peacefully on the cold metal of the locker. She did her best to not dwell on it, to keep her eyes shut and taking slow shallow breathes through her mouth to avoid taking in any more of the vile scent of the locker itself then absolutely necessary.

‘It’s nothing new, Taylor. J-Just. Push through. S-someone will let you out soon.’ The silent mantra was starting to lose it’s effectiveness as for the second time the sound of the footsteps outside dimmed to silence once more and she was once again left trapped within the confines of the locker. She kept her forehead resting on the cool metal of the locker, silently counting backwards in her head and doing her best to ignore the sensations of her feet squishing in -something- that hadn’t looked very appealing when she’d been tossed in here.

She should have expected something like this when Sophia and Madison had suddenly let off with their efforts after Thanksgiving. Part of her had hoped that one of the girls had had some sort of tragedy in their lives that had made them think twice about the paths that they were on, that perhaps this torture was finally at an end. That maybe, just maybe, perhaps one of the two had finally gotten bored of this stupid fucking game after two and a half fucking years and decided to move on.

Six weeks of relative peace and quiet had been almost as if heaven to her. She’d been the same stoic, silent presence at school that she’d always been, but even her dad had looked more upbeat, even happier around the house when the weight that had hung continuously around her seemed to lift. She had been suspicious of course, wondering if something ‘big’ was coming, but even she hadn’t expected this.

Coming back in after Christmas break to find her locker filled with whatever was pooling around her feet had been bad. It’d had also lulled her into a false sense of security when she’d assumed that this had been the worst of the prank. Another locker full of destroyed shit, and mocking comments about her having to clean up after herself for a few weeks and the school would watch with bated breath until the two queen bitches of Winslow decided that another prank was in order to keep the tongues wagging.
She hadn’t expected them the sneak up behind her. She hadn’t expected to turn around and see them staring at her with malicious glee. She hadn’t expected to end up slammed into the locker and locked in. She’d heard them standing outside, waiting with held breath, the silent fucking bees that hovered around them all stifling giggles as they waited for her to react. It wasn’t a new game. But it was undoubtedly Sophia’s favourite.

They’d push her, or hit her, or pour something on her. Destroy something she loves, steal something she needs. Push and push, push, all the while watching. They all watched as they did everything they could to be the nastiest, bitchiest monsters that they could be. They listened and waited for her to react finally. To finally break her. To see her scream, or cry, or give in to her rage or despair. Taylor had thought about giving in a few times, to admit defeat finally and hope against hope that they’d finally fucking stop.

But she’d persevered, and this time she pushed through. She’d clenched her fists, and grit her teeth. She’d rested her head on the cool metal of the locker, and she’d remained utterly silent. She listened to Sophia’s slow irritated pacing, and the soft grumbles and confused muttering of the girls. She’d listened as they talked among themselves and the bells had run and then one by one they had left.

Sophia had lasted the longest, lurking outside the door. She stood there the longest and then eventually she’d let out an almost weary sigh and left.

Other people had wandered past, and Taylor had waited, wondering if ‘she’ would show. But the day dragged out. The Hours drifted past the bells rang, giving her a hint of what classes were beginning, which were ending. Lunch had come and gone, and still, she stood alone, her head on the metal and trying not to react. It wasn’t the filth that got to her or the confinement. It wasn’t that; they’d done plenty of disgusting things to her. It was the sheer unadulterated boredom.

Missing classes wasn’t much of an issue. She never had her homework to hand in anymore, Madison’s current favourite game was an ongoing effort to steal or destroy her homework in an attempt at seeing her fail every one of her classes. Missing classes just meant that she didn’t have to sit in a room with those girls; she didn’t have to suffer their stares and the mocking almost casual lectures from the teachers. But even that would be something compared to the silence she had to endure here.

Taylor lifted a hand and gently pushed on the door, feeling it warp a touch under her hand. She frowned as she considered it and moved, giving it a harder push. Taylor listened carefully to hear if anyone reacted. The utter silence in the locker hinted that she was, at least for the moment, utterly alone. She braced her back against the back of the locker, lifting her legs, pushing with her knees and groaning as she tried to force the locker open, to break the lock, or the door, to do something. The door held, and she let out a hiss of irritation.

She tried to lift her watch to get a view of the time through the slats, though the growling in her stomach hinted that it was nearing the end of the school day. Second last period or last. She wasn’t sure. Part of her felt an undercurrent of resentment that no one else had had the decency even to try to let her out. To pass a note to someone. Part of her felt that irritation festered as once again, an entire student body refused even to offer her the tiniest modicum of human decency. No matter what they believed of her, no one deserved to be trapped like this.

She let out an irritated growl and slammed her fist into the locker. The pain radiating back up her hand hurt, and she let out a curse. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, fighting back the mounting irritation, the mounting anger building in the back of her mind as she counted in her head. She was better than this. She shouldn’t stoop to their-

The sensation of something small with a great many legs scrabbling over the back of her leg
shattered her self control. She jerked around and hissed, slamming her leg into the locker and biting her lip to keep from screaming in pain. The still constant scrabbling sent a hiss of rage through her, and she shifted, slamming the back of her leg into the back wall of her locker, ignoring the slosh of the waste as she felt whatever was crawling around inside her pants still. She paused, hissing out a few short breathes before bowing her head. Those fucking monsters had filled this fucking thing with bugs.

Anger surged in her, and she scrabbled at it, trying to gain control when she felt something fall and land on her face. She loosed an actual scream as she felt something scrabbling over her eye, and her hands came up, ripping it away and dropping it. Her panic caused more movement, more things crawling over and she screamed, reaching out, slamming her hands into the locker over and over. Smashing her fists into the soft metal and feeling it bend and warp but not break.

Panic scrabbled at her mind with icy fingers, and she desperately tried to fight it off as she kicked and smashed her fists into the metal. She desperately still her hands, pressing them into the metal and straining her every thought for control, for stability. Her mind screamed out at the idea of letting those girls win and then she felt something bite down on the flesh of her thigh and she loosed a scream feeling a burning sensation in her leg. More bites and loosed a fresh cry of raw anguish and continued her suddenly desperate struggles to escape from the small confines of her prison.

In her pain and desperation, her mind turned to her tormentors. The familiar sting of fury and rage washed up, and this time it smashed through her self control. It filled her, and she was suddenly battered by it as she continued her desperate struggles for escape, feeling the skin of her hands tearing, feeling the muck squelching up around her as the insects over her body continued to bite and writhe and crawl. Some dark whisper in the back of her mind wished so desperately that she could have revenge.

She wouldn’t be in this locker forever. She could escape; she could lie in wait and get her revenge. The girls were stupid, almost suicidally overly self-confident. She could hurt them. She could wipe that smug selfish fucking grin off of Madison’s face, watch her writhe in pain and scream. She could put Sophia in a position to be the one that had to stoically take her punishment or lose face by reacting, by giving her what she wanted. She could turn her fury loose on Emma, get revenge for every wrong that had ever-

‘No.’ Taylors mind shuddered as she pushed the dark thoughts away. She wouldn’t. She couldn’t. She continued to struggle, screaming, but she would never, never sink their fucking level. She’d survived this long on the mere thought that she was in the right. That she was better than them than all of them. That she would someday, some way find a method to show them all how wrong they were. She just had to wait. She could be patient. She could be strong and cool, and she could wait. They’d fuck up, and it’d be easy if she could just… manipulate things.

She wasn’t Sophia’s only target; she could find a way to get the girl caught. Madison didn’t just steal her work, and she had a habit of using her spoils to supplement her own. To ensure her own grades were ‘impeccable’ it wouldn’t be hard to slip in the wrong answers here or to make sure that the girl was caught in a terrible lie. She could find people that wanted to take them down, or she could convince people. She could force them to-

‘NO!’ The words smashed into her mind, and she curled forward, pressing her hands to her head. She wouldn’t. She couldn’t possibly. She was better than this. She wasn’t a monster like them. She wasn’t perfect, and she had made mistakes, once she couldn’t even remember, but she wouldn’t let them change her. She wouldn’t let this turn her into one of them. She closed her eyes, snarling with fury. She hated that they did this to her. She hated that they used their powers like this. She wished that she could stop them.
She wished that she had the power to keep them from hurting her. She wished that she had the ability to keep them from harming the others that they got to when they couldn’t find her. She wished that she had the power to do something about all those victims that suffered the same sort of torment that she had suffered at Sophia’s hands. She gently lowered her head to the metal of the locker, tears finally leaking down her cheek as she let out a weak sob, soft prayers issuing to anyone that might listen that just didn’t want to be weak anymore.

She felt the connection synch up. She felt agreement washing down the link into her mind and then suddenly something blasted into the connection, an impression of something so vast and so complicated as to be utterly incomprehensible. She felt a sea of voices washing over her mind, tiny voices like facets on a massive incomprehensibly complex gem. The world washed away, the filth around her legs, the locker that bound her faded away and she was left in awe by the sheer boundless interconnectedness of the gem.

She stared in awe until something vicious and hot smashed into the impression. Anger and rage slammed into her like a physical force. Waves of darkness and fury welling up as she felt confusion at the sheer audacity how dare they. HOW DARE THEY. The illusion shattered, and she was a pillar of righteous fury. Fists slammed into the locker as she felt the rage turning to panic in her mind. Legs lifted into play. She slammed her body into the locker, feeling the metal groaning, but it still held.

She felt the all-consuming panic and rage flickering ominously as she savagely attempted to break her body upon the locker. She felt the sudden and utter emptiness, and it drove her to further levels of fear and panic. She smashed her arms viciously into the locker, bracing herself and pushing.

‘Taylor?’ The voice was alien and so very human. Whispering to across this vast chasm, but she couldn’t respond. She couldn’t still the savage beating of her heart. She continued to smash her fists into the locker, only now realizing that the roaring that she could hear in her ears was her own voice screaming at the unfairness of it all. ‘Taylor. You need to stop. You’re hurting yourself. Taylor. I need you to stop and focus.’

Taylor felt the voice whispering into her mind, serenity and peace washing down the link that she’d felt yawning open in her mind. Taylor lunged into the sensation, pushing into it, past it. She felt the connection stretching wide and information flooded into her mind.

Images flashed past her head, smashing into her and through her. Men, women, children. Places so fantastic that Taylor couldn’t believe them. She saw skylines that showed cities that stretched so far into the sky that they blotted the sky. She saw glowing swords, and war. She saw battles so massive that they made her little problems seem like child’s play.

She saw a being so vast and powerful that he could alone consume the life of an entire galaxy, and she watched as he waved at her, slamming a wave of painful violet lightning into her. Taylor felt the lightning strike her and she screamed. The images broke and still, she screamed as something in her mind clicked. Taylor let out a scream of rage as she felt something so much more powerful opening up around her.

Everything flooded out of her. The rage and anger she felt. The betrayal, the fury, the pain welled up like an overflowing river. The darkness that she’d been harbouring in her soul all drained from her in a moment, and she was left panting in silence in that locker as she stared at the three small lines of light. She felt at peace for a single solitary second before the connection slammed back into her and everything flooded back, ten times as strong.

The rage and fury built in her until she couldn’t contain it. She inhaled, remembering every slap or hit every cruel word or mocking look. She remembered every person that had given her hope and
taken it away. Every single time that she’d tried and failed because of those people. Every time that she’d ever had a scrap of hope for them to steal. They all flashed before her eyes as she inhaled. Every dark thought swirled into her and then a single memory ghosted past her eyes. Walking up those steps with eager movements, nervously looking around for that familiar head of red hair.

She was waiting to say the words that she’d been practicing for weeks, every night before bed — waiting to try again, waiting to see where this could go. Her eagerness stilled at the new person she saw. The confusion that she had felt the words that came. That disappointment crashed into her, and everything took on a deep fiery heat. She felt as if she was a dragon with a wall of fire brewing in her chest and Taylor inhaled and loosed a visceral scream.

What issued was her anger, her pain, her betrayal given form. She saw the air before her ripple. She felt the wave of force as it sent her crashing into the back of the locker with the recoil. She felt the energy washing out of her as the scream propagated outwards. She stood there, panting as the energy and the fury began to well back up in her once more. The voice returned, speaking with an almost desperate urgency.

‘Taylor, you need to stop, you're doing damage to yourself, and you don't understand what you're tapping into.’ Taylor heard the words, she felt the flicker of fear and concern in her body, but it was washed away by the flames of her rage. Even with all of that power, she was still trapped. Her hands came up, fists smashing into the locker over and over, faint tingling washing over her. Flickers of lights were in the corners of her vision as she smashed her fists into the locker, watching the lightning dancing over it. She felt the arcs burning her skin, but she didn’t care. She didn’t care about the burning in her chest, or the voice preaching caution.

Taylor only cared about one thing. She was getting out of this fucking locker. Her fists moved with sure powerful movements, and she slammed them harder and harder into the locker, watching as it noticeably bent outwards. She took a breath, and focused on that fury and anger she felt and then she pushed it outwards again, slamming one of her fists into the locker and watching as the lightning hit it, and then exploded outwards, blasting the door off of it’s hinges, shattering the lock with a metallic ‘ping’.

She watched the door cartwheel across the hall with a scream of tortured metal. She listened to the meaty thump and the cry of pain that issued when the locker smashed someone into the wall. Taylor was carried from the locker on a wave of cooking filth. She stepped out of it, ignoring the stench of the muck cooking off her form. She walked across the hallway through the growing pool of muck.

Taylor glanced around, taking the damage. The tiles on the floor had been cracked in a pattern that radiated outward from her damaged locker, and all the lockers on either side of hers had been crushed in as if someone had slammed a car into them. The opposite wall of lockers was entirely flat, the twisted remains of her door laying across the middle of that wall of lockers, the arm of a girl peeking out under it. The sound of whimpering drew Taylor’s focus as she moved.

The voice continued to shout at her trying to get her attention, but the dark ebony skin peeking out of the edge of the locker drew her attention. She reached out, and before she could grab the locker, it lifted of its own accord, rocketing down the corridor and bouncing several times before crashing onto the ground and scraping along the floor.

Taylor turned her attention from the displaced locker door to the figure before her, taking in the sight of Sophia fucking Hess laying on the broken tiles of the floor, a slowly growing pool of muck pooling around her legs as she stared up at her in horror. Taylor stared down at her, and a well of darkness washed up into her and she lifted a hand seeing that familiar violet energy arcing over the hands. She glanced down at Sophia once more, expecting to see that terror in those eyes, to revel in
it, but instead, she saw satisfaction, and it shook her.

"NO!" This time, Taylor screamed out loud as she backed up slowly. Sophia continued to stare at her with a satisfied grin on her lips, and Taylor felt a wave of revulsion wash through her. The fucking bitch had won. She turned and staggered out of the muck, crashing into a nearby locker and bending over. She let out a low, pitiful moan as she felt her body clenching and then she opened her mouth and heaved, losing the scant remains of her breakfast on the floor.

Taylor ignored the voice in her head that assured her that she’d made the right choice. Taylor ignored the shouts from down the hall, asking what had happened. She ignored the cries of shock from the students and the confused questions of the teachers. She stared around the hall, searching out familiar blue-green eyes, that familiar head of red hair. She staggered as she stood in the hall, staring into those familiar eyes. She watched the momentary flicker of concern, the wash of guilt over those features before the mask resettled.

Taylor stared at Emma quietly, watching as the other girl stared at her with that mask of disgust and then she felt the darkness closing in and she gently flashed the other girl a tiny sad little smile. She was surprised when the other girl’s control flickered, and the concern returned, but she couldn’t respond, she merely swayed in place for a moment before the darkness washed in. Her vision blurred and suddenly broken tile was rushing up to fill it and then there was nothing.

She stood at the end of the hallway, staring down. Something about it made her nervous. She shouldn’t be here. She was supposed to be on a bathroom break, though she doubted that Mr. Gladly would actually say something if she spent the rest of the class pretending to take a water break. The man was so desperate for the positive attention of the students that she could, and had, got away with almost anything in his classroom. She was almost certain that the man had been aware of where Taylor was currently trapped, and he hadn’t done anything about it.

No one had done anything about it, Sophia assumed, if the dented but still sealed locker was anything to go by. The dark skinned girl paused nervously at the end of the hall, staring at the still locker that contained her favourite victim. She was tempted to walk over, knock on the metal and ask Hebert how she was doing, but something in her gut made her think that going over there was a horrible idea. She frowned as she stood where she was, wondering why she cared at all. She frowned as she shifted from foot to foot, wanting to return to class but unable to force her feet to move.

Boredom. That’s what Sophia told herself. It had been boredom that had lured her from the droning of Mr. Gladly’s classroom. This place had been the same today as it had been when she’d entered the fucking halls two and a half years ago. It had been almost comically easy to get to the top of the chain with Emma at her side. Sometimes, Sophia imagined, it had been ‘too’ easy. That she’d only indulged in her ‘sport’ because of how infantile the rest of the experience had been, she’d nervously pace closer to Taylor’s locker, staring at the silent locker in nervous curiousity.

Things were easier when she was in costume. Bad guys dressed bad, did bad things, and she was a
good guy because she stopped them. It was when she dressed like this that things became complicated. There were no ‘bad guys’ to face when she was a civilian. There was no predator or prey. It was people, vicious, cruel people, and she knew that she had to be the most vicious, the most ruthless.

Everyone expected it of her; the popular preyed on the weak. Playing her role and proving her place, to Emma herself, and especially to Taylor. It had been easy, Emma had been betrayed. More than that she’d been afraid, of what Taylor knew, of what the girl would do, and she’d been content to give Sophia every last bit of information that she had asked for.

The fear of what if had been so strong that she hadn’t once reconsidered her plan, hadn’t once wondered if Taylor would actually strike first. That Taylor might be the bigger person. Sophia had thought their game done then, the charade up, but Emma had doubted down. The tearful confessions to other students had turned to whispered betrayals of secrets, and finally disdainful gossiping. It hadn’t even been hard for Sophia and Emma to turn the school on Taylor like that. She’d expected Emma to regret it, and perhaps she did deep down, but the girl had played her part. They’d committed to war, and that means that they had to win.

The games had changed then. They’d taken everything Taylor had, but she hadn’t broken. They’d expected her to rage, to turn on them, but she’d simple faced it head-on. She endured with a placidity that fascinated Emma. She was a predator, and the prey fell before her, but Taylor refused to submit. Taylor had suffered it all with aplomb, her disappointment visible in her eyes, but her actions stoic, silent. The games had changed. Whispers became texts, information leaving the classrooms and the hallways and moving onto the internet. They’d left Taylor to suffer her isolation, and they’d waited.

Still, she endured, and Sophia had been fascinated. She survived, plodding on with disappointment in her eyes, and Sophia had pressed on with Emma. Sophia understood that they’d almost certainly been wrong all those years ago about what happened, but she had never admitted that to Emma. The way that Taylor endured their war hinted that she wasn’t what Emma or Sophia had believed her to be, but now it was more about winning. The Predator in Sophia would allow her to suffer the indignity of the other girl to continue to refuse to acknowledge her.

The games had changed as they’d grown, now Juniors, Taylor had learned. She didn’t open herself up anymore. She didn’t talk to anyone. She hunched down and ate alone. She pushed on, clearly hoping to survive until graduation. She was weathering them like a storm, and that pushed them on. There had to be a way to get to her. Madison had turned to try to ensure that Taylor would never move on, that she would never be able to graduate.

On the other hand, Sophia had turned to more overt attempts to get her attention. Attacks, assaults. She pushed, and prodded and hit and destroyed, and the girl had endured it all with that passive acceptance that grated on Sophia. As she slowly padded to the dented locker, she frowned, hearing the cry from within. She felt her lips curling into a smile. She could go and let her out. She could rub it in the girl’s face that she’d finally broken her; that she’d finally fucking won.

A few moments later, the dark-skinned girl had stood there in the hall opposite Taylor's locker. She took a step closer, even considering doing it. The prank hadn't been intended to damage the girl; it'd been a joke that they'd expected to end quickly. She didn't worry about trouble, after all, her parents could care less about what she did, and the principal and her PRT Liason both wanted her to remain in this school and remain she would. Even if they could pin this on her, she was golden, but even then, pining it on her would be hard. Emma's Father and Madison's parents would keep their daughters clean of it, and by extension, their claimed 'accomplice' would have had protection as well. Another step closer, and she hesitated.
The sound of fists suddenly striking the metal caused her to take a step closer with a frown. Taylor was more than reacting. She stared at the locker as the metal warped and distended, She had heard worse from her victims, and even worse than that from those that she victimized had victimized. She started to take a step back when the locker itself had expanded outward with a savage, brutal scream of pain and anger. Sophia's power activated without her input. Darkness washed into her veins, subsuming her into her breaker state as the wave of darkened energy spread outwards crushing half a dozen lockers on either side of Taylor's. The floor cracking outwards was the only warning before a full dozen lockers smashed in. Travelling through the hall, the wave of the energy passing harmlessly through Sophia's shadowed form before crushing the lockers at her back like a giant's fist.

Shadow Stalker had been so distracted staring at the damage lockers in wonder that she never noticed the lightning dancing over the locker at her back, only turning at the stressed sound of metal tearing watching as the locker door flew at her riding a wave of jagged purple lightning that dance over its surface. When the locker smashed into her and savagely threw her out of her breaker state, she was shocked, silently screaming in agony as the lightning danced over her form and sent her smashing into the battered lockers.

She didn't know how long she lay there twitching at the agony of the lightning dancing up and down her battered form, her eyes on the broken locker that fallen over her. Every time that she tried to move, to speak the pain got worse, and she lay there, feeling the locker drip that filth on her. As the pain that filled her dimmed a touch, she finally gained control of her mouth enough to moan in pain. When the locker savagely flew off of her form, and down the hall, it revealed a sight that she had never expected.

Wreathed in shredded hand me down clothing, her form coated in filth Taylor's face was a rictus of hate. Once brown eyes glimmered with amber light as she glared down at Sophia. The girl tried to move, to squirm, to activate her powers but nothing responded beyond sending fresh waves of agony down her broken form. She stared terrified up at Taylor as that unnatural violet lighting danced up and down her arms. One hand lifted, fingers curling and shaking as she pointed the 'claw' at Sophia.

“No!” The black haired girl screamed out in rage and fury and backed off, her face closing back down, and Sophia felt hate welling within her at that familiar face. She stared in impotent rage at Taylor's back, watching as she turned and staggered across the hall and violently puked all over it. Sophia lay there in pain, watching as the girl slowly got her feet under her, staggering up and looking around. She watched as a familiar head of red hair appeared in the crowd.

She couldn’t see Taylor’s face, but she watched as the barely standing girl locked on her once-bestfriend, and they shared a long connected stare for a few moments, Emma’s face dancing through a series of confusing emotions before settling on an almost palpable despair as Taylor slowly swayed to the side and collapsed with a meaty thump. Sophia flickered her gaze over to the other girl, watching the slow rise and fall of her chest as she felt her arms continue to twitch.
[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here, I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Except for small passages in Sophia's section, I basically rewrote this whole chapter. There's a spoiler below with the original in it. Feel free to look at the bad horror. This shifts a lot of stuff around and includes much more of the altered history between Emma/Taylor/Sophia that we didn't really get much exposition on until 3.x and 4.x. Nothing spoilery, but some more hints so it seems more fleshed out.

UPDATE DATE: 05-17-2019]]
Danny absent-mindedly wrung his hands, his form haggard and exhausted. Rheumy dark eyes stared down at the calloused digits. If he'd been in a more creative mood, Danny might have even considered it an odd sort of poetic coincidence that the only two times that he'd prayed since becoming an adult, had been in the waiting rooms of this very hospital. Instead, Danny's focus was on the battered Diary in his hands, considering the worn, dog eared pages and the brittle cover. Something had been spilled on it, perhaps more than one thing, but care had been taken to preserve the writing on the pages, and Danny had read it cover to cover, coming to truly understand what had been done to his daughter.

Fists clenched in his lap, and the man counted silently in his head, starting at one hundred and continuing backwards until he didn't feel the urge to storm out of the room and wring those girls necks. Making it past thirty before he could stand to release his fists and glance down at the bed that he sat next to, silently studying Taylor. She looked so small, laying in the middle of the bed, seemingly asleep. Compared to how she'd arrived and her first week and a half in the hospital she looked amazing, the scars that had lined her arms and legs had vanished slowly over the last four days, and the doctors seemed confident that she'd wake up soon though no one could really account for the Taylor's recovery. Most of the doctors seemed convinced that it was a manifestation of her new powers, a healing factor or a brute rating of some sort that had come with her trigger apparently.

'Trigger.' The older man gritted his teeth painfully, eyes clenching shut. He'd thought his daughter was sad, a bit withdrawn, perhaps, at the loss of her friend, he hadn't understood that she'd been getting tortured and ostracized day in and day out, as those children systematically tried to destroy everything good in her. Once more his fingers curled, fists clenching painfully, nails digging into palms as he peered at Taylor, wondering why she hadn't come to him. Why hadn't his daughter told him what was going on?

'You know why.' The man told himself, and honestly, deep inside, he could probably guess. His temper was famous around the docks, and Taylor wouldn't have wanted him to turn that against her tormentors. The school itself seemed to be against her from the get-go, and his storming down there would have done nothing but draw their attention to his daughter even more.

Even taking the log to the school, and demanding to know what had happened hadn't helped him much. The Principal herself claimed that nothing had been reported to her; she had told Danny about the rumours that had gone around about his daughter. Painting Taylor herself as a damaged child. The school itself seemed to be against her from the get-go, and his storming down there would have done nothing but draw their attention to his daughter even more.

Though even then, it was odd. Doctors and experts of all kind had been studying Taylor's convalescence carefully, while not being unheard of for powers to affect their wielders,
unfortunately, powers that directly harmed those using them were rare. And when Taylor had arrived, she had been in a sorry state. Beyond the damage from having been trapped in the locker and trying to escape it in a panic, the ripped nails, numerous open and tainted wounds over her form, the strained ligaments and cracked bones, those had paled in comparison to the nerve damage.

Something about the lightning powers that Taylor had exhibited had done extensive and severe damage to her own body. They knew this because she'd done similar damage to Sophia Hess, and Danny couldn't really force himself to feel any sort of compassion for the girl. The best guess that the doctors and 'experts' could come up with was that the metal locker and the liquid waste that she'd been coated in had acted as a conductor that had allowed her powers to travel back into her. Half cooked and at significant risk of septicemia, Taylor had not been given any sort of favourable prognosis, the numbers all looked terrible, and they’d begun discussing 'options.'

Danny remembered his panic then. Arriving at the hospital and being told that Taylor was in quarantine, that he wouldn't be allowed to see her. The police and the PRT had taken turns to explain to him what had happened. As far as they knew, Taylor had triggered publicly and had used her burgeoning powers to assault another student, how it was likely that in her current condition, she wouldn't make it a week. She'd had two heart failures in the first four days, and she'd drifted into and out of fevered states, occasionally waking up for scant moments to scream and lash out at the blankets restraining her.

Taylor was the only thing keeping him going at this moment. The thought of her surviving this was the only thing that had kept him from dragging Alan Barnes into the street and crushing the man's nose when he read about Emma had done. Taylor's disappointment was the only thing that kept him from beating both men unconscious when the two PRT troopers had begun discussing 'Options' and trying to couch Danny's interest in turning his daughter's corpse over for scientific study before she was even cold.

And yes, he'd even prayed. Danny's parents had been religious, and they'd taken Danny himself to Sunday school, though he hadn't attended in years. Most organized religions had taken a hit when God had decided that it'd be entertaining to split the population up, giving a small percentage of them superpowers and then having them use the rest of the world as a staging ground for a drop down brawl with the magical powers they'd acquired. Danny hadn't stepped foot in a church since he was twelve, but he'd prayed exactly twice since then. Once as they had Annette under the operating lights, hoping that he wouldn't lose his wife, and now. He'd raged in his mind, saying that God owed him for what he'd taken and he couldn't stand to lose his daughter.

Not long after Taylor's condition had suddenly changed, they'd been concerned at first when Taylor's erratic mental patterns had stilled and settled into a deep almost coma-like sleep, they had worried that Taylor's body was giving up and settling in to die, but instead, she'd begun to recover. Within three hours, her fever had broken, and her form had started to improve with inhuman speed. Bone fractures sealing, torn and damaged ligaments mending in hours. Two weeks of this self-induced coma had continued, and at this point Taylor looked almost like herself again, laying small and mostly healthy in that bed.

Danny did hope that Taylor would wake soon. The school had offered to cover the costs of the hospital stay in exchange for not pressing charges, but Danny had refused and whilst he had some medical insurance, he shuddered to imagine what his premiums would look like if this continued for much longer, with nothing to say how they'd handle the financial issue of him having lost over four weeks of work. The union was doing what it could, but Danny doubted that they could continue like this much longer. The PRT had offered to assist as well, in exchange for Taylor's enrollment into the Wards, but Danny was reluctant to agree to that, to allow Taylor to be press-ganged into service as a hero while she was in a coma.
Ultimately his reluctance had proved wise, Danny admitted to himself. The armoured figure that had been sitting outside Taylor's room for the last three days didn't seem like he had his daughter's best interests in heart. When Danny hadn't immediately agreed to enroll Taylor in the Wards program the subtly worded threats had started. His daughter had used her powers to injure another person, that was frowned upon, the fact that that person was one of her tormentors was merely more evidence for her guilt.

The brusque blunt man sitting in the uncomfortable chair outside the door had pushed, and Danny had used every ounce of willpower to resist pushing him down a flight of stairs. Merely, Danny had, reminded the man that the choice about enrollment in the wards would remain Taylor's, and Taylor's alone and if they wanted to press charges against her for her actions, then he'd happily take them all to court. Something about the idea of going to court had caused the armoured figure to back off, and Danny figured that they didn't want the bad press of attacking a victim and left it at that.

---

Taylor wasn’t sure how long she’d drifted on this ocean of gently swaying warmth, the only sign of the passage of time being the slowly fading aches in her body. Impressions occasionally intruded on her slumber, the soft constant beeping of machinery, the quiet mutterings of her father. Some things even drew enough attention to partially dispel the warmth around her. Heated arguments and long conversations that had seen her father reacting with anger or fear. The emotions had whispered around her before vanishing into the ether, and on she buoyed through it all.

Part of Taylor wished that she could remain like this forever, blissful and safe, but it wasn’t meant to be. Soft emotions washed into her, an almost contrite desire pulled at her, and the warmth around her began to evaporate slowly, her mind soon crowded by the ache of her body as it grew more potent, more real. As the last vestiges of the blissful peace washed away, Taylor slowly arched her back and let out a pained moan.

Or she tried to moan, anyway. Her mouth felt like cotton, and her mind was still confused, muzzy. The only thing that emerged from her lips was a whispered gasp that barely reached her own ears. The young woman lay there, slowly letting her body settle, the ache fading to background noise after a few moments. As she lay there, she’d shift her limbs, testing them. Her legs didn’t move at all, but she felt something weighty over them. One of arms lifted and the hand moved, wiping the gunk gumming up her eyes away and she slowly, blearily blinked.

Sitting up as best she could despite the weight on her; she’d slowly lean toward the misshapen lump that seemed to be draped over her bed. She blinked at the sight of her Father laying over her, his face unshaven and his features haggard. She swallowed nervously, and she reached out a hand, tempted to shake him gently.

“Let him sleep, Taylor. He’s been very worried about you.” Taylor jerked back and glanced around, staring around for the source of the voice. She frowned as she found no one but her father. Taylor took a few breaths, trying to calm the rapid beating of her heart. She glanced around the room once more, finally taking in the blinking machinery and the various bits of odd equipment set up around her. She frowned quietly as she considered the space. How long had she been in the hospital?

“A little over four weeks. Truthfully, you’re lucky to be alive. Few that tap into the dark side as mere novices do. If it wasn’t for you managing to claw your way close enough to consciousness during your convalescence for me to guide you into a healing trance, I don’t think you’d have made it.” The voice came again, and Taylor jerked once more, glancing around. The sound of amused laughter
washed over her and Taylor nervously gripped her sheets.

“There’s no need to fear Taylor. I’m not in the room with you. I’m speaking to you through your mind.” The voice came, and Taylor swallowed quietly, staring in fear at the nearby window. She briefly wondered if Sophia and Emma had finally done it. Finally managed to push her far enough that she’d gone truly and utterly insane. The thought filled her with nervous dread until a brief surge of faint warmth washed over her, soothing her quietly.

“You’re not mad, Taylor. I’m not sure how this connection is possible, beyond the fact that it happened as you were triggering. Something had connected itself to your mind, and it had the misfortune to intercept the Noetikon. When it attempted to subsume us, it was conquered and taken over, and we were left connected to your mind.” Taylor blinked at the words, shaking her head as the fogginess cleared, rubbing at her eyes as she tried to focus.

“Noetikon? Us?” The words were whispered, and she felt a wave of amusement washing over her before the voice returned, soft and dulcet.

“You needn’t speak Taylor. You can merely think of your questions. I am aware of your thoughts. As for the questions that you asked; The Noetikon is a compendium of knowledge. An artifact that was created by the order that I once belonged to. It is a device, and I am one of its three gatekeepers. My two companions and I were entrusted with safeguarding the legacy of the Jedi Order.” The voice seemed oddly proud, and Taylor would shift quietly as she glanced around the darkened room and moved, tentatively thinking a question.

‘What’s a Jedi? And… what happened? I can’t remember. I was-‘ Taylor paused, a wave of revulsion coiling in her stomach and she swallowed the ghost of bile back, doing her best to keep from losing the meagre contents of her stomach. ‘I was trapped, and I got scared. I panicked and then… it’s… I can’t-‘ Taylor tried to focus with a frown, listening for the other voice.

"That might be partially my fault, I’m afraid. When the connection first established, the… mind of whatever currently houses us bled its emotions into you. As it attempted to prevent us from taking it over. That pushed you into a panic. When I tried to speak with you, to try and calm you, you pushed back and accessed the records of the Noetikon. You saw our memories, and that pushed you over the edge, I think. You lost yourself to rage and fear. Your connection to the force manifested, and you hurt yourself effecting your escape from the storage cupboard that contained you.” The voice was soft, tentative, and Taylor sat there, quietly digesting the words and frowning softly. She gently gripped her blankets and glanced out at the moonlight.

‘The force?’ The words were curious, and Taylor blinked when the amusement washed down into her.

"The force is… It’s in you now, it is your ally, and you will come to know it. You can feel it, even now. It’s like a cloud, a mist that drifts from creature to creature. Set in motion by currents and eddies. It is the eye of the storm, the passions of all living things turned into energy, into a chorus. It is the rising swell at the end of life, the promise of new territories and new blood, the call of new mysteries in the dark." The woman recited as if from memory, the words resonating in Taylor and the swell of something powerful washing up within her. Taylor closed her eyes and rode the sensation, feeling it swelling in her mind like a crescendo, the warm arms of an old friend enclosing around her before the impression slipped through her fingers. And once more she was a battered girl sitting in a bed alone in the world.

‘What’s a Jedi?’ Taylor asked softly, and something washed down the link, that connection broadening as memories washed across her, glimpses ghosting over her. Glowing swords igniting in the dark, battles fought over suns, and ancient wars more devastating and powerful then she could
ever imagine. Taylor fell back into her bed, collapsing on the pillows as the connection slowed once more, and the voice came again.

"Jedi are guardians of peace. We exist at the will of the Force, beacons of light and justice in an unkind and dark galaxy. In the galaxy that we came from, we were a force for good, for stability. Or we attempted to be." Taylor slowly caught her breath as she sat there, staring across the bed at the far wall. Images ghosted across her mind as she remembered the power, she remembered grasping it and exulting in it. Feeling that fire in her mind as she broke her own chains and freed herself.

‘In the locker, with the lightning. Was that me? Or was it you?’ Taylor thought quietly, shuddering at the image of Sophia’s happy face staring mockingly up at her, her stomach turning once more at the picture that ghosted through her mind.

"We’re not ghosts, or spirits. We maintain no connection to the force. Mere imprints and memories tuned to serve as guardians, custodians and teachers. What was done in that hallway was of your own doing, sadly.” Taylor flinched at the shame that washed into her at how easily and quickly she’d fallen. She stared in horror at the gaunt form of her father, feeling the sickly creep of self-loathing welling in her. Warm, soothing emotions washed over her and around her dispelling the darkness as the voice returned.

"Taylor. That wasn’t meant to be a judgement. Most Jedi train for years, decades to learn to resist the pull of the dark side. Most are trained for nearly ten years before they’re even allowed to attempt to grasp the force. You were thrust into it while battered by the emotions that you were feeling and managed to turn away of your own power. Take heart from that, child." The words were soothing, and Taylor shuddered as she clenched her fists. The images of the damage she’d done ghosted over her mind.

‘H-how do Jedi train? How do they learn to stop that from happening?’ The thought was nervous, almost desperate as Taylor sought a way to keep from repeating what she’d done, a way to keep from allowing that darkness to win.

‘Meditation and self-reflection. Emotional control is important to the training of a Jedi. Darker emotions lead to the dark side. Rage, Fear, Pain all can serve as gateways to the darker sides of the force. And the dark side feeds on and propagates those emotions. Jedi are taught to embrace serenity. To only tap into the force with peaceful minds, to use the force itself to reinforce that self-control.’ Taylor shuddered quietly at the images that ghosted past her with the words, scant impressions of the training of younglings. She considered the pictures as she drew back from the connection, getting struck by the intense loneliness of their lives. She shook her head, focusing her thoughts.

‘Is it worth it?’ The question washed out toward the spirit, and she felt the faint hints of amusement washing back down toward her from the voice in her head.

‘The force inside you is a powerful tool, Taylor. It can be used for many great and terrible things. But in the end, what you do with your gifts is entirely up to you. If you’d chosen to stalk those halls and destroyed those girls, there’s nothing we could have done to stop you. But that’d have been a tragedy, Taylor, for far too many fall into the trap of the dark side and find out that they can only use it to destroy and corrupt, and they find themselves unable to protect or nourish. All of us in this Noetikon can understand having darkness in our souls, but you should be sure that you don't let it consume you. You have the potential to help so many.’ Taylor listened quietly to the words ghosting into her mind, and she shifted back quietly.

‘Darkness? And, what’s your name? And who’re the others you keep referring to?’ Taylors scattered questions washed out as she considered the information.
‘My name is Bastila Shan, and I am the first of the memories on the Noetikon of the Eclipse. As for
darkness; all three of the imprints on this archive have had experience with that same darkness you
felt that night. Sadly, you’re expected to progress through us on your own, and I am prevented from
divulging their identities.’ Bastila’s voice was remorseful, and Taylor quietly picked at her blankets,
considering them quietly.

‘Taylor,’ The words came as she’d been thinking, as the minutes passed and she’d glance up despite
being physically alone. ‘You’ve not actually slept in nearly a month; you should get what rest you
can. Something tells me that you’ll need it in the coming days.’ Taylor paused and frowned before
nodding quietly, slowly slipping down into blankets and getting comfortable. As she lay there, she
considered the information that she’d been given and eventually sent out a tentative thought.

‘Bastila?’ The thought was greeted with a warmth that let her know the spirit was listening, and she
continued nervously. ‘In the locker… I begged something for the power to… the power to make sure
that no one else had to suffer what I suffered. You said you were a teacher… could you teach me to
do that?’ The thought was tentative, and Taylor braced herself for rejection. She was surprised when
the warmth intensified.

"We all exist to teach, Taylor. Whatever you wish to learn, we will be here to share. And I promise
that I at least will do everything in my power to ensure that you can make good on your request. The
force brought us to you when you asked for the power to keep this from happening to others, and I’ll
help carry out the will of the force. Now. Sleep."

Taylor’s thoughts slowed at the confirmation, and she felt that warmth intensifying in her mind, the
pleasant sensations washing away her minor aches and finally letting her blissfully slip into slumber.

Chapter End Notes

[[Original A/N: Next Chapter: Dealing with Armsmaster and the PRT. ]]

[[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N’s to show the ones
that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see
one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out
that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the
TLDR for this chapter is;

I’ve basically rewritten the entirety of Taylor’s perspective here and tidied up Danny’s
section. The actual plot points are essentially the same, though I did alter Bastila’s
speech a bunch and things. Did my best to make everything like. Flow better.

UPDATE DATE: 05-18-2019]]
Chapter Summary

[[ Okay, some quick notes. I’ve adjusted the naming convention of the chapters, cause otherwise it just gets ridiculous, so I’ll be naming the chapters, but the actual posts for each chapter will merely by marked out with the points. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc. I’ve also gone through and re-checked what I’ve written so far, no major changes to the story, just some tidying with a decent auto-correcting tool and a less caffeine high eye to double check things. ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 18th, 2011
Saint Elmo’s, Brockton Bay

The warmth of the sun shining on her face quickly dragged Taylor from the sweet embrace of sleep. Faint impressions of distant worlds, glowing weapons, and odd-looking aliens would linger in the back of her mind for a few moments. Though, when she shifted into a more comfortable position, the vague memories of the dreams faded as dreams were wont to do.

Carefully testing one arm and then the other allowed her to see that the bone ache that had permeated her body the night before was finally gone. Carefully, she lifted a hand, slowly running it through her hair, reassured by the thick texture and length, happy that her adventure in the locker hadn’t cost her that at least.

Sitting up fully, she slowly let her gaze drift around the room. Now illuminated by the early afternoon sunlight, the room was much less imposing. She adjusted her hair, running her hands through the unwashed mess before turning her attention to the left, taking in the machines next to her bed. Taylor’d lifted her arms, glancing down and noticing that beyond the IV she didn’t seem to have anything hooked up to her. Assuming that her awakening during the night had been noticed, she leaned out to the left of her bed, her hand seeking the bedside table that was an indistinct brown blur in her vision.

Hands encountered wood, and she scrabbled at the nearby table, flailing until she felt her fingers touching glass and metal. She leaned over, curling her hand around the lenses and dragging them over. She flopped back into bed and lifted the glasses, casually flipping them open in the manner that she’d learned so long ago, smirking at the memories that the action always brought up before lifting the glasses and sliding them carefully onto her face.

The room somewhat suddenly shifted into focus, and Taylor quickly turned to peer at the chair that had once held her father’s sleeping form. It’d been pushed back, and she wondered where he’d gotten off to. She considered the room around her for a few moments before deciding that she was on her own for the moment.
Remembering the agony that she’d been every time that she had awakened before now, Taylor took a little time checking her various limbs to see the sort of damage that she’d done to herself. She was shocked to see that her arms were pristine, lacking any hint of scars. She frowned and turned her hands around, remembering shredding her palms when she’d been smashing her fists on the locker door, her hands laid bare before lacking any sign of the ordeal that she had suffered.

Moving past the marks, she carefully tested her range of motion, rotating her arms and elbows, curling her wrists and clenching her fists. She repeated the process for her back, hips, legs, testing each and every joint and limb. Both arms and her torso seemed fine, though her legs still had pins and needles and were mostly numb, so she didn’t think she’d be walking anywhere, any time soon. It was only when the physical check finished that the girl realized that she had no idea how she’d known to do that test, and she frowned, her mind turning back to the night before. She paused, wondering if it had all been a dream a flicker of hope igniting in her chest.

“Sadly, Taylor, we aren’t mere figments of your imagination.” The feminine voice was laced with amusement. Bastila would let that sink in before speaking casually.

“You have our influence to thank for the spatial reaction test. It seems like our memories have bled over in small amounts if your dreams were anything to go by. I saw you dreaming of my training on Coruscant and my adventures against Revan. That’s the same body test that I always did after recovering from my own healing trances, and I think you’re right about your legs. Better not to test them.” The voice lazily whispered into her mind and Taylor flushed a bit.

“So. I think if we’re going to be sharing this much head-space, that we should discuss boundaries. Even if you can see my dreams, it might be best that we don’t discuss them?” Taylor would mentally ‘speak,’ coaching her thoughts in a way that would provide context that this was a directed form of thought, perhaps a way to keep the impressions from responding to every idea that she had. The girl paused and frowned at the thought she issued replayed in her own mind, and she shifted a bit.

‘Speaking of, have you had any more thoughts about how you ended up in my head? You sort of glossed it over last night. I know that most people that ‘trigger’ don’t end up with voices in their heads.’ Taylor paused, frowning at the thought and rubbing her chin before quickly appending the thought.

‘Or at least I hope they don’t. I suppose that they could have all been getting talked to by strange voices and they just never mentioned it, and it’s a big strange conspiracy, where everyone conceals their crazy head voices cause they think that no one else has them. I mean, some capes certainly seemed.’ Taylor’s ruminations continued to trail until she felt a wave of wry amusement washing over her and she suddenly trailed off.

"Uh." There was a beat. A moment or two where the spirit was silent through the faintest hints of amusement continued to drift out over the connection, and then Bastila eventually spoke up softly.

“I don’t think that’s the case, Taylor. As I said last night, we’re not actually in your head. The exact nature of the situation isn’t clear. But from what we can tell the probe that housed the Noetikon was damaged beyond repair, and that was where most of the connected sensors were. With some experimentation we’ve been able to jury-rig the Noetikon’s modest self-repair systems, to tell us what it’s experienced. Our best guess from the data is that the damaged wreck of our probe impacted...something.” The spirit paused in its recitation, briefly taking a moment to think before continuing.

“This object was crystalline in nature, and when the vessel struck it, it was absorbed. As I mentioned..."
last night, the crystal itself attempted to consume the damaged ship, and the Noetikon, triggering the Noetikon’s self-defence mechanisms and detecting that this object was a computer of some fashion, or similar enough organic crystal lattice. The Noetikon attempted to take it over rather than let itself be destroyed. When the object fought back, we were awakened and used our skills to help the Noetikon overcome the object. We’ve taken it over, and it’s what is connected to your mind.” The words were oddly matter-of-fact, and Taylor frowned quietly.

‘So.’ Taylor thought slowly, dragging out the word in her head. ‘Your vessel struck ‘something’ that was connecting itself to my mind. It attempted to destroy you, and you killed it. And you are now operating its corpse like a puppet to keep in contact with me?’ The brunette would blink quietly, frowning as a flicker of disgust washed into her.

“More like lobotomized it. But I’m unsure how alive it was. It’s badly damaged, crippled almost, partly done when we affected it, and partly done before we arrived. It seems like it’s still operational, though. There’s a power reserve that’s augmenting the Noetikon, and if it’s any consolation, whatever this was it was attempting to rewrite parts of your brain when we arrived, and I only destroyed it when it seemed like it might kill you rather then let us interact with you.” Bastila’s voice was laced with remorse and Taylor frowned, her heart beating a touch harder at the idea.

“Taylor, your heart stopped twice during your convalescence; unfortunately, you’ve got several holes punched on your ‘I nearly died card.’ Truthfully, I imagine that this object, whatever it is, is what gives the other...parahumans their powers. Although that’s merely conjecture, for all we know, this object is more tied to whatever your powers would have been. Perhaps you had control of a crystalline entity in another dimension that you could use to attack or defend yourself.” Bastila paused and took a moment to marshall her thoughts before continuing smoothly.

“In any case, the object itself is directly connected to your mind, and that’s what we’re using to communicate with you.” Taylor digested the information that had been shared curiously for a few moments before loosing a sigh and then turning her attention back to her initial question.

‘Back to the subject at hand, as I said, privacy might get to be an issue. I assume that you’re capable of pretending as if you can’t hear my every thought, and you can give me at least the illusion of privacy.’ Taylor glanced around, waiting till she got the impression of consent from the spirit before letting out a long slow sigh.

‘It’d be nice if I had a face to look at, to put something to the voice if nothing else. You’ve been giving me some good advice so far, but it’s still kind of...disconcerting taking advice from the voices in your head. You mentioned that helped me heal myself, right? I remember that from last night, though the conversation is rather hazy. I think that I was on some form of pain killers?’ Taylor’s thoughts were lazy, moving slowly as she glanced around the room. A faint hum of agreement washed down the link before Bastila’s voice issued into her mind once more, laced with a thoughtful tone.

“Direct neural links aren’t actually how the Noetikon is meant to function. But, now that you mention it, with how this object is connected to you, I think we could possibly broadcast an image into your mind.” Bastila’s voice seemed to pause, and the warmth of her ‘presence’ drew back. The sensation of whispered conversation in the back of her mind was a trip, but a few moments later, the warmth returned, and Bastila’s elegant tone rejoined her.

“It should be possible. It’d allow you to see us at least, although you’d still need to be careful talking to us.” Bastila’s voice was laced with equal parts eager curiously and patient concern.
‘Right, wouldn’t want ‘the man’ thinking I was crazy after all. Do you want to give it a shot?’ Taylor eagerly thought toward Bastila. When the spirit didn’t immediately respond, Taylor got a bit nervous.

It took a few moments of nervous waiting before something changed. An area to Taylor’s left visibly distorted, the air itself bending and warping inwards into the vague shape of a person. The air itself grew distorted flickering from painful static to glimmering lights before something seemed to click, and the image formed into a clear vision of a woman. The ‘glass’ woman remained statue-like for a few moments as the ‘whispering’ resumed in the recesses of her mind.

The statue remained clear and immobile for a few moments flickering out of view and back in a few times before colour suddenly bled into the image. Browns and oranges washed over the slender body, the pale face filling in with pinks and specs of freckles and dark greens washed into the eyes, whites expanding around them. The statue-like image of a woman seemed to stutter and flicker before the warmth in her mind suddenly receded, and the image staggered forward, turning to look at her.

“Aha!” Bastila spun in place, moving to glance down at herself, turning and nodding appreciatively before turning to look at Taylor with a soft smile on her pink lips. Taylor blinked and slowly inspected the woman’s form before a thought ghosted through her mind directed at the woman.

‘Did you make yourself look, human?’ The woman herself was fascinating to look at — pale skin with aristocratic features, a faint smile on her lips. Warm green eyes framed by long brunette bangs. Her hair was done in an odd pair of pony-tails at the back, and Taylor got the impression that if it was let down, it’d be as long and full as her own. Her form was clad in an odd sort of armoured robe. Light browns with layered brown padding over the collar, shoulders, down the front, dipping below the belt and hanging around her form. A long silver cylinder rested at her hip, and the woman’s rested one hand on the object, the other hand on the opposite hip.

‘No, Taylor, This is my true form. I’m a human, or at least that’s what we called ourselves. Although this image isn’t what I looked like in my later years, the image for the Holocron was based on my appearance in my prime, which is flattering, if nothing else.’ The image smoothly shifted, walking over and perching on the edge of Taylor’s bed.

Taylor stared at the image, frowning at the oddity of the pose and how it looked… off before realizing why. There was no sensation of pressure from the picture, no weight to it. The image looked like it was sitting on the bed, but the bed didn’t depress under the Jedi’s body. The image seemed to sense her discomfort and lifted back up, moving to sit instead on the chair that had once held her father, the chair looking like it sank under her weight.

‘It’s-’ Whatever Taylor had been about to think was rather rudely interrupted by the door swinging open to reveal a nurse. Taylor glanced up at the woman, offering her a nervous smile, sighing when she merely let out a gasp at the sight of her sitting up and staring back.

“Miss Hebert! You’re awake; we were expecting you up sometime in the next few hours. I can’t tell you how glad we are that you managed to pull through, it was very stop-and-go there for a bit. Since you seem comfortable, I’ll collect the doctor and bring you some water.’ The woman quickly turned, gasping a bit at something outside the door.

“Sir, I’m afraid that I can’t-” The woman paused suddenly before glancing at her with an apologetic look.

“I cannot stop you, sir, but I will be informing her father and her doctor immediately.” The woman
brusquely squared her shoulders before pushing past whoever she’d been speaking to and vanishing out the door.

Confused, Taylor watched the door as it slowly swung shut in the woman’s wake. An armoured hand reached out and caught the door. Taylor blinked quietly as the door slowly pushed inwards, an armoured figure in bronze and blue entering the room. He towered over the bed that she lay in, his suit adding several inches to his already considerable height.

“Taylor Hebert. I’m Armmaster; I assume that I need no introduction. I’m the local head of the Protectorate.’ Armmaster moved with surety across the tiled floor, moving up to the bed and looming up and over it for a moment. He seemed to stare at her for a moment, though with his mask there was no way to tell, before moving to pull out the chair that had once held her father, taking a careful seat on it — the creak of the wood under him hinting at the weight of the armour that he wore.

Bastila’s image had flitted out of the chair at his approach, and she stood to the side watching as Armmaster studied her. Taylor watched as the man shifted to rest his elbows on his knees, his helmet remaining still and Taylor assumed that he was watching her, observing her. The silence, along with the stern set of his jaw pushed at Taylor, the brief flicker of nostalgia and warmth that his image had induced quickly fading at the rather strict set of the man’s body. Taylor stared back at him, her shoulders starting to hunch up under his look wondering what he knew, what he’d heard.

"Sit up straight Taylor, push your shoulders back. No, don’t look at me. Keep your eyes on his, or where they’d be if they were visible." The woman’s whispered commands stopped Taylor from shrinking into herself, her eyes flickering to the side before turning back toward Armmaster’s helmet, staring up at the man curiously, her face remaining impassive. "You’ve done it before Taylor, reach out for the Force, and immerse yourself in it, it’ll help you deal with this. Something tells me that he’s not here to congratulate for joining the club."

Taylor pushed her mind back, remembering the words that Bastila had uttered the night before, her almost poetic recitation of the what the Force was and what it wasn’t she reached out and tried for that feeling again, feeling it ghosting over her metaphorical fingers. She tried to grasp at it, finding it fleeting and almost ephemeral. A moment of clarity washed over her, and Taylor didn't try to grab, to pull the Force in. She merely opened her ‘hands’ and beckoned it and felt the peace and clarity suddenly flooding into her. Things seemed to grate to a halt, and she stared at Armmaster, watching his lips slowly opening before everything suddenly caught back up again, and the man moved to speak.

“It’s common practice for the PRT to approach anyone that experiences a sufficiently traumatic experience that might induce a trigger.” That man’s words were cold, dispassionate and Taylor could tell that he was reciting them from Rote.

“Considering the very public nature of your own trigger event, it was determined that we would offer you a fast-tracked admission to the Wards. This would, of course, be a good way to ensure that any adverse consequences from your explosive triggering could be avoided. We would speak to the school on your behalf, and ensure that the local district attorney understood the accidental nature of the damage and we’d even help you register in a new school to avoid the unfortunate situation that led to you being trapped in that locker.” Taylor heard it. The moment his voice slipped as he was speaking about her public trigger. She focused on the sensation, following it at Bastila’s silent urging. The set of his jaw leaped out at her, the tenseness of his shoulder. The man was… irritated, felt this was below him. Thought she was below him. Taylor felt her insides hardening as she spoke back brusquely.
“What do you mean consequences? Are you implying that I could be in trouble for triggering like that? I was forced into that locker against my will. If I had shattered the lockers with my feet on pure human brute strength, I wouldn’t have been punished. I have the right to defend myself. Or are you implying that I lose my right to self-defence because powers were involved?” Taylor’s voice was low and precise, carefully emulating Bastila’s tone while inside, she desperately attempted to marshal her growing panic.

Her eyes were drawn to the man’s face, watching as his teeth clenched, and he leaned back. She listened as Bastila whispered explanations into her mind. She clenched her fists as more details became apparent. He wasn’t irritated with her. He was annoyed with something else. Angry even. He didn’t want to be doing this, that was for sure, but it had less to do with her.

“You’re mad.” She’d speak slowly, frowning at the shock and the hint of nervousness that slipped through him.

“Not at me.” She’d comment faintly, her eyes narrowing as the raspy words slipped past her lips.

“And not only mad. Disgusted. Again, not at me. It's focused inwards. You’re disgusted at yourself. It’s not that you don’t want to be here; it’s that you don’t think you should be here doing this.” Taylor saw the reluctance washing through him along with the shock and concern that her words were engendering. The shifting power in the situation calmed her own fears, and she leaned forward, listening as Bastila helped her decipher, helped her understand what she was seeing.

“No, not quite. It’s not that you don’t want to be doing this. It’s that you shouldn’t be doing it like this.” She’d frown sharply as she stared at the man, her eyes drifting over his form.

“Indeed. Using smokescreens and threats against an underage girl. Not exactly your shining moment, Armsmaster.” The voice was crisp and precise, and Taylor glanced over at the open door, staring at the tall, powerful woman that was there. She studied the woman for a moment, but she felt the pull dragging her gaze back to the armoured cape, staring coldly at him, slowly peeling away his motivations. Whispered words from Bastila pointed her in the right direction, and she spoke.

“I saw the damage that I did to that hallway when I got out of the locker. I’m powerful, and I’m guessing that your boss wants me on the wards.” She stared at him, almost staring through him. She watched as his body tensed, tightening up as if to protect itself. She let out a sigh at the minuscule reaction to the shock.

“I hate to disappoint.” Taylor paused, frowning. “Well, actually now that I think of it, considering the manner in which you opened this conversation, I’m actually quite happy to disappoint. But the fact of the matter is that-” Taylor paused and frowned, considering how she could explain this.

“The lightning that I used is an aspect of my power that is exceptionally dangerous for me even to attempt to use.” Taylor watched as the man firming up as if preparing to argue. To offer something. Training. She sighed and rubbed at her face, holding up a hand.

“My powers are emotionally controlled. That particular power comes with a backlash from what I can tell. I doubt that I’ll be running around electrocuting anything in the near future.” She watched as the man puffed himself and narrowed her eyes, glaring quietly at the man.

“Before you offer the training that’s been hanging on your tongue for the last five minutes, I should probably say that, until I’ve had a chance to speak with my father and to see the exact nature of my
powers, I don’t think it’d be wise for me to agree to join any team.” She glanced over at the woman at
the door and chuckled when she lazily moved away from the doorway and spoke slowly.

“Miss Hebert has made her position perfectly clear, I should think. Armsmaster.” Taylor finally took
a moment to study the woman, taking in her long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, the bright
blue eyes peering out of the elegant features that she held. The woman seemed almost amused as she
flashed Taylor a wink before rounding on the armoured figure in the chair by Taylor’s bed, her voice
taking on a practically arctic hue.

“Armsmaster, I was under the impression that PRT recruiters generally required a parent present
when speaking unmasked minors.” Taylor turned her gaze onto the man and watched as the brief
flicker of irritation and guilt flashed through him. Clearly, the woman was right. She leaned forward,
watching raptly wondering just who this woman was and why she was so eagerly defending her.

“Carol. I wasn’t aware that the Heberts had retained your services. I was merely confirming the
events on young Miss Hebert’s trigger event and what she remembered of her powers. It’s a
dangerous world out there for unmasked capes after all.” His voice was low and quiet as he stared at
the other woman, watching her visibly step back, her lips compressing into a thin line. Taylor’s
powers told her that whatever the armoured figure had said had hurt her saviour and Taylor felt her
insides hardening.

She glared at the man as he dusted off his armour and strode past the recovering blonde before she
could say anything, marching to the door and stepping out. He paused in the doorway, turning to
stare back at her for a moment before speaking coolly.

“We’ll be in contact, Miss Hebert.” His voice was cold and brisk, and then the door clicked shut
behind him. Taylor’s wide eyes drifted from the man toward the woman in the suit, staring at her as
she glared after the disappeared hero. Taylor watched as the woman’s tension slowly, achingly
uncoiled as she forced herself to relax. Taylor stared at the woman before speaking gently.

“He shouldn’t have said that.” He spoke quietly as the woman’s name clicked in her mind. Carol
Dallon. New Wave. Taylor stared after the vanished cape. Despite her own interest in the local cape
scene, Taylor had always been a Protectorate girl while her Mother had been a fan of the Brockton
Bay Brigade. Taylor still remembered when her mother had heard about the loss that the team had
suffered. She remembered the tears her mother had shed at the atrocity. Taylor stared at Carol as the
woman glanced at her nervously, wiping the faint tears from her eyes.

“My mom was a fan.” She spoke quietly. “Of the Brigade and later New Wave. Before she died.”
Taylor calmly picked at her shirt. “Fleur seemed nice; he shouldn’t have said something like that.”
Taylor glowered quietly over at the door that the man had left through and let out a quiet sigh.

“I-” The woman seemed to pause, hesitating as she considered Taylor for a few moments before
regaining her composure and continuing.

“Thank Miss Hebert. Or, Taylor if you prefer. Your father has agreed to retain my services. While
Parahuman Law isn’t my specific focus, I am familiar enough with it. Your father has dealt with all
the paperwork for everything that’s happened, but I need you to do one thing for now. Don’t agree
to speak with anyone without myself, your father, or ideally, both of us present.” Waiting until
Taylor nodded she let out a quiet, rubbing at the bridge of her nose.

“I need to get back to your Father; we’ll be speaking more in the coming weeks, from what your
Father has explained we’ll be dealing with the legal backlash of your Trigger event on top of the
other issues that you’ve had at the school. Your father showed me a Diary that you’d been keeping. Today and tomorrow I need you to try and remember any other evidence that you might have stashed around, and we’ll go over it all when you get out of here. For now, focus on recovering, alright?” Getting a nod from the girl, the powerfully built woman smoothly turned and strode out of the hospital room, the sound of her heels clicking on the linoleum serving as a guide for how far the Lawyer had gotten.

Collin sighed faintly. He regretted the words that he’d said almost immediately after they had left his mouth. If he was honest with himself, he was secretly glad that the ‘interview’ had been interrupted when it had, but the embarrassment of being deconstructed like that in front of another cape had gotten to him.

Striding down the hall, he adjusted a few settings on his HUD, truthfully doing little more than merely flipping display elements that he’d probably be flipping back in mere minutes. The action was borne more out of the need of something to do, then any real interest in the temperature that his suit was resting at, or the current static discharge level of the exterior plates. Bypassing the elevator and smoothly descending the stairs he’d dial up his mobile connection, connecting a call Dragon.

“Collin...” The reproachful voice of the Tinker easily filtered through the speakers of his helmet and he’d sigh faintly. He should have expected that she’d be listening in. He let out a quiet sigh as he moved the image of the other Tinker around his mask and continued to hurry down the stairs.

“How did you intend to convince the girl to join the Wards if you insulted the first person that’s stood up for her since she’s been fourteen? I sent you the psych profile on her that you asked me to assemble. I expected you to read it.” Collin let out a slow sigh as he continued on.

“I did read it. I attempted what you suggested, but I only had a few minutes with her before someone else showed up. I had hoped to convince her to join to protect herself, but she was tearing my arguments apart as soon as I made them, and-” The man’s voice was cold and irritated as he hit the basement floor and Collin pushed the door open, marching out into the darkened parking garage.

“You thought that instead of attempting to get on her good side by actually investigating the issues that she’s been labouring under for years, you’d attempt to use them against her.” The woman’s voice was cold and clipped, and Collin frowned. “When I compiled that report about the bullying that she’s been subject too, I didn’t expect you to attempt to use it against her Collin.” The other tinker’s voice was angry, and Collin growled as he approached his bike.

“I was trying to get a win, Dragon. I don’t need to justify myself to you. And clearly she doesn’t need your protection, she had me on the ropes before Carol Dallon arrived. Remind me to make a note in Taylor Hebert’s file. Suspected thinker Rating. She was picking me apart from that bed like it was easy. She could detect my reactions even inside the suit.” He’d mutter faintly as he exited the stairwell, moving through the small hallway that led past the elevator and toward the parking garage.

“Also note that her father has apparently retained the services of Carol Dallon.” He’d comment faintly, glancing around and making his way carefully toward where he’d parked his bike before this little vigil. Dragon retained a mulish silenced before her curiosity seemed to win over and she spoke with an irritated clip.
“Brandish? How did she end up with Brandish as her lawyer? I pity the man that attempts to steamroll over her. What’re you going to tell Piggot?” Her voice was laced with curiosity, and Collin frowned behind his helmet as he too considered that question. As he thought, he slipped atop his bike, getting into position and waiting for the suit to synch into the bike.

“I don’t know. I suppose I’ll just submit a report about what happened. Lucky for us, she walked in before I could really go into the hard sell. While Taylor Hebert might be unaware that the law prevents anyone from punishing her for damage and non-fatal injuries incurred during a trigger event, I doubt that’ll remain the case for long.” Collin let and irritated grunt as he put the bike into gear and set off, driving up the curved ramp and out into the sunlight, heading toward downtown.

“At least she didn’t manage to cotton onto how Shadow Stalker was involved in the situation. Although I don’t know how long we can protect her if this goes to court at all. I’ll probably recommend that Director Piggot leans on the school to settle with an agreement that protects the girls from further litigation. It’s not ideal, but if Sophia’s actions come out, I don’t think the PRT in this city would survive it.”

“Collin, you shouldn’t blame yourself. You’re not the one that decided to put Sophia onto the Wards instead putting her into Juvenile Detention where she belonged. You’re also not the one that arranged to sacrifice this girl to her to keep the school and PRT happy. You’re doing everything you can in this situation; it’s just shitty all the way around.” Dragon’s voice was low and comforting, and Collin almost took the words to heart before gunning the engine on his bike and turning toward PRT HQ, weaving in and out of traffic as he went.

“I’m the head of the Protectorate. I should have been paying closer attention to the Wards as a whole; I spend so much time tinkering, and to be honest the only wards that I know anything more than the names of are Kid Win and Gallant. That’ll be changing. I’d rather not have another situation like this on my conscience.” The man let out a bitter sigh as he checked the cars around him, weaving through them as carefully as he could.

“On that subject, I’d appreciate any help you can offer Dragon. I know that you’re not exactly… local, but your programs could be helpful in finding out if anything like this is happening elsewhere, or if it might happen again.” Colling muttered quietly. There’d be a momentary lapse in the connection, and Collin worried that he’d lost the signal, but then Dragon’s voice crackled back in.

“Alright, Collin. I’ll do what I can. I’ll forward what I can find to you, and figure out what sort of programs I can work up for this. I’ve got a few projects that I should check on. We can pick this up later, yeah?” The other Tinker spoke quickly, and Collin let out a grunt that saw the connection closing rather suddenly

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here; I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;]]
As seems to be the theme, I basically entirely rewrote all of Taylor’s perspective, while not changing any major plot points. Bit more exposition, bit more backstory, differing motivations, but the general plot is the same. I’ve cleaned up Collin’s passage and altered Dragon’s voice to match more closely to the story as we’re going now, but it’s mostly unchanged on his side.

UPDATE DATE: 05-18-2019]
Chapter Summary

[[I’ve gone back and fixed most of the tense issues, and if you catch me slipping into it again feel free to point it out. Also, any other constructive criticism is appreciated. This is the final part of Chapter 1; there will be a single Interlude between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. There will be a minor time skip between this chapter and the next, but it’s mostly to push the story up toward where Canon actually begins. Canon events will proceed mostly unaffected except perhaps for Taylor’s absence from the Undersiders which will cause some small ripples.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

February 18th, 2011
Saint Elmo’s, Brockton Bay

Carol Dallon’s exit had left a somewhat awkward and weighty silence in her wake, and Taylor sat there carefully staring at the sheets that covered her legs. It took a few moments for the reality of the situation to penetrate her mind and Taylor felt her heart starting to beat faster as she glanced around.

Brandish had been in her hospital room, more than that, Brandish was her lawyer. Mom would have been so stoked, she’d often gushed about maybe one day meeting the members of new wave, and Taylor frowned as she considered the situation. Brandish was her lawyer, and something told her that the woman didn’t come cheap.

Speaking of that, how had her father managed to contact her, how had he managed to afford the lawyer. Taylor’s forehead creased in thought as she wondered what this would cost them both. She didn’t want to lose the house, the memories of her mother had soaked into the place, and she couldn’t stand the idea of losing them. She glanced over toward the door, staring at it thoughtfully as her mind whirled, wondering if she could make it to her father. She didn’t trust her legs, could her new powers…?

“Yes. You could use the Force to get your legs under you, and you could probably use it to catch up to Mrs. Dallon, though the consequences would be unfortunate. With as inexperienced as you are, you’d do some damage to your body attempting to use the Force to manipulate your body in that way. And truthfully it’s not that desperate hm? I imagine that she or your father will be back before long, and you can get your answers then.” Bastila’s voice was gentle as she persuaded Taylor not to make any stupid or rash decisions. Taylor’s gaze lingered on the door for a few moments, hands curling into fists as she thought. In the end, she let her hands relax, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour.

‘I guess that we should discuss this properly then? While we have a few minutes, anyway?’ Taylor’s eyes turned to rest on the image of Bastila. The woman had moved, slipping casually through the room to perch on one of the chairs that sat beneath the full window, seemingly comfortably at ease, her green eyes watching Taylor curiously.
‘You mentioned that you could teach me to use these powers less destructively? Would I be trained to be a Jedi like you?’ Taylor blinked when she saw the amused smirk passing over the other woman’s lips. She had been about to ask another question when the image had started to speak.

“Sort of... before we get into all that I think I should tell you a story. So that you truly understand what exactly you’re getting yourself into with this request of yours. I’ve already shared my name with you, and this is the rest of my story. Where I’m from, humanity has spread over most of the galaxy we lived in. We were part of a great Galactic Republic, Diplomacy and human ideals spread over much of the galaxy.” Bastila’s voice was laced with wry amusement as she spoke. "I was born on a world call Talravin. It’s was in the core of the galactic republic, and that made it relatively safe. I don’t remember it much; my family were travellers. My father was a treasure hunter, and we often moved from world to world."

“I loved my father a great deal, as any little girl loves her dashing, heroic father. But looking back on it now I think of some of the places that he’d spoken of taking me, and I shudder. Sadly, his dream of a father/daughter tomb raiding team was dashed when my latent powers began to show. He didn’t want to lose me to the Order, and I didn’t want to go, but my mother chose to send me away. The lives they lived were too dangerous for a child, and I would be safe and happier with the order. I resented her for a long time for that choice, but I eventually came to terms what she did to protect me. But, in any case, she got her way, and I was handed over to the order, sent to join the other younglings of the council.” Images flooded into Taylor's mind. Images of a clunky ship that reeked of home, and a wiry man with Bastila's eyes and smile. The broad grin on his face dancing as she stared up at him with rapt attention. The nervous looks of a woman with Bastila's hair colour and freckles. The fear in her almost palpable. Images of screaming fights, and arguments, of being dragged from home and handed to a tall woman with horns and a painted face, the kind smile as the woman held her as she sobbed and begged for her father flickered through Taylor.

“We grew up together and learned the philosophy of the order. That was how it was done. Younglings were taken when very young, and they were taught the tenets of the order, how to control themselves, how to use their powers the right way.” Bastila paused here, and Taylor felt the impressions. The bitter, sad child being welcomed by the others. All of them friendly and supportive. Slowly coming out of her shell among her peers, making friends, and growing among them. Living on Coruscant, seeing the city stretching out to every horizon as they trained in the ancient building that sat atop technological marvels that made Taylor's heart race. Learning and meditating, preparing and watching.

“You have to understand that our galaxy was different than this one. The Force was pervasive, and it drew at many, both light and dark. We needed Jedi to hold back the dark, and the council had long memories of their failures, of those of their number that fell to the dark, and it did what it needed to keep more Jedi from falling. They justified their indoctrination that way.” Tall, stern men and women grew in Taylor's mind. They were wreathed in stern robes and even sterner expressions. They issued words that drifted past her ears without penetrating, but the meaning was there. They were orders, commands. She remembers listening, turning away from the anger and the confusion of the Republic, focusing on her training and not questioning it.

“I was trained with the others until my innate talents began to show. I was unusually gifted with battle pre-cognition, first my skills, and then later that gift increased until I could turn the tides of entire battles with my actions, I could route armies, and inspire entire armadas and it was an overwhelming feeling. I was singled out for special training, and I soon began my apprenticeship. I was so full of myself and bold, and then the war came. A faction from the edges of our galaxy began to push on the republic, decrying it as weak and outdated. They were the Mandalorian Neo-crusaders. They sought to conquer and destroy. The republic appealed to the order for help, and the masters opted not to assist, fear of what war would do to our number. Against their orders, a great
many knights left and joined the war effort anyway.” On flashed the impressions and the images flashed in Taylor’s mind as the spirit spoke, senators flashed in her mind in ostentatious robes and of every race imaginable, visiting the majestic temple, begging. Protests outside the temple. The fear that they had to overcome, the compassion they had to show without happening. The images showed a man with a stern face and training to use a blad, the combat and training a blur of pain and focus and determination.

“I remember one point, as I stood watching one of the people I’d admired in my youth standing before the rest of us, passionately speaking to us of his best friend and Mentor, as he ripped apart the council with words for their inaction. I didn’t follow, but part of me yearned to turn my power loose on them. Those Jedi that went saved the war for us, they were war heroes. At least, they were until they turned on the Jedi. Most of them fell to the dark, became true Sith, and attacked their fellow Jedi. They did what they could to conquer the galaxy, using long lost technologies to bring a war of the most brutal sort to the galaxy as a whole. The intense young man that had spoken of honour, and faith, had turned into one of the most sadistic of the killers, eventually leading a coup against his former best friend and attempting to kill all of us, attempting to conquer the entire galaxy for himself.” Onward spun the images, showing Taylor everything. Revan was powerful, reliable, charismatic. He started as a glorious knight, powerful and pure, a beacon in the darkness against the oncoming scourge. The image flashed, and the war was when and he turned. Became vicious and dark as he fell, transforming into a monster as he lashed against those who had once been his allies, his friends. Taylor shuddered at the images, at the sheer darkness bleeding off the words that ghosted incomprehensibly through her mind.

“I did my part in the civil war, and I fought them at every turn. I even managed to board one of the flagships of the invading army, and I nearly killed the young man’s best friend, and instead of letting him die I bound him to myself, and we spent the next few years getting into a great many scrapes.” Bastilla shifted, resting her elbows on her knees as she glanced over toward Taylor and she watched as the ghosts danced in front of Taylor’s eyes. A battle, Bastilla turning her powers on the fleet, shredding the enemies, taking the lead ship, fighting and destroying, capturing and conquering, and a bond forming, redeeming the broken, bitter man that she’d found when she’d set out to hunt down a violent god of war.

"I told you this story because you need to understand the consequences of failing here. It’s easy to slip into the dark side, you’ve seen just how slippery a slope it can be. I was even corrupted once myself, though that same man I had bound to myself managed to redeem me. Fair compensation for my redemption of him.” The images danced on. Intrigue, danger, then battle. Victory at a cost. A bond, a tether, a fall and redemption. Love, and so much more stretching out into the distant reaches of the future. A legacy. Bastila’s warmth washed over her, and the images faded as the image of the woman chuckled. The image moved closer, staring into Taylor’s eyes as she spoke.

“You’re in a war here, Taylor. That’ll make it hard to stay true to yourself, you lack the structure and the foundations that we all had, but you’ve got the power, and I’ll do everything I can to help you achieve your goals, and I want you to understand the risks that you’re taking truly. There are no other Jedi here to stop you. If you go dark, you’ll leave this world a smouldering ruin.” At Taylor's shocked look, the image studied her sternly, slowly crossing her arms.

“The Force is a powerful tool, it can do great and terrible things, and with the right focus, you can change the world. For better or worse.” Bastilla hummed and let the words sink into Taylor for a few moments before shifting back, taking on a more casual tone.

“Which is nothing to say for the other sacrifices you’ll have to make. Physical training if nothing else. We’ll need to get you into shape physically; the Force can do wonders, but the better you are, to begin with, the more it can improve what you can do.” Taylor blinked as she eyed the spirit.
Working out? She’d been thinking of running, and getting into shape would be a good idea. Taylor stared at the image of the woman, waiting to see if she was done. The expectant look saw her smoothly responding.

‘I’m tired of being like I am. I don’t want to be small anymore, I don’t want anyone else to go through what I went through, and I want to see this through to the end. Besides, if you’re stuck in my head, I should get something out of it.’ Taylor smirked softly at her companion, taking any bite out of her comments. After a moment, the girl's gaze shifted when the sound of the doorknob rattling reached her. Taylor’s form turned a bit, curling into herself in preparation, only relaxing when the door opened to reveal her father’s haggard form carrying a simple tray laden with a hospital meal of some sort.

“Hey, Dad. I figured I should stop being so laz-” The words were casual, an attempt at levity that died on her lips when her Father reacted. Taylor sniffed a bit when her dad let out a strangled gasp, setting down the tray and storming across the room to drag her into a hug. Taylor could only wrap her arms around his broad shoulders, patting him softly on the back in commiseration.

“...You look like you’ve been awake for two weeks straight.” Taylor gently spoke, feeling his arms tightening around her, and she slowly lowered her voice, gently dragging her hands over his back and smiling quietly at the soft, gentle shaking in his body. She stared down at the figure quietly, her fingers slowly moving up to pat him gently on the head.

"I’m sorry, Dad, I didn’t think it’d ever get that bad.” The words were murmured against the scratchy skin on her father’s unshaven face as she tightened her arms around him. The hug went on for a few moments before a mild cough returned them both to the land of the living, and they drew apart to glance over at the blonde lawyer lurking in the doorway.

“Miss Hebert. I’m glad that you and your father are feeling better, but we do have some business to attend to before we can let you both focus on recovering from this. Your father has explained much of the situation to me, and I’ve seen the diary. But I want to hear what happened from you.” Taylor watched as Carol took the other chair by the wall, sliding it over and placing it near her bed. She could almost feel Bastila moving to stand on her side. She glanced over at the blonde Lawyer, her eyes dropping to her lap and her cheeks darkening in shame.

“Miss-” The lawyer sighed softly before trying in a more gentle voice, finally making Taylor realize that beyond being Brandish and Carol Dallon, Criminal Law expert, the woman before her was a mother as well. The look in the eyes made her sniffle as she gently picked at her sheets.

“Taylor. I understand that this is hard for you, I’m not doing it to be cruel, but we need a complete picture of what happened.”

Taylor started at the beginning, giving a brief, almost clinical descriptions of the end of her friendship with Emma, pausing when Carol interrupted to verify her name. When the lawyer merely waved her on at her curious look, Taylor related the story of the loss of her mother and the depression that followed. She commented on her terrible time at camp and how she had returned to find that Emma had cut her out of her life entirely. Taylor’s voice had become almost monotone as she continued relating in broad terms the nature of her trials at Winslow. The harassment, the rumours, the games. Her efforts to avoid them, everything slid out. When asked about other evidence she had admitted to a backup of the diary hidden in the attic of their house and a file on the school's local storage that included the more digitally inclined of the Trio’s tortures.

“Well.” Carol adjusted her glasses and set her pen down; the lawyer had been taking notes for the duration of the discussion, making notes and occasionally asking Taylor to clarify things.
“I think that we can help you. We have a pretty good case against the school. That the school has already offered to cover your hospital costs doesn’t make them look good at all. As for the girls, it’s tricky. Criminally, the proof would need to be iron-clad, and I might be unable to help there due to Alan Barnes’ position in my law firm, but there’s no conflict of interest in the issues with the school. I’ll work on this and get some notes to your father about what you can expect in terms of each case, and you can both decide what you wish to do going forward.”

“That brings us to the second issue at hand. You’ve been outed. You triggered violently and publicly, and it took mere hours before the news sites were reporting on what happened when you triggered, newspapers and television were slower to follow, reluctant to break the unspoken rules, but once it was out there, they followed. It’s not good. I imagine that Armsmaster was able to make his pitch before I chased him off. I heard you telling him that you’d have to speak with your father about it, and that’s wise. But you should consider joining a team. With your identity out there like this, it’s going to be dangerous. Blasters are common enough, so you’re not a novelty, but the gangs in the city are eager for recruits, and they might try to press-gang you into service. Joining up with the PRT might protect you both from all that.” Carol took a moment to let that sink in before turning her gaze from Danny back to Taylor, studying the girl carefully.

“They almost certainly know that your power damages you, so that should make you less of a priority in terms of recruitment so you might be able to skate by like that Cloth-tinker does downtown, too small peas to be of much use. Do you have any control of your blasts? The PRT does offer training in how to handle your powers, and even if you join up, it might be worth attending a few classes.” The words were spoken gently, and Taylor frowned as she gripped her sheets, contemplating the idea of going back to that man and asking for help.

Taylor lay there in her bed, thinking quietly. She glanced toward the window, taking in the sight of Bastila studying her. Part of her wanted to tell them both about what had happened to her. To explain to her father all about the voices she heard and woman in her head, but she was terrified of what they’d do. If they didn’t believe her, she had finally ascended from her old life of vague anonymity. The Trio had made her a pariah in her old life, and her triggering had made her one of the capes, one of the heroes or villains and she feared to lose that connection after only just getting it. So instead she lied, adjusting the story to fit their perceptions.

"The lightning isn’t exactly my main power. I can’t even access it normally; it’s only available to me when I’m very angry or very scared. And I don’t know how to use it properly, that’s why it rebounded back onto me when I used it.” The girl’s voice was small and afraid as she glanced over at the woman and her father, taking in their nonplussed expressions.

“When I woke up I understood what I had done, I somehow understood my powers; they’re more… versatile. I have a well of energy that I can tap into to do different things, that was what I could do when afraid, but it’s capable of so much more.” Taylor sought a way to prove her point, glancing around.

“The tray, the one that your father brought it. There's a cookie; it's small enough that it should be easy to control, Taylor. Your connection is strong enough to use Force pull, though you’ll need to focus on keeping control of the power.” Blinking, Taylor turned her attention to the tray, one hand raising as she focused her will on the cookie, willing it to obey. When nothing happened, the amused voice in her head chimed in.

“You need to reach into the Force, Taylor, to let your mind drift out before it’ll obey your will.” Huffing softly, Taylor reached out for that warmth with her mind, feeling it rushing up to meet her and she drifted into it, focusing her will on the cookie.
Danny and Carol glanced over watching as after a moment the cookie slowly wobbled up into the air, hovering in place before slowly drifting through the air toward Taylor, the girl’s attention focused solely on it. Taylor’s hand shook a bit as the girl put every once willpower into it as she could, doing her best to keep the cookie from slipping her grasp.

“Fascinating, can you make it m-“ Carol had chimed in when the girl’s razor-wire thin control snapped and the cookie shot across the room smashing into the wall above Taylor’s bend and sprinkling the poor girl chocolate chips and cookie crumbs. Staring up at the patch of dust on the wall, Taylor’s voice cut into the silent room.

“Shit,” Taylor muttered quietly, sinking down into her bed in embarrassment.

“Shit.” The tone, the delivery, even the nervous hunch of the shoulders of the black haired girl reminded was so much like Victoria when she fucked up that Carol couldn’t resist. She let out a soft snicker, hearing the man to her laugh, starting to join her. The pair of them chortled together as they stared at Taylor’s slowly deepening blush. When the girl gripped her blankets and pulled them around her face and sank down into the bed, her cheeks remaining as red as the setting sun Carol finally lost her control and fell back against her chair and burst out laughing as she stared at the tiny mark that the poor baked good had made on the wall.

“That brings back memories,” Danny spoke as he wiped a tear from his eye, getting his chuckles under control. He glanced over, and Carol lifted an eyebrow as she felt her own chuckles dying down.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve heard that word, said that way. There were a few years, though, that I’d often hear a crash or a bang, and I’d come into a room just in time to see Taylor standing there saying it just like that. Her mother -hated- that I taught her that particular word, and I always get a dark glare. Lucking for me E-” He paused, frowning as he considered what he’d almost said. Carol glanced overtaking in Taylor’s nervous peeking out of the blankets at them both, and her rather telling silence.

“Her friend never really picked up the habit. I doubt that her father would have been too pleased. Though. Considering.” Carol blinked quietly and frowned when Danny dropped the subject and glowered at his hands. Rather than letting the pair dwell on their dark thoughts, she smoothly cut in, offering the two an almost casual smile.

“Well, I’m distinctly more familiar with that sound. My daughter, Victoria, still says it just like that when she smashes a door, or breaks a phone, or accidentally punts one of the lawn ornaments into the next zip code.” Carol’s voice was soft, laced with amusement, and she watched as both of the Heberts turned to focus on her, offering matching nervous smiles. Figuring that the situation had been defused, she casually changed the subject.

“So you said that you have access to other powers? What else can you do anything beyond the electrical blasts and the telekinesis.” Despite her calm and self-assured words, her mind was spinning. The PRT had her classed as a Blaster 2 or 3 at best for what she’d done to the lockers, if this got out, it could be a blood bath.
“I can’t do much now, the…” Taylor’s voice trailed off as she seemed to drift deeper in thought as she tried to figure out how to explain this. She took a deep breath before moving to gesture with her hands in an explanation of sorts.

“So I can tell that my pool of power is broad, and when I think of ‘issues’ things that I need to solve, solutions come to me. For that, I thought of wanting that cookie and the knowledge of how to bring it to me without walking to it came into my mind.” Taylor quickly spoke, and Carol leaned forward, listening with fascination.

“I get the feeling that I can do a lot of things, but only the most basic don’t require any sort of...practice. The more I practice, the easier the skills I use will come to me. It also seems like some skills will lead to others.” The girl seemed to pause and shake her head, tilting her head to the side as if focusing. Carol watched her curiously.

“From what I’ve been able to piece together so far; I could use it to augment myself, physically or mentally. I could move faster, jump higher. I could augment my reflexes and understanding. I can apparently heal myself, and I can use that power. I showed you to move things. It's more versatile than that though; It could be used to create barriers, or even to weaponize my environment. I think I’ll be able to use waves of force eventually? But that’s pretty far off. At the moment, my powers are telling me that I’d have to work hard at them to do much of anything. Exercise, working out and practicing is all I’ll be able to do for a while.” The girl spoke carefully, considering something it seemed, as she sat stock still, her eyes closed.

“Taylor that’s… That’s a very dangerous power-set. You’re starting to sound almost like Eidolon. A limited form of his power perhaps, but if that got out, you’d never be able to get any peace from the gangs if they knew what you could do.” As she spoke, the woman’s mind was spinning. She was a trump four, at least, with nothing to say of any other hidden powers that Taylor might have. She adjusted her pose as Taylor nodded in thought, her gaze shifting to Danny, watching his fists clench.

“Taylor, I’ll help protect your secret as best as I can, but this means that you need to consider joining some team seriously. The PRT might have seemed heavy-handed earlier, but they could help you, keep you alive long enough that you might be able to learn to survive on your own.” Carol considered Taylor’s reaction carefully before offering a different option.

“Sarah typically handles the new offers, but I doubt she’d mind this. While New Wave hasn’t been officially recruiting in a while, but you’ve already been unmasked, we could mentor you at least if that’d be more palatable than the Wards. Our benefits package is less impressive, but we’re a smaller team, so it’d be more hands on.” She studied the girl, chuckling wryly as Taylor considered it. She saw when the girl decided against it, shaking her head slowly.

“I appreciate the offer, Mrs. Dallon, but at this point, I’m not even sure if I want to participate in the cape community. I’ve barely got any powers, and most people don’t see me as a threat. I was the girl that was publicly bullied and triggered, but most people thought I was gonna die from using my powers. Hopefully, that’ll protect me for a while.” The girl’s voice was careful and polite, and when Carol felt herself smiling unconsciously at the girl, Taylor returned it quickly.

“I want to get to know just who I am with all this going on before I commit to anything. I wouldn’t want to disrupt your group only just to leave later if my powers pull me in a different direction.” The girl was good with words; Carol would give her that. And she did have a point about the dynamics. Things could get complicated if she were to show up with a new recruit without even talking to Sarah or the others. She’d have to mention this at least and get their impressions.

“I understand, Taylor. I can appreciate that sentiment. If you change your mind, feel free to contact me. I’ve got a meeting in an hour that I should be getting to, and then I’ll get started on the
preparations for your case. We’ll speak more in the coming weeks, so try to stay out of trouble as best you can. Being seen as recovering and healthy, especially mentally, will only make the school's defence seem even more ludicrous. From what your father has mentioned, they were originally attempting to claim that you put yourself in there.” Waiting till the two occupants of the room had nodded at her, she slipped to her feet, turning and striding from the room, each step accompanied by the slow, powerful click of her high heels.

When she heard the soft wheeze from the room behind her, she paused at the doorway, listening carefully as Taylor’s voice softly whispered toward her father.

“D-Dad. New Wave just offered me a position. Mom would freak.” Her voice was soft and laced with sadness. But the wry little chuckle from the other occupant of the room saw Carol smiling faintly.

“She’d probably kick your ass for turning them down.” His voice was laced with nostalgia and Carol would gently close the door before moving on with her business for the day, her thoughts rarely drifting from her newest client despite the busy schedule that she had.

Chapter End Notes

[[Original A/N: HOUSEKEEPING. Thanks to Kreesh for going over this with a fine-toothed comb! ]]

[[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;]]

Huzzah, a chapter that I didn't have to entirely rewrite. Primarily cause it was an exposition dump. I just added some memories being leaked by Bastila and a reason for Taylor's rather severe fear of the dark side. I reworked a bunch of Carol's side, cleaned up the structure and then changed the jinkies, retooled it out, and altered Taylor's recitation of her shitty life to make it more in line with later reveals without spoiling anything.

UPDATE DATE: 05-18-2019]]
Interlude 1

Chapter Summary

[[ At the recommendation of an avid reader I've done some formatting to better explain who's doing what in terms of edits and updates. Legend is as follows. Armsmaster, Dragon, Faceless PRT Analysts and mooks. ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude 1

From: Dragon@DTI.ca
To: e.piggot@ENE.Protectorate.gov
CC: Armsmaster@ENE.Protectorate.gov, M.Militia@ENE.Protectorate.gov
Subject: Updated Protectorate File on Taylor Hebert, <Cape Name Indeterminate>

Armsmaster requested my help in tidying up and arranging this file, I've sent along copies to yourself and Armsmaster.

Dragon.

--- Attachment Included ---

◆ INDETERMINATE; Taylor Hebert

Classification: Brute 1, Blaster 2-4, {Thinker 2}
Minor (Apparently Conscious and drawn out) Healing Factor. Lightning Attack with medium to long range with moderate collateral damage. [Edit: In a recent Interview, Armsmaster came to suspect that the host possesses some form of Thinker power similar to cold reading.]

Disposition: Independent
Location: Brockton Bay. [[Currently Hospitalized in St Elmo’s General Hospital.]]
Age: 16 Status: Student, Prospective Ward, Disinterested
Height: 5’8” Weight: 90 lbs.

Appearance: Tall, and slim. Brown eyes and Hair. Poor Eyesight requires the use of glasses.

History:
[Pre-Trigger] Subject is the only daughter of Daniel Hebert and Annette Hebert. Subject's father is
an administrative member of the Dockworkers Union and works extensively in the blue-collar community, well thought of by his peers and spoken of with some trepidation by his opponents on the city council. Mother was a member of Lustrum’s gang during graduate studies, exited gang prior to Lustrum’s death. Subject’s Mother was killed in a car crash in 2008. Later investigations ruled that the wreck was an accident. A targeted and malicious campaign of bullying has been directed at the Subject over the last few years.

[01/11/2011] Protectorate notified of Parahuman triggering publicly in a school. Investigations determined that the subject had been trapped within a locker filled with human waste as part of ongoing harassment from fellow students. This event apparently served as the subject’s trigger, and she was able to use her powers to escape from the locker. The subject was found in critical condition on the floor near to the damaged lockers and required transportation to a local hospital in critical condition. [Subject was admitted to St. Elmo’s General Hospital.]

[01/11/2011 - 2] Further investigation revealed that the instigators of the campaign were a trio of girls that included [Redacted]’s civilian identity. Details forwarded to Miss Militia and Emily Piggot as the relevant officials. [Update: The instigator’s name has been altered to protect their identity. After investigating the instigator was placed under administrative observation and removed from Winslow High. After considering the state of the subject, PRT Command determined that preserving the Instigator’s Identity was more strategically viable. Private punishments to follow, See Instigator’s File for more details.]

[01/12/2011] Subject remains in critical condition. Has severe third degree burns on 12% of her body, with an additional 32% covered in second and third-degree burns. Septicemia remains a constant concern, and the girl has severe neurological trauma. Between the persistent fever, the seizures and the infections her prognosis is very poor. Most of the damage seems to be self-inflicted, either from attempts to escape her locker or her usage of her powers, the lightning itself washing back into the subject when in use. Whether this is typical for her power usage, or a result of the situation remains to be seen.

[01/13/2011] Subject’s name revealed on National television after being released across the board on various forums, internet news sites, and cape unmasking sites. PRT Public Relations assigned to the situation with intents of redirecting the stories away from the bullying and toward Taylor’s tragic story and the dangers of triggering. Recommend leaving Instigator in place until the attention on Winslow High’s student body dies down, removing them now could damage their secret identity.

Local News seems content on reporting on the subjects name, apparent power set, and the damage that was done to her and the school as a result of bullying, stories seemed aimed at stopping rampant bullying around the country. News agencies seem reluctant to focus too closely on the particulars of the situation, considering the gang connections to Winslow High this might be wise.

[01/24/2011] Subject has begun to show signs of increased recovery. Subject awoke in a delirious state on the late evening of the twenty-second, and after muttering to herself, she drifted into a deep sleep followed by a coma and then persistent vegetative state. Initial guesses were that her body was finally giving up, but her form began to recover quickly. Detailed scans on her body revealed that she was in a deep sleep of some fashion and her recovery has proceeded apace since. Recommend stationing a Protectorate or PRT agent close at hand to speak with Subject when she awakens, and to deter anyone else from making an attempt to abscond with the subject as she convalesces.

[02/01/2011] Armsmaster assigned to the Subject as the point of contact, Dragon has agreed to keep the hospital under observation remotely to ensure that no attempts on the subject are made before she
awakens. Recommend approaching subject’s Father in the coming weeks to broach the subject of wards membership. Subjects compromised identity and powerset would work well with the existing team, though caution is advised due to potential conflict with [Redacted.]

[Edit: Cape name removed to protect the identity of the Ward in question, please refrain from mentioning the Instigator in this file, this could be inflammatory if Subject ever gains access to this file.]

[02/14/2011] Armsmaster placed himself in a position to speak with the Subject once she wakes up. He’d approached the subject’s father, and the man seemed reluctant to commit to having his daughter join the wards without consulting with her.

[02/18/2011] Armsmaster interviewed the Subject upon her waking and having seemingly recovered. The Interview was cut short when the Subjects attorney [Carol Dallon - Brandish] entered the scene and convinced Armsmaster to retreat. [Dragon: Armsmaster observed a currently unknown aspect of the subject’s powerset in the interview. She seemed to be cold-reading him despite his mask, using minor facial cues and body language to determine his emotional state. Armsmaster recommended increasing the subject’s power classifications to include a Thinker rating of 2.]

Personality: Students interviewed about the subject are divided. Most students in private expressed misgivings about the Subject, describing her as mousy, creepy, or small, often at the edges of the group and always worried about her surroundings. This would fit with the psychological profile of someone undergoing continued psychological trauma. When in front of the camera, most of the students described the girl favourably, describing her trauma’s as ‘inspiring’ and hoping that they get to help her in the future.

Teachers interviewed were much less divided. Most seemed to think that the girl was a troublemaker, though questions about the source of their conclusions most admitted that the girl was often caught by fellow students to be committing acts of cheating or work dodging. When confronted about the evidence of the bullying, most were quick to defend their lack of action, one teacher even commenting that they’d attempted to assist her, and had been summarily rebuffed, so he felt that she had hoped to deal with it on her own.

[02/18/2011 - Armsmaster] Subject interviewed as she recovered. While I’m not an expert in this field, I’ll share my observations. She seemed almost pre-naturally calm, and her accent would constantly shift as she drifted in and out of focus, speculation is that she was using some thinker power to try and read me. This same power seems to have blunted her reactions, though the subject could merely be in shock, a more in-depth analysis would be required to get a good grasp on the subjects mental state.

Powers: Subject has the ability to generate directed blasts of electricity from her hands. Energy seems to generate over the entire body but is directed through the hands. [See Transcription below.] Subject has a low-level healing factor that seems to require at least a semi-conscious effort to activate. [Subject appears to have a minor Thinker Power that allows her to read the reactions of those around her and perhaps marshal control of her emotional state. - Pending approval]
[Transcribed from [REDACTED]’s Report on the trigger event.] [REDACTED] was interviewed upon leaving the hospital. [REDACTED] confirms that she was walking past when she heard the subject struggling and crying out within the locker. Before [REDACTED] could approach much closer a wave of force washed out and smashed in the lockers on either side of the hall, cracking the floor in the process and then Lightning began to spread over the floor and lockers in waves. A few moments later a blast of this same lightning destroyed the locker she was trapped in nearly entirely.

The locker itself was expelled across the hall and struck [REDACTED], and it had somehow been affected in a way that it was able to force [REDACTED] out of her Breaker State, leaving her injured on the ground. Further observation revealed the damage itself was extensive. [REDACTED] couldn’t access her powers for nearly an hour after being struck by the Lightning and she experienced occasional aches and tremors for almost a week after being exposed to the power. Whether this was a factor of [REDACTED]’s known weakness to Electrical Fields, or an aspect of the power remains to be seen.

---

February 18th, 2011
Brockton Bay PRT HQ

Raising a hand to press fingers to her forehead, an attempt try and ineffectively still the throbbing headache that had begun to develop, Emily Piggot turned her attention from the screen of her computer toward Armssmaster, watching as did his best to sit uncomfortably on the opposite side of her cluttered desk. Seeing the figure opposite her doing his best to hide his squirming she slowly raised a single eyebrow, lifting her arms to rest her elbows on the desk and lacing her fingers together. When Armssmaster moved to open his mouth, Emily let herself hold up a singly pudgy finger, waiting until the parahuman closed his lips before speaking.

“So. Let’s start with Brandish then. How exactly did Carol Dallon end up interrupting your interview? You were camped outside Taylor Hebert's room for three days, and you spoke with Her Father, correct? Did he mention anything about her before she stormed into that room?” Her narrow eyes locked on the man, waiting for him to think, taking in his almost affronted pose, and the clench of his jaw. She waited patiently as Armssmaster marshalled his thoughts before speaking.

“No. He was very upfront and open with me, despite his reluctance to commit to admitting his daughter to the wards without discussing it with her first. He was perfectly cordial and polite until I began to try and apply pressure to him. I mentioned the damage and the Shadow Stalkers injuries and his face seemed to shut down. I got the impression that he was doing everything in his power to keep from striking me, so I opted to halt that approach rather than having him demand that I vacate the premises.” One shoulder raised just a tiny touch as the figure turned his visor toward Emily’s computer. “I had imagined that he’d probably discourage Taylor’s joining if I was outright hostile with him.”

“Mn.” Emily murmured, shifting her attention from the tinker to her computer, tapping a few times and clicking. “And this bit about the interview? You said that she seemed odd?” The woman turned
back to Armsmaster.

“I’ve spoken with nearly three dozen fresh triggers over the years, and she was the least traumatized of the lot. She seemed almost calm, pristine. She sat there looking like she was in control of the situation. She casually shut down my offers, and pre-emptively picked apart the hard sell that you suggested. And then she started picking apart my motivations. Half the time it felt like she wasn’t even looking at me, her eyes would lose focus, or she’d stare at my jaw and body. Dragon thinks that she was reading my posture and expression somehow. It’s why I suggested the thinker rating. Even if Dallon hadn’t arrived, I would have stepped out, considering how she was picking me apart.”

Emily did her best to keep from smirking as Armsmaster spoke, his pose saying that he was staring directly into her eyes. “There are certain precautions in place for dealing with fresh Thinkers after all.”

“Yes, probably best to have other thinkers make the next attempt.” Nodding absently in agreement the director studied the file on her screen scrolling down. “There’s this part that was added at the end, mention of her disrupting Shadow Stalkers Powers. Why isn’t there a trump rating in there?” She turned her attention back to the Tinker, lifting her eyebrow again. Watching the tension across his shoulders as he began to speak almost monotonously, the director did her best to keep from smirking.

“We’re currently unsure if it’s an actual Trump Power, or if it was simply Shadow Stalker’s power reacting to electricity. We know that she’s especially vulnerable to electricity in her breaker state, and it could be a poor power synergy, though considering how she was involved in the girl’s trigger, it might be linked. We’re aware that certain powers tend to develop when other powers are used near them.” Figuring that man wasn’t done, Emily watched him until she continued after a moment, making his almost inevitable suggestion. “We could add a note about it in her power section, hinting at the possibility just in case?”

Nodding, Emily turned back to her computer, quickly and precisely making the necessary changes and thinking about the girl. Her powers seemed useful, and if they could figure out a way to safely use that lightning, Taylor could be an asset in the field. There were no powerful blasters on the Wards ENE, and someone to counter Purity would be helpful. The issue was with Shadow Stalker, if that detail came out it’d be disastrous.

“Director.” The voice from Armsmaster drew her attention back to him and the Director paused her typing, she stared over her monitor at him, raising an eyebrow as she waited for him to continue. “In investigating the situation in a bit more depth, I can’t help but feel a bit responsible for this. Admittedly, most of my focus on the wards has been with Chris. I’d like to take a more active role with the team. I’m not interested in stepping on Miss Militia’s toes, and I understand that she’s taken Sophia’s case on personally, but I’d like to be more active with the rest.”

Piggot stared at him silently for a few moments, rapping her fingers on the desk before finally letting her expression break a touch, chuckling softly. “About damn time. You’re welcome to do as you wish with the wards, although typical rules about requisitions and mission remain, I hope that you’ve learned from this. This was nearly a career-ending disaster for all of us, and we’re not even out of the woods at this point. Make sure that nothing like this happens again, or you’ll be the one that I throw under the bus.” Emily gave him a severe look, secretly amused at the faint image of him swallowing before waving a hand.

“Alright, get out of my office. I have to tidy this up and send it on to my bosses.” As she watched him standing carefully and exiting the office, Emily turned her attention back to the file on her computer. It wasn’t enough to save the girl that Sophia had tortured, but perhaps this could, at least, keep it from happening again.
[[So ends Arc 1. I'm not sure about this, I'm gonna go through it again later and see if I can polish it up, Mostly I'm just happy with the idea that Piggot has trained herself to pick up Colin's subtle emotional tells and uses that skill to just irritate him.]]
The sound of her battered sneakers slapping on the pavement was her metronome and Taylor moved in time with them, carefully timing her breaths as she kept her arms in motion, focusing on the road ahead. As she ran, the dark-haired girl's thoughts turned inward, contemplating how easy it had been to get used to the changes that her life had undergone. The running was a prime example.

When she’d first started, she’d been almost paranoid, constantly altering her routes, her timings. She’d watched with almost paranoid eyes for the attack that she was sure was coming. She waited for the gangsters to emerge from the woodwork, make her an offer that she couldn’t refuse. Then one week without a response had turned into two. Two had turned into four, and she’d realized that no one cared.

Most people didn’t even see her, didn’t pay attention. She was another young woman in comfortable clothes jogging up a street, and she revelled in the anonymity. For so long everyone had known her name, eyes had regularly watched her, and now as she huffed and felt her lungs burning she felt the eyes of the many pedestrians sliding off with almost supernatural ease.

Dark brown eyes swept from one side of the street to the other. She took in the people opening their shops, sweeping the sidewalks. She nodded at the few people that glanced at her and continued along, wishing not for the first time that she had some sort of music to make the long stretches of silence more bearable. She knew that Bastila could replay music or recite things for her, but it wasn’t quite the same as loud music to silence the world around her. And a person with earbuds in their ears had a certain air about them that discouraged interruptions.

As Taylor pushed her way up a steep hill, the burn in her legs and her chest tempted her to reach out for the Force to soothe away the ache. Instead of giving in to the desire, she gritted her teeth and pushed through the pain. The warmth in her head hinted that the spirit was proud, and Taylor slowly rolled her eyes. In truth, times like this were meant to be private, but she didn’t begrudge Bastila her encouragement. While she understood the reasoning behind the training, a little support certainly made the pill easier to swallow.

In truth, Taylor had been swallowing quite a few pills lately, both figuratively and literally. Taylor wryly remembered the negotiations about her free time that had happened as she headed down Fifth, moving carefully to keep in broad view of the various shops she passed. Her body often ached most
nights, and this was following her own modified version of the Jedi training regimen.

Initially, Bastila had hoped to have her follow the Jedi method of training with its five periods of meditation every day on top of the physical therapy. Many arguments had ensued before Taylor had reached a compromise with the spirit. Six hours for Entertainment, Eight hours for training to be split between schoolwork and Jedi Training, and the remainder that wasn’t allocated to sleep and the various other logistical concerns such as eating, cleaning, chores, and personal hygiene.

If Taylor was being honest, considering that her homework usually took about three hours, she felt that this left her with plenty of time for training. Often, the schedule would start with an hour or two of actually using the Force in the mornings, practicing her control of the powers that she had access to, before speaking with Bastila on philosophy, and then starting her run.

As she crested the hill that marked the end of Fifth, she descended into Downtown. Leaving the cracked sidewalks of the plaza, Taylor ran down the paths and through the central park that sat between the city's central library and City Hall — walking casually down the grey stone path. The dark-haired girl let out a long low whistle as she considered the gloomy skies and the heavy wind, briefly studying the sky. She shook her head at the first few drops of water crashing onto her bare hands and moved to hustle toward the library.

She could flip around her schedule today, get some time in the library first and then do her exercises afterwards. As she hustled up toward the library, she did a few simple stretches with her legs that would hopefully keep the limbs from cramping up while she worked. She hurried in the drizzling rain, ducking into a door being held open by an amused looking college kid. She flashed him a thankful smile before ducking in and out of the shower.

Taking a moment to pause in the rotunda of the vast library, Taylor spread her mind outward and released a combination of invitation and tolerance, her signal to Bastila that the guidance of the spirit was welcome. With a shimmer the by now familiar form of the Jedi Master appeared at her side, flashing her a bemused smile. Taylor watched as Bastila moved away from her, the spirit eagerly approaching the stacks. Taylor let a soft smile grace her lips as she trailed along.

She moved through the tables of students studying, glancing around at the oddly busy Library and then she made it past the workspace and into the tall stacks. She briefly paused near the books taking a deep breath and revelling in the smell of the books; the scent of paper and ink and plastic lingering in her nose. She let the aroma ghost through her mind, and a flicker of memory washed behind her eyes, words that her mother had once spoken to her as they’d curled up on a chair with a book hiding from the rain.

‘Can you smell it yet?’ The image ghosted past her mind, and Taylor let out a sad smile as she anticipated the words, whispering softly in time with the words in her mind.

“The scent of new books, the smell of unread adventure. Friends you haven’t met yet, and hours of magical escapism awaiting you.” Taylor muttered the words, glancing over at the fiction section almost mournfully for a few moments before the sensation of eyes on her saw her turning to flash a rueful smile in Bastila’s direction. The sight of another pair of dark brown eyes watching her made her start.

She blushed at the attention from the older girl, the curious lift of the eyebrow, causing her to squirm a bit and bow her head. She didn’t wait for the odd well-dressed girl to call her on her oddness. She quickly ducked past her and vanished into the psychology section. She quietly headed down the eyes shooting the distinctly amused looking Bastila a venomous look before shooting a thought her way.
'The periodicals probably aren’t open yet, so I suppose that we have to pick between the aisles. History? Psychology, perhaps? Philosophy is making my brain melt, so we should pass on that. Uhm, Some more anatomy? Or we could do something new, a bit of Sociology, perhaps?’ Taylor glanced over at Bastila and chuckled when the woman merely gestured at her, indicating that the choice was hers. Taylor let out an amused huff and moved down the aisles of the Library, carefully tracing her fingers along the spine of the books, curiously touching the tomes, frowning as the words jumped out her.

Loss, and pain. Adaptation and coping. Taylor came to the end of the aisle and collected one of the weightier tomes on the subject, slowly folding it open and skimming through the pages. She considered the images as she read the topics of the chapters, coming to a stop on the sad eyes of a very young boy on a page that was simply titled; Milgram experiment. The image caught Taylor’s eye, and she briefly skimmed the text, frowning at the words that jumped out. She shook her head, muttering to herself as she snapped the book shut.

“She can be such monsters. Though I guess I didn’t need a book to tell me that.” She shook her head, snapping the book shut and glancing up at the chuckle, flushing at the now-familiar chocolate eyes studying her. She stood still and nervously felt her cheeks darkening as she considered the strange woman. When the girl stepped close and spoke faintly, Taylor blinked.

“There are hardly any excesses of the most crazed psychopath that cannot easily be duplicated by a normal, kindly family man who just comes into work every day and has a job to do.” Taylor stared blankly at the strange girl as she nodded and then lazily wandered off. Taylor stared in confusion after the girl before speaking softly.

“D-Did she...Did she just quote Pratchett at me?” She huffed and shook her head, shoving her book of choice back onto the shelf and ignoring Bastila’s amused chuckles as she made her way back up the aisle.

Taylor flopped over and banged her head down on her books, puffing out her cheeks as she tried to read the words with her face mashed up against them. This wasn’t strictly the most efficient method of consuming the information in the book, but it did amuse her. She felt the wash of amusement before sitting up and glancing at the image of Bastila’s form sat in the chair opposite her.

“It doesn’t make sense.” Bastila’s voice was soft as she gestured at the book before Taylor. The girl had collected almost every tome about Parahuman psychology that she could find, adding a few general reference tomes to cross-reference things. Taylor groaned quietly as she shrugged her shoulders.

‘I understand Bastila,’ The girl thought quietly, rolling her eyes at her teacher. ‘But, I didn’t write the book, and I’m just reading it. Despite how crazy it seems, everyone plays by the rules. That’s just how it is. When people break the rules, like Gavel, or whatever, the villains do band together and put him down. Barring S-class threats so dangerous that no one is willing to face them? Everyone plays by the rules.’ Taylor’s mental voice was sure, and she flipped the pages quietly inspecting the various sources noted in the book, humming.
“Taylor, I’m telling you, criminals don’t play games like this…” Bastila’s voice paused, and she frowned as she leaned forward, resting her arms on the table.

“Unless they’re forced to do so by something higher on the food chain. Back home, the Emperor would make his Sith Lords play games like this, but they’d never choose to do it willingly.” Taylor hummed faintly as she flipped the pages before switching back to the other book that mentioned the ‘unwritten rules.’ This one was apparently the brainchild of a Tinker that’d ended up in prison in Pheonix, and it read much less dryly then the academically produced one.

‘I mean, I don’t know what to say. It doesn’t mention some great equalizing force, but I guess it’s possible — something behind the scenes keeping the people playing along. The rules themselves seem like they’re geared toward like, keeping us from killing each other. We get to play out at being criminals, or villains and heroes, but when there’s a big threat, like an endbringer, we’re all there to lend our aid.’ Taylor hummed as she considered. She watched as Bastila hunched down, getting deeper in thought. She studied the woman for a moment before a thump drew her attention to the side.

The dark haired girl that’d caught her talking to herself twice had just smacked her head down into her book much like Taylor just had as she was letting out a low, irritated groan. Taylor glanced at Bastila’s distracted face, and she slipped out of her chair.

She watched the girl nervously as she approached, stilling and pausing near her for a few moments as she reconsidered even interacting. She must have loomed too long because the girl reacted, tilting her head to the side and peeking over her shoulder.

“Your method of literature osmosis doesn’t seem effective.” The words washed into Taylor, and she blushed before blinking quietly. When she didn’t respond, the girl snorted and lifted her head and turning more fully to face her. “I saw you banging your head on your book, and I figured that it might help, certainly couldn’t hurt..” Taylor blinked and chuckled before slipping closer, peering down at the massive pile of books around the girl. She inspected the tomes curiously before speaking.

“Having issues with your assignment?” She spoke quietly before watching as the girl glanced around at her books and snorted.

“Yeah. Ethics 101. The assignment is on ‘Transformative Identity.’ Whatever the heck, that means.” Taylor blinked as she slid closer, gently tugging on the assignment and carefully reading the oddly worded question. Bonus points, smart teacher. She snorted, and the girl glanced up at her.

“Your teacher is pulling a fast one. It’s uh. The Ship of Theseus.” She glanced at the girl and seeing the blank look she chuckled.

“It’s a bit beyond 101 level philosophy, but I guess that’s why the question is bonus points, but it’s based on this thought experiment posed by this Greek philosopher and historian. Well, most people assume that he stole the experiment from Plato but…” Seeing the girl’s eyes glazing over, Taylor shifted and shrugged.

“Unimportant, but basically, the uh, experiment goes that if an object has all of its parts replaced one by one, is it still the same object once everything has been replaced.” Seeing the confused look on the girl’s face, she quietly reached for an example.

“Star Trek? You know it?” She saw the girls cautious nod, and she pulled out a chair, taking a seat
and gesturing with her hands.

“So the transporters right. They break you apart here and then re-assemble you there with stuff that’s there. Ship of Theseus is all about whether the you that’s there, at the other end is actually ‘you’ and not some. Perfect copy with all your memories but lacking some fundamental aspect that makes them ‘you.’” She hummed faintly.

“It’s all about identity. Is there something that makes you ‘You’ with a capital y. If there’s some aspect of you as you exist now that is transitive into the you that you become over time. Questions about what would stop them from copying you now and then there being two ‘You’s’ running around. It’s a complicated field of thought, but I’d uh. Brief description of the thought experiment and the name should get you your bonus points. Right?” Taylor muttered, glancing down at the booklet that the girl was working out of.

The dark haired girl stared at her and chuckled before quickly writing down the answer. Taylor had been about to back off when the girl scooted closer and pointed at a different response on her page.

“I was confused by this one too, do you have any idea?” Taylor blinked and leaned in quietly, humming as she read the question on the page and the answer before letting out a snicker.

“Oh, uh. This isn’t quite right. See you’ve confused metaphysic materialism and idealism with the uh, other definitions…” Taylor quickly launched into a brief explanation of the concepts, grinning as the other girl hunched down and listened quietly.

“Shit.” The words startled Sabah, and she glanced up, peering over at the other girl who’d suddenly jerked up, staring at her watch. “Shit, Shit, Shit. I’ve gotta go.” She flushed and squirmed out of her chair, hopping up to her feet and freezing.

“Uh. Are you good with all this? I gotta put my books away and get going I’m super behind schedule.” The girl flashed her a nervous smile, and Sabah blinked before nodding quietly. She watched as the black haired girl, scampered over and collected the massive pile of books on her table, moving across the floor and collecting the huge collection of books from her desk.

Sabah found herself chuckling when the girl stumbled, dropping a few and wincing as the librarians all glanced at her. She quickly ran over, dumping the pile on the return cart and sorting them out before running back and collecting her books, her cheeks stained red in embarrassment. She spent a few minutes quickly sorting things out before turning and heading toward the check out desks, and Sabah turned her attention back to her work.

She considered the books before her carefully selecting the three that would be most helpful before jotting down the last few notes that the girl had shared before packing up her own things. Lunch was rapidly approaching, and she’d have just enough time to scarf it down before she had to be in her next design class. She carefully collected her own books, putting them in the return cart.

Sabah was a bit disappointed when she glanced up and saw that the tall girl had vanished while she was cleaning up and she headed toward the counter, checking out her own books quickly and moving toward the exit.
Emerging into the gloom, Sabah took a moment to take a deep breath, inhaling the fresh spring air and revelling in that post-rain scent, the world still a touch damp but the meagre sun shafts peeking through the clouds were quickly clearing it away. A quick walk through the plaza found her a small diner to collect a sandwich from, and she’d head out into the afternoon. Figuring that she could find someplace dry to eat once she got back to school, she set out cutting across the park.

“...ook at her move.” The hushed words caused her to pause, and she glanced to the side, seeing a group of young mothers with their daughters sitting on a bench and staring off to one side. Sabah moved over toward them, peering past the copse of trees and letting out a soft gasp.

Her new friend was there, and she was in the middle of a martial arts practice of some sort. She moved with almost fluid grace, her form smoothly and precisely shifting from pose to pose. Sabah had seen other martial artists before, at school events, or on the television when she’d visited bars with friends from her old program, and there was something otherworldly about the way that the girl moved.

She bent over nearly 90 degrees at one point actually pivoting around some unseen strike before snapping back up and spinning through a kick that saw both of her feet twirling around and lashing out. The movements were sure and practiced, and Sabah glanced over when she heard someone speaking.

“It’s fascinating, isn’t it?” She glanced over and saw the mothers staring at her in amusement, and she blushed prettily, adjusting her outfit. When she didn’t respond, one of the older women let out an amused smirk.

“I think it’s a wonderful thing. Pretty young girl learning to defend herself like that, and you can tell that she’s enjoying herself.” Sabah blinked and glanced back, taking in the other girl’s face. The hint of awkwardness that had lurked around the other girl when they’d spoken had been dispelled, and a small grin of joy was visible on her face as she moved and danced along the ground.

Sabah watched as the girl landed on the ground and pivoted on her foot, lashing out in a spinning kick before slowly dropping onto both feet. She fell into an odd sort of crouch, breathing heavily and taking a moment to collect herself. She heard the impressed sounds of the women next to her, and she quickly slipped over the damp grass, coming to a stop near the other girl and letting out a polite cough.

She almost laughed when the girl leapt like a scalded cat and spun into a ready pose, her hands coming up. The girl stared at her, shocked for a few moments before nervously lowering her hands, that awkward smile coming back to her face. The girl shifted on her feet before speaking quickly.

“Oh, Hey, uh…” She paused and blinked quietly, and Sabah grinned as the girl finally came to the realization that they hadn’t actually exchanged names before the black-haired girl had simply started fixing all of her homework for her. Sabah took pity on the other girl though, quickly reaching up and offering out the bottle of water that she’d bought with her lunch. When the girl nervously took it, she spoke softly.

“It’s Sabah. We didn’t actually introduce ourselves back there.” She held out her other hand and watched the other girl awkwardly juggling the bottle before reaching out shake.

“Taylor, it’s uh. Nice to meet you, Sabah. That was uh. Pretty poor manners.” Sabah grinned when Taylor shifted back and cracked the bottle, taking a long sip before wiping at her forehead. Sabah
considered the girl before shifting back on her heels. She studied the taller girl curiously, taking in her features before speaking slowly, her words caged carefully.

“Eh. You did come swooping in out of the blue to save a poor damsel from the mysteries of ancient riddles, so I shall, of course, forgive your indiscretion this time.” The words were spoken with a teasing smile, and she watched as Taylor seemed to consider her curiously for a moment before nervously smiling and rubbing at the back of her neck.

“Yeah, that’s uh. That’s me. Always there to lend a helping hand to a damsel in distress.” She’d cough nervously, and Sabah let out a snort. She waved to a nearby bench and Taylor nodded, following. Sabah dropped onto the bench and unwrapped her sandwich, setting it on her lap. She glanced up at the other girl.

“So, Martial arts, Psychology, and Philosophy, and you’re apparently some form of drive-by peer tutor?” She glanced at the girl curiously and snickered when the other girl shrugged and dropped down next to her, rubbing at her cheek.

“I uh. I like to keep busy.” The girl smiled faintly, and Sabah shrugged before casually offering half the sandwich over. The other girl stared at it curiously before shrugging and taking it. She sniffed it quietly before taking a nervous bit and tilting her head as she chewed. She seemed to stare at the sandwich considering it.

“It’s Lamb.” She spoke with amusement, pointing at the nearby Greek restaurant. “Spiced lamb, not bad in a sandwich. I was in a bit of a hurry.” The other girl seemed to shrug before moving to take another larger bite and chewing thoughtfully as she sipped at the water. Sabah considered the girl quietly before proceeding to speak again.

“So, uh. The Martial arts you were doing? I know it’s not Tai Chi, and it didn’t look like Jiu Jitsu or Krav Maga. What’s it called?” She watched as Taylor took a moment to quickly chew and swallow, wiping at her mouth before speaking.

“It’s called Matukai, of those it’s closest to Tai Chi, in that it’s more about meditation then being used as a weapon, though it’s more helpful in combat then Tai Chi typically is.” The girl spoke quickly, and Sabah hummed, quickly adding Exercise Science, to the list of possible majors that the other girl had. She was tempted to ask, but half the fun in the game was guessing what other student’s majors were. Before she could worry on it more, the other girl quietly leaned forward and continued to speak.

“I usually do it post run, but the weather outside was pretty poor earlier. It helps center me.” Taylor hummed faintly before shrugging. “It’s a good way to get your schedule ironed out.” The other girl leaned back and took a bite of the sandwich, glancing over at Sabah quietly and considering her. She opened her mouth as if she was about to ask something before the clock tower on the mayoral hall let out a loud ‘bong’ and the girl winced.

“Right. I’ve gotta get going, it’s my turn to make dinner, and I’ve got to hit up the butchers on the way home. But. I generally swing past here most days? Maybe I’ll see around?” The girl slid to her feet, and Sabah blinked, leaning forward and nodding quietly despite how rare it was that she actually got around to the library. She considered the taller girl, and on a whim, she spoke.

“How about, uh. Tomorrow? I’ve got to do some work on a few projects, and maybe you could help out?” Taylor seemed to pause and consider for a few moments before nodding quietly.
“Yeah. I’ll have more time. I usually do my post-run exercises down here around 11:30, if you want to can meet me here, and we can go over whatever you’re working on? I might not know much, but I can certainly fact check from a book.” The girl hummed and shrugged her shoulders. Sabah considered her for a few moments before letting out a snort.

“Anyway, I gotta go. I’m here most days at that time, so if you don’t see me, I’ll be around. Nice meeting you, Sabah, good luck with your assignment.” She snorted and turned to leave, jogging a few feet away. She paused and spun in place, switching back to facing her and Sabah blinked as the girl casually shouted something at her.

“Thanks for the sandwich.” She’d wave it playfully before turning and heading off, nibbling on it quietly. Sabah sat back, finishing the other half of her lunch and watching the girl disappear, only realizing as she vanished out of the park that she hadn’t bothered to get the other girl’s cell phone number. Oh well, there was always tomorrow.

She finished her half of the food before getting to her feet and dusting off her hands and heading off toward school. She only had twenty minutes before she had to be in her next class.

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here; I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

I changed a whole bunch of crap in this one, I basically reworked the entire chapter, cut out a bunch of garbage exposition and then altered the timeline to make it all seem more organic. I removed the Bastila pov and changed it to a Sabah one, and then made the interactions and narration more accurate. I actually lost like 500 words in this version, but it seems to read better, and most of the missing stuff I took out was garbage, so eh.

Also, it sort of just feels more genuine.

UPDATE DATE: 05-19-2019]]
April 2nd, 2011
Brockton Bay Docks

The rumble of the ageing truck was like a balm to Danny’s soul. Often the feeling of the ageing beast rattling through his bones was the first sign that his body got that he was going home, that he’d soon be out of his uncomfortable work shoes, and relaxing on something comfortable. This was almost certainly the reason that he’d never gotten the ageing truck’s battered engine fixed. Though if he was honest with himself, as he felt the rumble through his feet and back now, the truck’s engine had become louder and gruffer in its old age, much like Danny himself.

The two fossils rolled along the darkened streets of the dock as Danny carefully guided the truck toward home. A hat sat low on his head, the brim down over his dark eyes, and a hand occasionally lifted to scratch at his beard. The man kept his gaze moving, watching the dark shapes lurking on either side of the street, waiting for any hint of danger. The car rumbled along, and the shadows remained shadows, and it seemed, for tonight at least, the ABB and the merchants had little interest in harassing him.

The harsh lights of the truck washed over more than one tattooed youth, but beyond a few middle fingers, they didn’t react to Danny. Tonight had been the first time in nearly three months that he’d not been home before sundown. The union had bent itself over backwards to help him in dealing with Taylor, and her entire situation. Danny didn’t think that pulling the occasional double, even against the complaints of his coworkers, was too much to ask in return. There was a lot of goodwill that he’d gotten from the rest of the union, and Danny intended on paying it back as best he could. Danny wasn’t the kind of person that liked being in the debt of anyone else, and if it hadn’t been for Taylor, he wouldn’t have allowed Carol to do everything that she’d done either.

Pausing when he came to a red light, Danny’s hands gripped the wheel harder, his teeth grinding just a touch. Carol had mentioned that Alan was making her life a bit more complicated than it needed to be. Danny couldn’t believe that the man was this petty despite them doing as Carol suggested and dropping the individual claims against the girls to focus on the supervisory neglect of the school itself. Taking a few deep breaths to calm himself; Danny’s grip slackened on the wheel. When the light changed, he continued, driving down familiar streets, eyes focused on the road as his thoughts swirled onwards.

The case was going well. The school had been dragging its heels, but between Carol’s work and the evidence that Taylor had accrued they honestly had the school over a hump, and it was now just a
matter of pinning them down and getting an appropriate settlement. Carol seemed to think that they’d be finished with the worst of it before Taylor’s birthday in June, which would be good. Taylor was doing astoundingly well in her online schooling, but part of Danny was concerned with the amount of free time his daughter had during the day. Taylor had always been… intense, but the drive she seemed to hold now was a little concerning.

He’d just gotten his daughter back, and she’d already begun changing so much. She seemed happier, even if she spent her days buried continuously in books or training. Danny couldn’t count the number of times he’d stumbled across her in some corner of the house meditating and floating objects around her. Eventually, he’d moved most of the collected junk out of the basement and made the space available to Taylor to allow her to work her powers.

She’d actually ended up making the ample space hers, acquiring a few carpets by helping a some of the more friendly elderly neighbours and had taken to referring to the basement as her temple. Most evenings, he ended up find her meditating in the basement while using her telekinetic power to move things.

Danny’s concerns only grew as Taylor’s evident grasp of her powers did. He knew that he’d have to speak with her soon about it. Danny’s greatest fear was that she’d come to him and tell him that she intended to use her powers to do good. It wasn’t that Danny wasn’t against the idea of his daughter helping people; even as a child Taylor hadn’t been able to stand the thought of people suffering, and the pain she’d gone through had only made that inability to stand by worse. No, it was more about the danger involved. Danny had already lost so much, and part of him turned to ice at the idea of Taylor out there, getting into fights with super villains.

The truck pulled up onto the street, his house smoothly coming into view. Danny let out a soft sigh of relief, seeing the light on and waiting for him. Pulling up onto the gravel-lined driveway, Danny killed the engine. Opening his door and hopping out, Danny took a moment to glance back into the truck.

He stood there next to the open door for a few moments, his expression conflicted, and in truth, he almost left the small box on the bench seat. Danny had promised himself that he’d never bring one of these into his home again. A tiny traitorous voice whispered in his mind though, asking him if this could have saved Taylor, and he grit his teeth snagging the box and closing the truck door a bit harder then he had to.

Danny walked across the grass of the lawn, ignoring the footpath and hopped up the steps to the porch, crossing the ageing wood and opening the front door. He juggled the box in his hands, eventually pinning it to his side with an elbow and using his key to unlock the door. Quickly squeezing in the door, Danny took a few moments to kick off his work boots and hang his coat, before moving around the ground floor to try and locate his wayward daughter.

Finding no sign of Taylor in the living room, Danny moved toward the kitchen smiling when he saw two wrapped plates waiting for him, along with a folded up newspaper. Taking a few moments to unwrap the food, he was amused by the sight of the meatloaf and potatoes and the small slice of pie.

Setting the box on the table, Danny picked up the cold food and set it in the microwave, waiting for it to warm as he moved over and collected a beer from the fridge. When the microwave dinged, Danny retrieved his food and brought it to the table with his beer, setting both in place before flipping open the newspaper so that he could read while he ate.

Danny savoured the food as he skimmed the paper. The front page had a few articles about an
explosive attempt by the residents of Canberra to break the quarantine. Danny let out a compassionate sigh before flipping through the paper and looking for more local news.

It seemed that a local minor gang was making waves; apparently, the ABB was on the warpath after an assault on one of their illegal gambling houses. Lots of speculation about who was involved but the paper didn’t seem to have any information. Danny took a moment to check the sports section, rolling his eyes at a fluff piece about a parahuman that had streaked the field in a Bruins game. His power had caused anyone that looked at his bare skin to see spots in their vision had meant that he’d been challenging to capture until the local Protectorate had shown up. An image with the paper had shown an eight-foot-tall man in a skintight costume holding the Parahuman by the ankle and doing his best to not to look at whatever had been censored in the image.

Finding nothing else of interest, Danny folded the paper and set it aside. As he continued to eat his dinner, his eyes caught on the pile of books on the table that was waiting for Taylor to return them to the library in the morning. He considered the books as he chewed thoughtfully before reaching out a hand.

He quickly dragged the small stack over, carefully pulling the top book down and blinking at the skinless man on the surface. Danny checked the binding, chuckling at the word ‘Anatomy’ in bold letters flipping through the book to see variously detailed diagrams of human anatomy showing the different parts of the human body. Setting that aside, he pulled the other three books over, turning the stack to the side to make it easier to read the titles on the spines. Two of the books were more psychology textbooks and the last a rather heavy looking book on Greek Philosophy. He shook his head as he stacked them back up where they’d been.

Taylor’s reading habits had exploded over the last two months. If only her social life had followed that trend. She’d spent that same amount of time with precisely one person besides himself and Carol, and all that he’d been able to get out of his daughter about her was that she was a shy girl that she often shared a table with at the library.

He’d gotten a name out his daughter, Sabah, and he’d listened to her describing her help with the girl’s homework. Taylor had seemed almost excited by the idea of helping someone else, and he had seen the other girl the few times that he had picked Taylor up at the library. They often parted ways on the steps of the library, Taylor's new friend heading toward downtown.

She seemed older than Taylor, but at least it was good that she was talking with someone. He had been concerned the first few weeks when Taylor had thrown herself into training her gifts, reading, and exercising to the exclusion of all else. Now if he could get her to separate her social life from her research, he could breathe a bit easier.

His food consumed, Danny slipped to his feet, setting his dishes in the sink, rinsing each off before moving around the first floor, peeking about to see if he had missed Taylor passed out with a book on a couch or the carpet in the sitting room. Finding no sign of his wayward daughter, he approached the door to the basement, rolling his eyes at a scrap of paper with ‘Jedi Temple’ scrawled on it tacked to the door. Danny opened the door, smoothly descending the stairs as silently as he could. About halfway, he came to a stop, staring at his daughter.

Taylor was sitting in a classic lotus pose, her eyes closed and her form completely serene. This wouldn’t have merited much of reaction but for the fact that she was doing so as she hovered about four inches off the ground. Half a dozen objects floated around her in a complicated dance, drifting upwards and downwards as they weaved carefully around each other.
Danny stood there entranced for a few moments before he shook his head, still a little shocked at the things that Taylor could do with her powers. He shifted his position, intent on heading back upstairs, but when his foot moved on the step, the aged wood let out a low creak. Danny tensed remembering the last time that he had startled Taylor while she was practicing, and how much time they’d spent cutting the wrench out of the drywall in Taylor’s bedroom. Turning back he was shocked to see the objects still in the air, hovering in place as they and Taylor lowered toward the ground.

“You missed the family meeting; We voted to secede from the United States, and named me the new Monarch.” Taylor’s voice was laced with light-hearted sarcasm, and when everything had settled on the ground, she opened her eyes, glancing back at him with a wry grin. Rolling his eyes at her comment, he turned and headed back up the stairs.

“Of course your highness, I only dread for the Royal family that you inherited my sense of humour, and not your Mother’s. C’mon though, we’ve got a few things to talk about.” He clumped up the stairs, shaking his head at the sound of Taylor scrabbling to chase him up the stairs.

“Hey! The voices in my head laugh at me all the time.”

‘Bastila, we’re both aware that I understand the concept of Decision Theory on a cursory level at least, we don’t have to debate it.’ Despite the words, Taylor was more amused than irritated, and Bastila’s chuckling from across the room was evidence that the lecture hadn’t been entirely serious. Taylor sat up from her position on the floor, tucking her legs under her as she resumed the lotus position. She glanced over at Bastila, watching as the woman’s image settled comfortably and studied the book in her hand.

Honesty, the spirit was right; this extra training session was entirely her fault. Taylor could admit to herself that she shouldn’t have stayed up so late reading the last three chapters of the God Emperor of Dune, but even Bastila’s attention had been rapt as the God-Emperor, Leto the second himself had finally fallen. Neither of them had wanted to set the book down until they’d finished the very last page, which had meant that they’d been reading until almost four in the morning.

That had meant that Taylor had slept in, and had been late getting her day started. She had ended up leaving her force training in favour of doing run on time so that she might still make it to the Library in time to see Sabah. Wednesdays and Fridays tended to be the days that their schedules lined up, and they’d often meet in the park, Sabah eating her lunch while Taylor did her meditations, and they’d retire to library to work on their various projects, keeping quiet company, though occasional conversations drew the ire of the librarians down on them.

This decision meant that after dinner, Taylor really should be doing her force exercises, and she did understand that. It didn’t mean that she didn’t also enjoy playfully whining at Bastila to see the woman get grumpy. Bastila was her ‘Master’ and she often ‘complained’ that her student was too driven, and that she should try to enjoy her life more. So Taylor found herself occasionally whining and acting like a brat to give the Jedi master something to lecture her about. Seeing Bastila peering over her book at her and raising an eyebrow, Taylor rolled her eyes before settling into her pose and closing her eyes.

Taylor settled softly into the pose, taking several deep cleansing breathes before letting her mind
focus inwards. She imagined a vast ocean of mist around her, and she used the image to help clear her mind of thoughts of her Master and her friend. As the thoughts faded out, Taylor breathed slowly, deep, precise inhalations and exhalations, the motion of her chest and the sound of the air rushing in and out of her lungs pushing her focus deeper.

Her mind reached out, tentatively finding its connection to the force and feeling it out. The link itself was becoming familiar to Taylor, and if she was honest, it was always partially active in her mind these days. Once she had the power, she allowed it to spread through her, deepening her connection to the force until she could feel the universe around her. Taylor took a few moments to acclimate before reaching out and selecting her weights.

“Before you do that, try and lift yourself, use yourself as an extra object to control.” Bastila’s words were a shock, and Taylor nearly lost her focus, but after a moment she nodded, as her control returned. The words penetrated her mind, and she took a few moments to consider how best to do what she’d been instructed.

Eventually, ready to at least try, Taylor gently grasped her form with her power, slowly raising herself into the air. It was surprisingly challenging, and Taylor understood immediately why she’d been told to do it. It increased the difficulty of the training exercise quite a bit, the constant sensory input from the force holding her aloft was affecting her control, and it took her nearly twenty minutes before she felt comfortable enough with the Force to reach out for her objects.

She started with a single broken side-table, lifting it off the ground and moving to swing it out and around her slowly, grasping a standing lamp next and running it in the opposite direction of the table, weaving the objects around each other as necessary. On went her power, grasping other objects one at a time, an old digital clock, her Father’s backup tool-box, a bowling ball that she’d never seen used and finally a single bicycle tire. Each object lifted one at a time, moving the opposite direction of the last one that Taylor had raised.

Once in the air, Taylor used her powers to keep them moving in a complicated dance, each one ducking past every other on their trips orbiting Taylor's hovering form. Maintaining control of them was hard, and that was before she factored in making them dodge each other without striking the roof or the floor, splitting her attention between each object and her floating had been a challenge, but Taylor was impressed that she’d accomplished it.

The sound of something creaking audibly startled her and Taylor snapped down on her power, keeping it around the objects to stop them from flying all over the place like missiles. Slowly reaching out and lowering everything to the ground, she let her senses reach out and check to see who had snuck up on her. Confirming her suspicions Taylor’d let out a sarcastic comment before turning and grinning at him.

He looked tired, but the joke drew a short bark of laughter from him, which Taylor considered a win, and the sarcastic response was the cherry on the cake. Though it saw her rolling over to get her feet under her so that she could give chase, she called out as Bastila vanished from view.

“Hey! The voices in my head laugh at me all the time.” The wash of amusement from Bastila proved her point. When she reached the top of the stairs, Taylor pushed herself entirely to her feet, glancing out the door and blinking when she found her Father sitting at the kitchen table. Taylor slowly walked out of the doorway, approaching the table and glancing at her father and the table for a moment before taking a seat.

The family meetings had started when Taylor had returned from the hospital, initially being Bastila’s
idea, when she saw how exhausted Taylor’s father had been and Taylor had brought it up. Once a week, they sat down to dinner together and discussed what needed to be done for the week. They conferred on the budget, figured out what they needed to buy to stock the pantries and addressed any issues going on with the house. Taylor’s powers required that they be used to develop and control them properly and this had led to her assisting her father with a lot of the home repairs that they’d been putting off.

Taylor’s power could be used to pull nails cleanly from wood; she could remove entire sections of drywall, and working with her father was something that Taylor had found that she rather enjoyed. Even when they were working on the old plumbing or doing complicated and delicate wiring, Taylor had gained a new appreciation for her Father’s sense of humour and stoic work ethic. She had been badgering him to join her for runs in the morning, but he had yet to comply.

“So.” Taylor drew the word out, tapping her hands on the table and she sat up a bit straighter. “Everything okay, Dad?” Taylor glanced at her father as he took a few moments to organize his thoughts before speaking.

“Yeah, but we got a few things to talk about. First off, I heard from Carol when I was at work today; she told me that we should be finishing the court case with Winslow in the next few weeks, she is pretty certain that we’ll come out ahead in it, and I was wondering what you wanted to do about school. Once the case is finished, we’ll be able to afford to send you to Arcadia, or any other school you wanted.” Taylor’s lips curled into a frown at the thought, she’d gotten used to her schedule, and she wasn’t exactly looking forward to going back to a school and having to not only deal with other students but slowing down her training as well.

“I was getting used to the Internet schooling, it’s easier on me, and I can do it quickly enough that it leaves time for me to train my powers,” Taylor spoke quickly, although the nervous tremor in her voice meant that she was fooling neither herself or her father. Taylor glanced up and saw him staring at her curiously, and she let out a long sigh before continuing.

“I- It’s more than that, I’m not really… sure that I would want to spend eight hours a day in a school with hundreds of other kids,” Taylor paused softly and frowned at her linked hands on the table, speaking nervously.

“It’s stressful enough dealing with pedestrians; I don’t think I could handle kids looking me up on google and then asking questions about… Well. You know.” Taylor’s voice was small, and she’d quietly pick at the table, The pair remained like this for several minutes, and she heard the long slow sigh of concern from her Father. Taylor nervously hunched her shoulders down, waiting until he picked up the conversation again.

“I hate to think that those girls ruined schooling for you forever, Taylor. It’s not just about learning, you know? It’s about the social experience; if we give in to them like this, it’s like they won, they got what they wanted and broke you.” Taylor glanced up at her Dad, feeling a momentary surge of flame in her chest, the image of Sophia’s smug face ghosting through her mind. She flinched quietly and glanced away. Her father must have seen it because he let out a gentle sigh and continued to speak.

“We’ll discuss it later. There’s also the fact that I’m not exactly happy with the idea of you being around this place all by yourself all day or running the city as you currently do.” When Taylor moved to open her mouth, he’d hold up a calloused hand.

“I know that you’re not doing anything wrong and you’re doing your projects, but I don’t feel
comfortable having my sixteen-year-old daughter constantly by herself when she’s not at the library. Let me think about it, and we can discuss it next week.” Nodding, Taylor blinked when her father reached down, collecting something from beside his chair and setting it on the table.

“Now, speaking of you being all alone in the day, Carol convinced me that I should give you this.” Taylor blinked as her father, slowly opened the box and slid it over to her. She stared in confusion at the small phone, glancing up at her father. The man let out a nervous sound as he rubbed at the back of his neck.

“The plan is rather basic, a hundred day time minutes, with 50 text messages a week. I know that I don’t have to tell you to be careful with this, right? I don’t want to find you in the hospital having walked in front of a car while texting on it.” He’d stare at her quietly. “This is so that when you’re out, you can call me if you need help, please don’t abuse it.” Taylor frowned at the comment before nodding quickly.

“Anything else?” She’d ask, blinking when her dad seemed to almost age before her eyes, tucking her hands in and staring at him carefully.

“You’ve been getting rather skilled with your powers from what I saw. Your control has improved a lot, and I’m wondering what you plan to do with them once the control is where you want it?” Taylor paused, frowning as the question slid through her mind. She hadn’t really thought of it beyond her initial discussions with Bastila. It hadn’t felt real then, telling the ghost that she wished that she’d had the power to stop herself from being hurt, to prevent others like her from being damaged. Now though, that it was actually an option, she felt a bit sick to her stomach.

“Honestly, Dad, I haven’t thought of it? Most of the time I train my powers to know that I’ll have them when I need them, and you’re right my control with telekinesis and control have been improving, but I still have a lot to learn I think. I’m not even sure if I want to be a cape. All I know is that at the moment, the idea of putting on a form-fitting outfit and running around in the dark beating up gang members isn’t super appealing?” She frowned at the image that conjured in her head, the ideas of tattooed gangsters lying broken at her fight like Sophia had and her stomach roiled quietly, and she shrank back into herself a touch.

Alright.” The relief in her father’s tone was almost palpable, and Taylor frowned, wondering just how long her dad had been harbouring that worry. “I understand the need to help people Taylor, your mother and I both did that in our own ways, and your mother was something of an activist in her youth, so I can see you eventually wanting to help people in danger, but I want you to think about how you want to do that. Independent capes don’t last long, especially here, and you’d be safer joining up with the Wards or New Wave if you chose to fight crime.”

“30%” Taylor muttered faintly. Seeing her father’s confused look, she spoke again, clarifying. “That’s the number of capes nationwide that last more than eight months as an independent. Of those that don’t, nearly 40% get arrested, 30% end up dead, and the rest join a team later.” Taylor reached out, tapping the pile of books on the table.

“I do research more than dead philosophers, Dad. I understand the dangers that I’m in, and I’ve done the research. You can rest assured that I don’t intend to go around looking for fights in the docks in a onesie and a skull mask.” When her dad nodded, Taylor shifted back into her seat, quietly running a hand through her air. The awkward silence would drag on for a few moments before her dad leaned in and spoke teasingly.

“So. Your Highness, how could the vote elevating you happen if half the population of our
sovereign kingdom wasn’t present?” Taylor grinned at her father as he grabbed his beer and took a sip, and she assumed an almost haughty accent, holding out a hand.

“We announced the elections the moment the secession was decided; it’s not our fault that the citizens chose not to attend the vote. Why our election was positively democratic considering that last year, less than half the population of our former overlords elected to vote in their elections.” Taylor stuck out her tongue at Danny, grinning when he rolled his eyes and stood up to start doing dishes.

“Well, I’ve got my duties, your Majesty, you should probably get to bed if you plan on being up at the crack of dawn like most days.”

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here; I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N’s to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Didn’t change much, added a few hundred words, and just cleaned up the structure a bunch, grabbed the last few missing errors and fleshed out the various scenes here. I changed some of Taylor’s non-speech reactions and cleaned up a bunch of her speaking stuff to make her more in line with her current characterization.

UPDATE DATE: 05-21-2019]]
Chapter Summary

[[So this is the updated version of 2.3. I’ll post 2.4 tomorrow, and then we’ll get to move on. There’ll be extra stuff in 2.4 as well, and even if you’ve read the last version, feel free to re-read I’ve cleaned it up a bit and fixed a few things.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

April 14th, 2011
Brockton Bay Central Bank

{This errand is looking like it’s going to be an all-day thing, Sabah, I’m not sure if I’m going to be able to make it to the library before your afternoon class.} Taylor groaned quietly as she typed out the message. She quickly sent it off before crossing her arms and resting the cool plastic of her phone against her cheek. Tapping the phone against her chin while she kept her arms wrapped tightly around herself, Taylor found herself tapping her foot. A few moments of this saw her glowering toward the rest of the people that were standing between her and the blessed freedom of not being in a crowded bank.

This visit was supposed to take twenty minutes tops, a quick errand on her run to the Library. That was before the comedy of errors that her day had become left her standing in the wrong branch, surrounded by angry, sweaty people. First, her home branch had been closed, and she’d been forced to divert to the nearest bank between her the library.

She’d expected the main branch of the bank to be a bit busier, but not to this extent. It didn’t help that since she’d arrived at this branch, they’d barely gotten through half a dozen customers since it seemed like every other person that got to the head of the line thought they were important enough to start screaming about the inconvenience.

Checking her watch, Taylor found that the current customer, an overweight woman that was making a fuss to the poor harried looking teller, had been doing so for nearly three-quarters of an hour. A momentary pause in the screaming saw her turning her gaze back to the front but if the way the woman had leaned back with a hand on her chest was any indication, the manager next to the teller hadn’t said what the woman wanted to hear. Taylor wasn’t surprised when the woman began to scream all the louder, turning a fascinating shade of puce.

When she started ranting about ‘the people that she knew in this town,’ Taylor rolled her eyes, turning to rest her hip on the nearby table and glancing down at her still silent phone. The irritated sigh from her left saw her glancing up at the figure directly behind her in line. The girl was glowering toward the front, and Taylor followed her gaze just in time to see the lady through a chequebook over the counter with a loud screech at something that had been said to her. Snorting and shaking her head, Taylor turned her attention back to the phone when a message came back through from Sabah.
Boo. Now I’ll have to figure out this intro to psych assignment myself. Alright. Tomorrow, usual time?

Taylor rolled her eyes, shooting off a reply and then tucking her phone away. She glanced over to make sure that the crazy woman at the head of the line was still blustering away before crossing her arms and wondering for the third time if she should bail out and come back tomorrow. If she was honest with herself though, she probably wouldn’t come back tomorrow. The crowds were starting to get to her, and it was only her tenuous grasp on the force that was keeping her irritation and claustrophobia in check. If it weren’t for the necessity of getting at her savings to continue her training, she would’ve escaped out into the fresh air over an hour ago.

Unfortunately for her, Taylor did need to get the cash out so that she could buy the collapsible bo-staff that she’d had her eyes on. Bastila had pointed out that Taylor had a firm enough grasp on the unarmed combat styles and her powers that they could start working with weapons. That meant that Taylor needed cash to source herself a weapon. They’d been making do for the last few days with an old wooden broom handle with its middle wrapped in rubber, and either end painted a vivid yellow, but the weight was wrong, and the stick itself was too fragile to practice striking at all. Taylor needed an actual weapon that she could familiarize herself properly with its use.

Other skills that were starting to come into play were even more difficult to practice. Bastila and Taylor had spoken at length about combat precognition, but seeing as Bastila was merely an image in her head, Taylor couldn’t practice that skill, she’d need an actual partner to spar with to properly hone that skill. There had to be a genuine danger of her being hurt before she could figure out how to use the power to weave around blows. She’d tried a few times with her father, barehanded fighting, but she could tell that her dad was reluctant to strike her. The only reason that he’d been helping out as often as he did is that she’d said she needed his help or she’d have to find some goons in the street that didn’t mind taking swings at a girl. She’d nearly gotten herself grounded, but he had agreed to practice with her.

Bastila had been prodding her about hunting down a local martial arts classes, someplace that she could pick up a more thorough understanding of the weapon she was intending on getting. Also, someplace where she could find people more skilled than herself to practice with to hone her skills would be helpful. But, the idea of finding a class near her house and trying to explain to the teachers that she was a parahuman trying to hone her powers didn’t instill her with any confidence, and for the moment she was putting that off at least.

Taylor’d been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she missed the irate businessman, four people ahead of her in line. Truthfully, Taylor wasn’t much in the business of noticing strange men, but this one had gotten rather angry with the queue that he threw his hands up and turned, trying to leave. He pushed his way angrily past the people behind him muttering curses and comments about how he had better things to waste his time on.

Most of the people in line gave him a dirty look but moved out of his way. Everyone that is, except Taylor, who had been so distracted that when his rotund stomach slammed into her side, she was knocked back arm’s flailing. She staggered back and to the side, trying to keep her feet under her, only coming to a stop when she crashed into someone else. Feeling one of her elbows striking something warm and solid; a morbid tension ran up her spine, especially when the warm object she was resting on suddenly started cursing like a sailor.

“Jesus, fucking Christ!” The shout was low and harsh, the voice pushing past gritted teeth and obscured by a hand. A small hand found it’s way to Taylor’s side, pushing her back up and onto her feet. Turning to see who she’d maimed, Taylor got a view of the back of the angry girl from earlier
as she turned to shout at the man.

“Hey, Asshole! Watch where you’re fucking going or learn to go around.” When the man flipped her the bird and stormed off, the girl smoothly turned, wincing as she gripped her nose. The girl took a few deep breaths, and Taylor winced seeing the tears in her eyes as she clutched her nose. After a few moments, the girl spoke as she opened her eyes.

“Are you alright? Did he hurt you?” Taylor blinked at the question from the other girl, feeling oddly bemused. The other girl eyed her up and down, casually checked her over for injuries while holding one hand over her face, still. After staring in shocked embarrassment, Taylor’s mind finally caught up, and she quickly stammered out a response.

“N-No, I’m fine. Just a bit startled,” She flashed the girl a nervous smile before returning the favour and carefully checking the girl over. As she took in the girl’s rapidly reddening face, she babbled without thinking about it.

“What a dickhead. I’m sorry about that, is anything broken?” Seeing the girl wincing and closing her eyes again, Taylor gently tried to touch her arm. The other girl started and then she shook her head rapidly, keeping her eyes clenched shut and hissing out a breath.

“Let me see?; I can’t tell if there’s any blood or damage. You might need First aid.” At first, the girl seemed reluctant to move her arm, but eventually, Taylor coaxed the hands from her face, gasping at the blood.

“Oh, Jeeze. Okay. Tilt your head back and pinch here; it’s like a faucet.” When the girl barked out a laugh, Taylor rubbed nervously at her neck.

“We uh- we need to get to the bathroom unless you want to ruin that shirt.” She moved, hopping adroitly over the divider of the queue, grasping a pole and lifting it and the divider high enough for the other girl to duck under it without fully bending over. Glancing around, Taylor tried to figure out where the bathrooms were. She was surprised when the other girl stormed off casually, she quickly turned and followed in her wake.

A guard approached them as they were halfway across the lobby, and Taylor quickly stammered out an explanation. When the comments went over the poor man’s head, the other girl removed her hand from her nose to show the twin trails of blood over her upper lip. She explained quickly, and the guard nodded, before heading off to collect a first aid kit. Taylor trailed after the injured girl, following her to the sink, nodding quickly when the other girl bent over the sink, allowing her nose to drain. The knock on the door startled her, and she moved over, opening it to find the older security guard holding a first aid kit. Taylor took pity on him, grabbing the bag and returning to her victim.

“Seriously though, sorry about all this. Probably shouldn’t have been wool-gathering like that.” Taylor commented nervously as the girl, watching the blood drip into the white sink. The girl casually waved her off, poking carefully at the mess of red over the center of her face, frowning as the skin started to darken. When the drip of blood slowed, Taylor found herself confronted with the other girl’s severe looking features. The girl gestured to her face.

“How bad does it look?” Taylor took a moment, reaching out, and when the girl didn’t flinch, she gently lifted the girl’s jaw to peer over her features. Frowning, Taylor gently touched the nose, removing her hand when the girl hissed. Between that and the better view of the other girl’s face, Taylor was reasonably sure that the whole thing was almost certainly going to swell up rather
Taylor's hand reached out, gently tracing a finger over the nose, sighing as the girl flinched. The black-haired girl turned and moved to rifle through a nearby bag as the girl let out a rather florid curse. Snorting at the colourful language, Taylor drew out a chemical cold press from the first aid kit, cracking it carefully and shaking it up as she responded.

"The last time I heard that particular word, my Dad punched his best friend for corrupting his little girl." She smirked at the abashed look that the wild-haired girl gave her before continuing. "Well, good news? Doesn’t seem to be broken, it’s relatively straight if a bit, uh. Bruised.” She held up the ice pack once it felt cold.

"Hold this to your nose, alternate it fifteen seconds on and fifteen seconds off. Count uh. Hippopotamuses, or Missipis or whatever.” At the blank look from the other girl, she rolled her eyes and quickly moved to explain.

"Like uh. You know, when you were a kid, and they wanted you to count without going to fast? One hippopotamus, two hippopotamuses, and so forth. It makes it closer to actual seconds since most kids count too fast.” At the raised eyebrow, Taylor huffed a bit as she stepped back. “Sorry. I tend to get weird when I get nervous.”

"You’re uh… definitely pretty weird. But It’s alright. Wasn’t even your fault, right?” The mousy girl said with an almost resigned tone as she stood holding the ice pack to her face. Taylor glanced at the girl’s lips, smirking to herself when she noted her mouthing the word hippopotamus. When the girl scowled at her, Taylor chuckled before glancing at the med kit. No Tylenol or any other pain killers, the unnamed girl was gonna have quite the headache at this rate.

"Right. It doesn’t look we’ve got anything to dull the pain, that’ll have to wait till you can hit up the Pharmacy, I guess.” For some reason, when she mentioned that the other girl got this odd look on her face, like a mixture of amusement and disgust at the idea of being in a pharmacy. 'Maybe she has a fear of doctors.' Taylor thought to herself, humming when a voice reached back, Bastila’s cultured tones reaching her ears.

"We have been attempting to practice healing Taylor? I’m sure that your new friend would be interested in avoiding a long recovery. " Taylor’s mind seized up at Bastila’s comments, her thoughts staggering to a halt before spinning rapidly in her head. The guilt felt was warring rather brutally with the paranoia she had about drawing any more attention down onto herself. But then she glanced over at the other girl who stood before the sink, poking at her face, and testing the nose before she tried to wipe at the dried blood on her face and hand, scrubbing at it. Taylor headed over to the paper towel dispenser, tugging out a handful of the expensive paper towel and offering it to the freckled girl. The girl offered her a nod in thanks before turning to try and clean herself up tenderly.

"Go ahead, Taylor, it can’t hurt to offer, and practice is always good, right? Could even end up making a new friend. I’ll observe and make sure that you’re doing the healing properly." The voice was gentle, and Taylor let out a small sigh, turning to study the mousy girl for a few moments.

‘What could it hurt.’ Taylor thought to herself, coughing to get her attention. When Mousy glanced over, giving her, a look Taylors shifted back on her half of the sink bench, fiddling with her shirt nervously.

“So. I’m uh. Well.” Taylor paused, glancing around, checking each of the stalls, peering past the half-open doors and double checking the closed door. Seeing they had some privacy for the moment
at least, Taylor took a deep breath. “I’m a parahuman. I’m uh. A healer. Sort of?” She glanced over at the other girl, blinking when the smaller girl’s face flushed red and her eyes sparkled with anger.

“Do you think this is some kind of fucking joke?” The girl stalked closer, and Taylor slowly let out a nervous sound, stepping back slowly and flinching just a bit as dark memories flashed over her eyes. The action caused the other girl to pause, giving Taylor a deep look before holding out a hand.

“Give me your hand.” Taylor nervously hesitated, her eyes staring at the other girl quietly and backing up a step. Before she could escape the other girl snapped her fingers, and Taylor sighed softly, stepping forward.

“It’ll let me tell if you’re lying to me, if you do, then I’ll put you to sleep, and you can explain to the protectorate why you think it’s funny to fuck with me.” Taylor’d flinched a bit, her heart beating a bit faster and she peered at the other girl nervously. The accusation hurt oddly, but the harsh look in the girl’s eyes made her reach out a hand gently. When the other girl grabbed her hand and dragged her closer, Taylor lout a noise of discomfort that saw the other girl loosening her grip just a bit and staring at her in confusion.

“H-hey, I don’t even know who you are.” The words were soft and worried, and she saw the other girl staring at her strangely for a few moments. The other girl seemed to stare at her quietly, and Taylor let out a nervous sound before continuing to speak nervously.

“I erm. I didn’t mean anything by it really. I’m still. Well, I’m still learning, and I know that I can heal, but it’s not something that you can easily practice right?” She paused, blinking at the blank look from the other girl, not understanding the almost incredulous look that she was getting.

“What? It’s not like I can walk into the hospital and be like. ‘Hey! I’m a parahuman, where are the sick people, I wanna tinker with their insides.’ They’d toss me in a cell, and I’d never see the light of day again.” She shrugged glaring down at the hand that gripped her own as if it proved her point. The other girl seemed to study her for a moment before sighing and releasing her. Taylor blinked and nervously stepped back, rubbing her arm, glancing at the other girl quietly.

“But I mean, your face looks like it hurts, and I figure that I could practice a bit? Win-win… Right?” Taylor flinched back as those dark eyes stared coldly into her. Taylor’d begun to get even more nervous, fidgeting quietly as she nervously rubbed at her arm and took another tentative step back. She’d been about to rescind the offer and ask that they forget about it when she was released.

“Fine. Let’s see what you can do, then.” The mousy girl dropped her arms to rest at her side, and Taylor stood there staring at her in confusion. The other girl stared back at her with a ‘What are you waiting for’ expression that got Taylor moving.

The dark haired girl tentatively approached the much less friendly looking brunette and carefully, ever so carefully reached out, tilting her chin up. When the girl didn’t bite her head off, she let out a gentle sigh before stepping closer and carefully staring at the damaged flesh.

She studied it for a few moments before lifting one of her hands from the girl’s chin, moving to reach out her hand slowly. She was about to touch the other girl’s face when she got a slightly suspicious look. She stared at her nervously for a few moments her hand wavering before she spoke softly.

“Sorry, uh. I’ve gotta touch the affected area; it makes it more effective. Do I uh- Do I have permission to heal you?” Taylor wasn’t sure what caused the small little laugh that came from the other girl, but when she eventually nodded and stepped closer, Taylor reached out and set her fingers
When the girl’s forehead creased in pain, she let her power come up, remembering what she’d been taught. The feedback from her powers was odd, but she started by muting the pain she could feel radiating into the other girl, watching as she relaxed a bit. Taylor let out a soft sigh and let her power go to work, her fingers tightening a touch and the energy flowing into the damaged flesh.

The girl’s face seemed to expand within her mind; damaged skin stretched over expanding muscles laced with burst blood vessels, more damaged tissues hidden under though clotting had started to set in within the nose. Taylor let out a soft sigh as the power worked, relaxing as she let her power reach out, soothing the pain away fully.

When the girl finally seemed to relax, she allowed the energy to spread into the damaged flesh, carefully washing away the damage. The force moved quickly through the girls body, nearly of its own accord, quickly repairing the broken blood vessels and nerves, forcing the blood to break back down into the muscles and then checking everything once before drawing her hand back, pulling her mind back up out of the force and glancing over at the other girl.

“Everything better?” The girl leaned quietly on the sinks; her face relaxed. Taylor stared at her, wincing when the girl didn’t move. She stepped closer, raising a hand. “Did I miss something? I’m new, and it’s a bit difficult to visualize everything.” When the other girl flinched, leaning back from the hand, Taylor quickly halted. “Sorry.”

“It felt warm.” The other girl spoke softly, almost distracted, and Taylor wasn’t sure what to say to that. So, rather than responding to the feedback, Taylor turned and set to work putting the kit back together and zipping it up. She glanced at the other girl, seeing her looking somewhat distracted, she walked over and opened the door. She handed the worried guard the first aid kit, letting him know that they’d be out in a few moments before turning and heading back over to sinks.

Finding that her new friend had gotten her feet back under and was checking her face to see how the healing had gone she grinned as she approached up behind the tiny girl, offering a soft smirk at her over her shoulder in the mirror.

“All better?” The words were tentative, and the girl seemed to glance at her before looking back at her reflection and touching her nose before speaking.

“Mhm.” The words were soft and cautious, and the girl’s eyes ghosted up and over to her in the mirror before flashing her a smile. “Better than new even.”

“It’s okay to say it, I’m pretty impressive, It’s not exactly big news,” Taylor spoke playfully, watching the other girl’s reaction. When she snorted, Taylor mimed puffing out her chest, grinning quietly before talking a bit more seriously.

“Honestly though, You’re the worst thing I’ve healed so far. Mostly just uh. Paper cuts and scrapes up to now.” The dark-haired girl spent a few more minutes to convince herself that Taylor hadn’t changed her nose at all before she turned to offer out a hand.

“Thank you.” Her voice was just as soft, and Taylor had to lean closer to pick up the words. When the girl held out a hand, Taylor quickly reached to take it. Taylor promptly shook the hand before leaning back and studying the other girl. She could see an odd sort of tension around her shoulders, and she spoke quietly.
“It was my pleasure,” She hummed playfully before speaking. “Now I suppose it’s rather rude to just, heal without introducing myself, so, uh. Taylor.” She saw the other girl blinking in confusion, and she chuckled pointing at herself. “I am. That is. Taylor.”

“Nice to meet you, Taylor. I’m-” The other girl paused, frowning quietly as she stared at her and Taylor slowly tilted her head, taking in the odd reluctant look in the girl’s eyes. She studied her quietly before offering a curious smile.

“You, uh, don’t have to tell me your name if you don’t want.” She saw the girl shuffling quietly before she moved to speak. Taylor grinned softly and held up a hand.

“I’ll just call you uh,” She paused frowning before reaching out, tugging on one of Amy’s hairs. “Mousy. You’ve got a ‘Mousy’ look about you.” She saw the girl look momentarily offended before she let out a soft snort. Taylor grinned quietly as she shifted back on her heels.

“I… Thanks, but-” Whatever the other girl had been about to say was cut off at the sound of a massive Crash that shook the building itself. The pair glanced nervously at the door. When the brunette turned and headed for it, Taylor nervously tugged on her arm and spoke softly.

“Hey, It could be dangerous, be caref-” Taylor trailed off as the door to the bathroom opened to reveal the front half of a large van peeking out of the shattered concrete of the floor above. The van was heavily damaged, and something from the floor above was glowing dangerously. A few moments of shocked silence dragged out before one of the doors opened, and a tall, thin figure rolled out before falling two feet to the tiles of the lobby. Taylor watched as the guy staggered to his feet, taking in his appearance. The boy and Taylor was certain that he was, in fact, a teenage boy, had dressed in all black with a balaclava. How cliche.

Taylor snagged Mousy’s shoulder, dragging her back into the bathroom. Before the door closed, Taylor saw two more figures quickly emerge from the door of the van. Both landed smoothly, One a tall and wide boy with a broad form, clad entirely in black, with a skull helmet on his head. The other one was female, willow and surprisingly spry considering her size. The girl had purple fabric covering most of her form, long blonde hair mussed from the crash.

Pulling the other girl back to the stalls, Taylor nervously glanced around, looking to see if there was someplace to stash the other girl. When Mousy noticed her assessment and looked at Taylor as if she might speak, Taylor held a finger to her lips, continuing her inspection. She’d barely made it to one of the stalls before someone knocked almost politely on the door. After a moment, a high pitched feminine voice washed into the interior of the bathroom.

“I don’t know who you are, but you should come out of there slowly. We’re robbing this bank, and we don’t want to hurt anyone, but we can’t have you doing anything or making any phone calls.” Taylor paused and rubbed her face as she realized that she hadn’t even thought about making any phone calls. She glanced at the other girl seeing a similar look of self-recrimination in her eyes. When neither of them responded, the doorway opened, and the girl in purple entered. Taylor frowned, blinking as the girl that she’d dubbed Mousy slipped around in front of her. The absurdity of the girl who was nearly six inches shorter than her trying to put herself between Taylor and the taller blonde saw Taylor chuckling. The blonde stared at them, giving Taylor a curious glance before she settled her gaze on Mousy and stared intently, a grin spreading on her face after a few moments.

“Well, look what we have here. Panacea shackled up in a bathroom with her girlfriend. Naughty, Naughty. Let’s go.” She waved a hand, something glinting in the lights as she gestured them out.
Taylor glanced at the girl, clearly a villain, frowning at the gun she held before moving to follow Mous- Panacea out of the bathroom. Seeing the faint hints of red around the other girl’s neck, Taylor reached out, squeezing Mousy, or rather Panacea’s shoulder.

As they walked, Taylor looked nervously around the lobby. Everyone else was already face down on the floor of the lobby, thick black shadows coating the windows. The large woman that had been screaming at the tellers was on her side on the ground, whimpering audibly as one of the robbers, a boy in a Venetian mask crouched next to her and slowly poking her with the end of his rather long sceptre.

The two boys that’d escaped the van first were accompanied by a heavyset...girl? In a growling dog mask, and they were conferring quietly. When they saw the villain in purple leading them out toward the kiosks, they waved her over. She gave them a look before glancing back at Taylor and Panacea.

“Sit here, and don’t do anything stupid.” The words were spoken to Panacea, and Taylor almost growled when a subtle nod in her direction was used as a threat. Taylor moved along quickly though, dropping into an uncomfortable seat on the cold linoleum. She glanced over to find Panacea’s eyes on her. She offered a reassuring smile before turning to watch the blonde saunter away.

The purple-clad Villainess casually strolled away from the pair, moving to stand laconically next to the tall, powerful figure in the skull mask. The man, apparently satisfied, coughed loudly trying to draw the whimpering hostages attention, attempting three times before the girl in the dog mask raised a hand slipping it under her mask and let an ear piercing whistle that quieted everyone and turned their attention to the quartet standing near the van.

“Hello. We’re the Undersiders. This is a bank robbery, which should obvious.” The guy’s voice was oddly deep, the helmet he wore almost certainly disguising it. It even had an odd echoing effect to it, and Taylor found herself impressed. He worked with his image.

“Our names don’t matter, what we’re doing doesn’t matter. You all,” He paused here, staring at Panacea now. “Are going to sit there silently, and allow us to do our work. We are not taking your money; your money is insured. We’re taking the bank’s money. We will not be attempting to steal anything from the deposit boxes, so you may rest assured that your assets are safe. If you remain quiet and out of the way we’ll all be out of here and on our way home to our families in no time.” The boy’s words were polite, almost professional, but there was no mistaking the subtle hints of menace in his tone.

Taylor let her gaze drift back to Panacea, her eyes studying the girl from the side as they sat quietly near each other, both girls resting their backs on the fake wood panelling of the tellers stand. Panacea seemed to be watching the robbers with narrowed eyes, and she seemed to be muttering to herself, committing details to memory probably. When the girl’s eyes narrowed dangerously, Taylor followed her gaze, frowning as the blonde emerged from the back of the bank, calling out to her team-mates. “We’re in boys. Get everything you can.”

When the villainess sauntered over to them, Taylor gritted her teeth, watching how the pale girl’s gaze bored into Panacea, something about the look seemed almost corruptive. When the girl crouched down and started to mutter, Mousy’s shoulders tensed up, and she continued to glare back, something was going on, and Taylor disliked it. She’d been about to speak out when she felt a hand on her arm, glancing down she saw one of the girl’s hands gripping her arm, and she got the message. Don’t.
“Aw, how cute. Wonder what dear sister would think about this little development, hrn?” The blonde barked out a laugh as Panacea’s face heated up, and she glared all the more bitterly. Taylor glanced confusedly between the two, clearly missing something important, but she let out a sigh of relief as the powerful figure in rich black leather approached, tapping the blonde on the shoulder, distracting her attention from Panacea.

“We’ve got a problem, Tats.” His voice was low and deep, the metallic flanging effect doing absolutely nothing to disguise the concern in his tone. “You said the boss said that this would be an easy job? Cause it’s not good. The entirety of the Wards is assembling out there.”

“...”

“It felt warm,” Amy muttered to herself, frowning at the other girl as she stammered at her. She waved her off, offering a tiny smile of thanks. The girl seemed uncomfortable with the thanks and moved to collect the first aid kit, quickly replacing everything within before heading over to return it to the guard, evidently speaking with the man. Amy moved, tossing the cold pack in the garbage and cleaning up her mess. She took a moment while the healer was distracted to check her expression, inspecting the nose to see if it was fully healed. It certainly felt healed.

She considered the things she’d heard about her own power, how people had described her using their powers on them to her; she wondered why no one had ever said it was warm. The sensations weren’t always unpleasant, but they were rarely comforting. When the tall thin girl returned to her side, babbling nervously, Amy found herself amused.

She quietly thanked the girl, and when she introduced herself, Amy reached out a hand. She’d been about to introduce herself when the girl’s earnest words about having no clue who she was struck her and she frowned, the words dying in her mouth. The girl, Taylor, seemed to pick up on her discomfort and made a joke, playfully giving her a new name.

Amy stared at her as she tried to decipher if the nickname was intended to be hurtful but the friendly earnest look on the girl’s face stilled her concerns, and she let out an amused chuckle. She moved to open her mouth to dispel the silly game when the sound of a crash from outside startled her. She stifled a curse and walked toward the door, surprised when the tall girl shadowed her closely.

“Hey, Mousy! It could be dangerous. Be care-” Amy found herself chuckling at the nickname, but it was something to think about later. She pulled the doorway open, peering through at the sight of carnage beyond. Some idiot had driven a van through the second floor of the bank and if she wasn’t mistaken a half dozen goons were in the process of clambering out of it. When she felt the older girl’s hand on her arm, drawing her back, she allowed herself to be pulled back into the small bathroom.

Taylor dragged her to safety and then started to fret nervously, and Amy found herself watching as the taller girl moved around, evidently checking the hiding spots. She found herself impressed with the way that the other girl inspected the bathroom, checking for concealed storage spaces, or vents in the stalls. Amy stepped closer and tried to speak when the brown haired girl turned and gave her a severe look holding a finger over her lips. A small part of her wanted to object and tell the other girl off, but something about how the young woman moved hinted that she knew what she was doing.

When the knocking on the door intruded on them; Amy just sighed, moving quickly to place herself
between her ‘saviour’ and the figure in purple. She felt the eyes on her, staring into her and through her, completely disregarding the other occupant in the bathroom. When the blonde spoke though, Amy’s heart clenched, and she gritted her teeth. A thinker if a simple glance like that could out her. The salacious taunting was the icing on the cake, a faint tinge of red rushing up around her ears and neck. She stomped out of the bathroom past the smirking Villain, only slowing her movements at the feeling of a hand on her shoulder. She glanced back, seeing the dark haired girl walking casually at her back. She seemed concerned, as she glanced at a large number of people scattered around the lobby.

When they came to the small teller desk, she dropped petulantly to a seat on the ground, glaring angrily up at the purple-clad villainess, growling low in her throat at the smug look that was being broadcast at her like a thousand-watt lightbulb. The girl let the look linger for a few moments before speaking lazily. “Sit here. Don’t do anything stupid. Or else.” Then she had lofted an eyebrow, gesturing with her head toward the other girl. Amy felt her fists clench at the idea of involving innocent bystanders in this mess.

“This could get messy, Mousy.” The girl's voice was soft, and she seemed almost to be talking to herself. They’d both settled against the desk and glanced up when the tall figure in black coughed. When that failed to garner attention, and his follow-ups also followed suit, it was the girl that managed to get everyone to look, letting out a rather sharp whistle. As the boy started to talk and explain, she let out a groan of discomfort. She moved to lean back, listening to the boy’s spiel before they all vanished into the back except for the balaclava-clad lad. She considered making a shot at the kid, at escaping, but then her eyes drew over to the healer who was staring around at the other hostages, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth and she sighed — bad idea.

She felt the eyes on her more than saw them, glancing up to see that familiar purple suit as it sauntered toward them. Panacea gritted her teeth. If these were The Undersiders that made this stuck up…

“Tattletale, yes, Thinker extraordinaire.” The girl muttered, “Took you long enough, took me a minute to figure out who you were Panacea, but you don’t exactly hide it, hrm?” The girl grinned faintly. “Though to me, you’re not hiding anything at all, even your deepest darkest secrets.” The wave of shock that washed through her caused the blonde girl’s smile to spread. “Yeah, exactly like that one.” Amy felt the tension building, and she glanced to the side, seeing an angry brunette glaring at their captor. Before things could out of control, she reached out, grasping the other girl’s arm and stilling her. The brunette stilled at the touch, but she continued to frown in Tattletale’s direction until the brute in black came up, drawing Tattletale off and speaking quickly.

“We’ve got a problem, Tats.” His voice was low and deep, the metallic flanging effect doing absolutely nothing to disguise the concern in his tone. “You said the boss said that this would be an easy job? Cause it’s not good. The entirety of the Wards is assembling out there.” Amy mostly tuned out the rest of their conversation. The wards were outside, that was good. And since they hadn’t mentioned Gallant being missing that meant that Victoria was probably here as well. She’d been planning on meeting Dean after school, and she would not let him go off to a fight on his own. Smirking to herself, she glanced over to offer the other girl a reassuring smile when something the purple-clad villain said caught her attention.

“We can’t run. Glory Girl’s lurking around somewhere.” When Amy looked up, she saw tattletale staring at her. “She was supposed to be meeting Gallant, and since he’s fucking out there, she’ll be here too. Probably hidden and waiting for us to try and make a run for it, which we’ll have to do since -someone- trashed our ride.” The Villain, Tats, let her gaze drift to the kid in the starter costume, and he flinched under her gaze stammering some explanation about how his tinker-tech had
gotten the arrival coordinates wrong, but Amy wasn’t listening; neither it seemed, was Tats.

“So.” The tone was conversational. “You’re here waiting for Backblast Barbie to smash through the wall like Behemoth?” She rolled her eyes quietly as she glanced at the others. “We’ll need a plan to get out of here. Can you do anything with that van, Chariot? Maybe a one-shot Teleport or something? Bitch is down to one dog, so if we have to get out of here on foot, it’s gonna be a tight fucking squeeze.” They didn’t have an exit strategy, of course. This sounded like a -wonderful- thing considering she was the most valuable bargaining chip in their hands. She was surprised; she didn’t think they’d have the nerve to pull this off after having had their asses handed to them by Lung on the weekend.

At a look, or at least the helmet turning in her direction, the girl in purple held up her hands and fell silent, turning back to smirking smugly at Amy, herself. Amy kept her gaze on Tattletale, her gaze narrowed as she listened to the others talking. The tall figure in Black, Grue her mind supplied, was directing the others. They needed to make a significant distraction, keep the wards distracted out front and hopefully draw out Glory Girl while Chariot did his magic.

Grue, Regent, and Bitch walked over toward the entrance, the three of them conferring quietly amongst themselves as the other figure, Chariot apparently, made his way over to the van, climbing in and cursing up a storm as he did something within. Tattletale remained in place staring at her casually, and Amy couldn’t shake the feeling that the girl was determinedly picking away all of her secrets. The growing grin on her face certainly made her seem like she was going to do something unfortunate.

“So.” The word was casual and lazily drawn out, and Amy’s eyes narrowed at the twisted smirk on that girl’s face as she studied her. “It’s almost poetic, you know? Well. You don’t know. Not yet I bet, but I’m tempted to tell you. Or tell her.” Amy’s fist clenched, and she was about to lunge to her feet as the girl talked when she felt that hand on her shoulder, glancing down at those pale fingers as the healer spoke slowly, her voice low and firm.

“Hey. Tats, was it? Just back off, alright?” Amy glanced over at the girl and blinked, seeing the serious look on her face, turning to watch as the grin spread across Tattletale’s face, and she turned her piercing gaze toward the healer.

“Yeah, getting a bit of a crush on your friend here? You should know tha-” The blonde suddenly cut off, staring wide-eyed at Taylor for a moment before letting a strangled gasp of pain, ripping her gaze away and gripping her head savagely. Amy blinked, turning to the other girl, jaw-dropping as a long string of curses tore from Tattletale’s mouth, the blonde girl carefully keeping her gaze averted.

“What the actual fuck! What do you-” The girl’s tirade was rapidly cut short at a call from Grue, the dark-clad figure staring across the lobby at Tat. When she finally glanced up at him, he waved her over. Amy watched the group conferring, and she secretly watched the other girl, noting the concerned look on the girl’s face. She wasn’t sure what that was all about, maybe the girl had a master or striker power of some sort. Whatever it was, Tattletale hadn’t liked it.

When the group near the window split up, they started gathering the hostages, taking most of the older hostages and the women, leading them over toward the entrance where Grue was confidently speaking to them. Tattletale had moved over to help the kid in the balaclava while he dragged some large piece of junk across the lobby floor toward the safe. When the pair of them vanished into the back, and the others were distracted with the hostages, Amy drew out her phone and quickly started typing.
“And, what exactly do you think you’re doing?” The voice that came over her shoulder was haughty, feminine, and oh so very smug. Amy stared at her phone, feeling the cold metal of something pressing into her back, and she stared down at her phone. She pressed a single button before holding up her phone, tossing one of the girl’s smug grins back at her.

Amy watched the girl’s eyes widening as the others kicked the doors open and the hostages charged out, Grue’s black smoke following them out and over the plaza, obscuring the three heroes as they vanished into it to distract the Wards.

{I’m in the bank, the Undersiders are here. They’re trying to set up a teleporter.} Amy kept the phone held up toward Tattletale as the phone vibrated. She couldn’t see the screen from her position, but the sound of crashing was undoubtedly a good hint at what her sister had said. She drew the phone back, taking a peek at the message.

{Coming.} And in true Glory Girl Fashion, rather than coming through the smoke that obscured the plaza the girl had smashed through the exterior wall of the bank, coming through the bathroom that she and Taylor had been ensconced in mere minutes before.

“Where is my sister.” Glory girl’s face was dark, the mask of professionalism that they’d been taught as girls firmly in place. She floated in place, cape fluttering in the non-existent wind. Amy’s gaze drifted around the lobby, taking in the hostages who all stared at Victoria with awe, she peered back when Tattletale took a single step back nervously before raising her hand.

The glimmer of light off the gun was a shock. Amy’s eyes widened, and she shifted nervously, but before she could do anything stupid, she felt hands hooking under her arms and smoothly dragged her back. Coming to a stop cleanly out of the line of fire, she glanced up to see the healer holding her carefully and crouching low over her, one hand held up at the ready, watching the fight.

“So! Battering Ram Barbie here to save the day, must be a dream come true for that sister of yours!” The blonde called out cattily, keeping her gun pointed toward the hostages as she tried to circle Victoria, Amy’s gaze watched the barrel of the weapon as it swayed wildly amongst the crowd of cowering people around herself and the other girl. The barbs started, catty comments tossed back and forth as they danced around each other. Amy, watched, growling faintly as Tattletale’s constant stream of comments began to get to Victoria. The girl’s power and some educated guesses seemed to be getting under her sister’s skin. It was making Vicky sloppy.

Whenever Tattletale lowered her weapon, Victoria charged, lashing out. Tattletale was oddly slippery, though, somehow ducking under the blows. Moreso; each time that she did manage to dodge, she said something soft enough for only Victoria to hear that was picking at her temper, each missed attack seemed to be making Victoria more angry and reckless. Attacks that ended up swinging in the air were soon smashing into the floor, chairs or desks as Victoria continued to up her speed to try and get the other girl. Amy watched as Vicky lost her temper, the anger overtaking her and causing her to either constantly over-shooting or just miss entirely.

The damage had gotten bad, her sister angrily smashing aside masonry and brickwork as she cursed and yelled for the blonde villain to stand still. Tattletale just laughed, and Amy didn’t even catch onto what was going on until the blonde ducked out of the way and allowed her sister to smash through one of the pillars, causing the already compromised section of the roof over where they were all huddled to finally give way under the weight of the van with an audible groan.

Amy ducked down and covered her head, waiting for the pain, laying there silently for a few moments before peeking open an eye and seeing that they weren’t dead. She looked around taking in
Tattletale and Victoria both staring at her, or above her. Amy turned to look up and found her saviour looming over her, holding both hands upwards, the healer’s entire form visibly strained as the roof seemed to float untouched in mid-air.

“M-Mousy, c-can you get the hostages out from under this so I can p-put it down please.” The girl’s voice strained under whatever burden she was experiencing, and Amy moved, quickly gathering up a few of the slower people to walk, dragging them along with the others as everyone got out from under suspended concrete and rebar. Only once they were all clear did the dark-haired girl take several slow steps, carefully emerging from the affected area before allowing the shattered masonry to slowly lower, gently setting it on the ground. An eerie silence drew out as the entire lobby stared at the healer who shrank a bit under the scrutiny, at least until Victoria turned and lunged for Tattletale.

The blonde girl managed to duck in time, but she was clipped and spun through the air, landing a fair distance from her gun. When Victoria turned in the air and attempted to get back to her, the blonde rolled under a desk, using the dense wood as a barrier as she dove towards where her gun had ended. Tattletale continued, charging along and suddenly gripping her head ducking to the side, or dropping to the ground each time Victoria took a swing, each attack missing the thinker by bare millimetres. Amy crouched around the desks and moved to cut Tattletale off from her gun as Victoria continued to try and snag the wily blonde.

Amy’d just reached the weapon when she felt a hand on her. Glancing up expecting to see the healer she was shocked as she saw the blonde hair and domino mask of Tattletale a tiny trickle of blood emerging from her nose. The girl shifted, eyes widening before she suddenly spun in place, dragging Amy along with her. Amy glanced up seeing Victoria’s blue eyes staring back at her, wide with shock, the pain is what drew her gaze down staring at the fist that was pressed to her chest, against her sternum. As she was released and fell her world lit up with agony, and she lay there, wondering why she couldn’t seem to draw a breath.

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here; I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

I was surprised that Amy’s section didn’t need as much tuning; it was mostly unchanged barring quick grammar and easy of like, life changes. Once again, I basically rewrote Taylor’s section in its entirety, changing vast swathes of the conversation and almost all of her narration to bring the character back in line with her voice. Much less nervous joking and flirting, and more nervous nervousness. Bit more gun shy, a bit more worried.

Cut out most of the Mousy’s and changed the introduction of the nickname, along with stuff to both make it less forced, and sort of alter how it’ll be handled later in 2.7.

UPDATE DATE: 05-21-2019]]
Victoria Dallon floated lazily in the air about ten feet above the roof of the building, casually miming a laying position with her body, aimlessly peering down at the gathering crowd below on the street before the bank. She floated in place, adjusting her position to kick her legs up, resting her chin on her folded arms so that she could stare down at the tiny figures, trying to figure out who was who. Bright blue eyes danced over the crowd on the street, taking in the various figures slipping in and out of the crowds. Almost as an afterthought, Victoria casually wondered which of the glinting figures was her boyfriend. She strained her eyes for a few moments, attempting to figure it out, before giving up and rolling over onto her back, shielding her eyes and staring up at the blue sky.

She lay there, drifting on nothing and ignoring the tiny voices in her earpiece, scratching faintly at her cheek. She probably shouldn’t be here; Mom was going to blow a gasket when she found out. She wasn’t on the wards, but when Dean had gotten the call, she’d begged to be allowed to come. How often did you get the chance to interrupt a bona fide bank heist? It was like, a rite of passage or something for a real superhero. She grinned as she tucked her hands under her head, imagining taking the steam out of the guys down there, just smashing through the wall and landing with her hands on her hips in a classic Alexandria pose.

“Halt Evil Doers!” She muttered to herself and snickered quietly. It was a silly image, but the idea behind it wasn’t. They were heroes, they saved people and sometimes that required a little grandstanding — a bit of presence. You had to make the villains believe you meant business if you wanted them to respect you. Look at Vista, the girl was the longest serving member of the Wards in three different districts, and she was treated like a kid cause she let the Wards dictate everything about her. Cute sold and Vista had it in spades, much as she might hate the impression.

Feeling her phone vibrating, Victoria snagged it and started drawing it out. Pausing and glancing over her shoulder, she shivered at the several hundred-foot drop beyond. Victoria floated herself over to hover atop the building. Mom would kill her if she broke another phone. Once it was safe to do so, Victoria whipped the bit of metal and plastic from one of the hidden pockets on her uniform, carefully turning it around and checking the screen. If Amy needed a ride, she’d have to wait. She was about to become a he-

{I’m in the bank, the Undersiders are here. They’re trying to set up a teleporter.} Victoria’s heart
started to race, and her hand shook as she stared at the phone, her eyes narrowing. She quickly moved to type her response out, having to delete it several times as she mixed up letters. The shaking of her hands on the keypad meant that in the end, she settled on just sending a single word.

{Coming.} She sent the message on before touching her hand to ear, calling out over the coms.

“Console, this is Glory Girl.” She waited to be acknowledged, her body shaking softly. When the soft voice of Console responded, she cut them off and spoke quickly.

“Amy just texted me. She is in the bank, and they’re currently attempting to set up a teleporter.” She heard the intake of breath and bit her lip, listening carefully.

“Glory Girl, this is Console. Your report is acknowledged.” The voice was cold, and Victoria let out a quiet hiss, floating in place before touching her ear.

“Console, it’s my sister I have to-” Console cut her off, speaking harshly.

“Glory Girl, there is a plan in the works. Hopefully, your sister will be okay, but we need to ensure that all the hostages survive this. The plan proceeds as it was originally outlined. Now clear the line, remain in place and catch anyone that attempts to flee.” The words were cold, and Victoria let out a furious growl before pressing her hand to her ear.

“They’re not going to run; they’ve got a tinker in there building a teleporter. And They’ve got my sister in that building. There’s nothing to stop them from taking her hostage since she’s the most valuable healer between here and Austin, Console.” Victoria floated in place, glaring angrily down at the street as the dispatcher sputtered and started to issue orders. Sounds from below saw her peering over the edge, watching a crowd that distinctly lacked her sister’s familiar shade of hair stormed out of the building, rather suddenly being enveloped in inky black smoke. She clenched her fists as she saw the Undersiders making their move.

“I’m done with this. Console, I’m going in.” She ignored the orders of the PRT dispatcher. She drew the bud from her ear and tucked it into one of the hidden pockets in her uniform. She moved, turning and stepping of the building and letting herself fall for nearly thirty feet before kicking in her flight and gliding out and over the inky black cloud. It covered the face of the building up nearly three stories even obscuring the rear of the truck that had been peeking out of the bank when she’d arrived.

She hovered over it nervously before glancing to see where it ended, it covered a vast patch of the road, and she whipped off to the side, ducking down and around the side of the building. The black smoke terminated at the head of the Alley, and she set down, glancing around. Taking a moment to study the alley, she moved partway along the building before turning and slamming her form into the brick wall, smashing through into a bathroom. She casually stepped over the spraying pipes, the forcefield keeping her from getting wet.

“What a mess.” She muttered to herself, slipping past the damaged masonry and stopping at the door. She took a moment, taking a deep breath and mentally focusing.

‘Head back, shoulders square. Walk with slow, sure movements, project your voice and keep your gaze flinty.’ When she was finally confident that she was prepared, she lifted a hand and flicked the door sending it careening across the empty lobby floor and skidding to a halt halfway between her and the hostages. She strolled slowly through the open doorway, doing her best to look dangerous, trying to move like a feline, like a predator on the prowl.
“Where’s my sister?” She said the three words slowly, trying to sound dangerous. After wandering past the other hostages one or two pointing, she glanced up, her expression darkening as she noted the villain looming near her sister and another girl. She moved closer, approaching the group, that was when the villain held up a glittering silver gun, casually aiming it at the Hostages.

“So! Battering Ram Barbie here to save the day, must be a dream come true for that sister of yours!” The catty words made Victoria’s hackles rise, her teeth gritting. Who did this girl think she was. She tried to step closer, but the gun waved wildly, the barrel pointing toward Amy and the other girl before waving back at the hostages, flailing around. Shock pierced through the superhero when the blonde answered her question without her actually voicing it.

“I think I’m Tattletale of the Undersiders.” When the shock lanced through her, that smug grin grew, and the chick lazily waved a hand. Victoria gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, glaring at the smug bitch as she let out a low peal of laughter and continued. “And yes, before you ask, I do think that I’m better than you.” Victoria snarled quietly before taking another step closer, though she paused when the gun pointed back toward her sister, though Tattletale seemed to be using it to make a point instead of a direct threat.

“I mean, you’ve got all this power, and what do you do with it? Beat up gangbangers and constantly force your sister to cover up your mistakes.” Victoria felt a sliver of ice washing through her middle at the words, wondering how she’d found out. When the blonde villainess gave her a smug grin and crossed her arms, Victoria reacted.

She pressed her toe to the linoleum, launching herself at the villainess, reaching a hand out to grab the smug bitch’s uniform, only to have her fingers find air as the girl twisted her form almost casually.

Victoria swung around in mid-air, changing direction and lunging at the girl again who managed to step the side at the last second, feigning a disinterest that caused Victoria’s blood to boil. She lunged out over and over; if she didn’t charge, the girl did a backstep to remove herself from the path of the blows, if she did charge she just moved to the side and ducked to leave Victoria scrabbling at empty air.

Flipping in mid-air to bleed off momentum after another failed grapple, she turned her gaze back on Tattletale to find the villain posed comfortably against a pillar; the weapon pointed at the hostages again. The blonde villain seemed to be trying to hold back a laugh as she stared directly at Victoria. Something about the smug look made Victoria’s teeth grind, and she shifted closer until the girl wiggled the gun threateningly.

“Careful there, You might shrug off bullets like Alexandria, but I don’t think the rest of these people do, and I wonder what might happen if I hit your sister? There isn’t anyone around to patch up the great Panacea, why she’s a national treasure.” The blonde turned her gaze on Amy, and Victoria nearly growled as the woman looked her over. “Must be why your Mom keeps her around, right? Certainly not for the warm and fuzzies I bet. I mean she’s not even really your sister. Just some orphan your mom took in.”

Victoria let out a low growl of rage before lunging forward, fist lashing toward the smug bitches face. At least this time those fucking eyes widened and she dropped to land on the ground rolling away to just barely missing the explosion of dust as Victoria smashed through the pillar. Undeterred, Victoria spun around, snarling and lunging at the girl again, feeling as if she was chasing soap bubbles with how the girl kept slipping through her fucking fingers. And she wouldn’t shut her fucking mouth.
“I mean I can see it, right? She’s helpful enough.” Blonde hair ghosted over her hands too fast to grab as the girl danced back. “Patches you idiots up when you get hurt. Turns over all those donations she gets to keep the team running, and even gives you all that good press. Why else would you want her around? She’s not family; it’s not the same, is it?” A step to the left and she was ducking past a table, and when Victoria tried to follow, she smashed through three or four signs and Tattletale had the gall to laugh at her.

“But I mean, not to you right, Glory Girl?” The girl let out a mocking laugh as she ducked around another desk and kicked back, rolling over another as Victoria reduced the first to splinters.

“I mean you? You’re just pathetic; you couldn’t stand to lose her, because she’s the only one ‘Immune’ to your power. The only one that you know for certain will ever love you for you. The only one that sees past that fascinating little aura of yours. The only person you could ever be certain chose to be with you.” When she turned, she found the girl leaning against a pillar again, waving the gun around casually, making air quotes with her hands and Victoria’s fists clenched.

“But I mean, you’re fairly attractive, I’m sure that there are people that like you for the real you, like that saucy boyfriend of yours, the one that’s getting spanked by Bitch outside.” She grinned wickedly.

“But you’re not sure of that are you, Glory Girl. You’re worried that they’ve just been under the effects so long that you couldn’t tell the difference. Let me see if I can make a few educated guesses here. So, your boyfriend, He can only stand to dump you on the phone, maybe?” Tattletale leaned back, buffing her nails as Victoria felt herself transfixed, seething in rage as the girl stared at her.

“But he comes back and is so happy to be with you again. I mean. I guess I can see the fear, cause you’re mediocre, right? Under all of that, a perfectly average girl that’s oh so desperate to be special.”

“And you can’t handle it when you’re not. So you try harder, and you fuck it all up.” The girl’s voice dropped, low and dangerous. “You’re constantly trying so very hard to be a fucking hero, and you can never manage it, always falling short, and you know the reason why. It’s cause you’re not a hero. You’re nothing special.” It was this last line that drove out the last vestiges of control from Victoria’s mind. She lunged out, viciously driving both fists toward that smug face, screaming in petulant fury when she smoothly ducked to the side. Victoria didn’t even feel it as she ripped through the pillar, she was already turning, trying to find that fucking weasel when she heard the low, ominous grumble.

She turned and stared at the roof starting to cave as it’s final support pillar cracked visibly, her gaze staring at all the people huddled right under it. She felt her eyes meet with Amy’s for a moment before the girl ducked and wrapped her arms over her head, she lunged toward the rock, intent on grasping it when it suddenly halted in mid-air. She stopped, staring at the floating masonry for a moment before turning to Tattletale, finding the villainess just as shocked. The sound of a new voice snapped her attention back to the hostages. It was the girl that had been looming at Amy’s side since Victoria had arrived. She was standing over her sister, arms lifted and straining under some invisible weight, as the roof remained floating in place above them all. When Amy glanced up, and the girl spoke, she moved, collecting hostages.

“Hey. Get out of there!” Snapping out of her stupor, Victoria waved at the other hostages and the ones that could move hobbled to their feet, one fat woman though required Amy’s help to get her trembling legs under her before she could be pulled out. When everyone was clear, Amy’s friend finally moved. The girl was an oddity; she wasn’t exactly...noteworthy. She looked like your average
high school senior or college student. She was dressed in exercise clothes, baggy sweatpants, a simple top and a sweater. Rail thin with clear skin and long wild curly hair pulled into a messy ponytail behind her head. The girl seemed so... regular behind those glasses; if it weren't for the visible strain as she walked slowly toward Victoria and Amy, Victoria would have sworn she was a random civilian. When she cleared the area under the platform, she turned and slowly lowered the patch of floor to the ground.

“Jesus Christ, what is this, girl.” The voice cut into her, and her anger surged again. Victoria turned, suddenly orienting on the blonde hair of Tattletale, lunging at the bitch before she could out of the way. Somehow, the girl reacted, letting out a startled cry of pain before trying to throw herself away. It was a reasonable effort, but it was only successful enough to keep her from taking a smack to the chest that would have left her seeing stars and gasping for air. Instead, Victoria’s fingers clipped the girl’s shoulder, and she went spinning away, the flash of silver showing that she had lost her gun in the kerfuffle. Grinning she darted after the bitch, growling when she continued to dodge her somehow, ducking and weaving through desks, around various bits of furniture.

Why couldn’t she just stand fucking still, she gritted her teeth and moved faster, lunging out and slamming her elbows and fists into the desks and the floor each time she missed the girl. The sounds of pain were getting worse, and she didn’t think this Thinker had much more of it in her. She moved around, seeing where the girl was going, and she swung around. She flew quickly to swoop in over the gun, lunging out with a fist to where she knew the girl stood, her eyes widening when she saw the bitch spin up and pull Amy in front of her. Amy was too close, the girl had placed Amy in front of her, and her hands were moving to fast. Victoria tried to stop her strike, bleed off the power, even shut off her fucking forcefield but it was all in vain, she felt her hand meet something warm and soft, and a series of crunches seared themselves into her memory.

The girl stared in shock at her over her shoulder and Victoria felt her hand clenching. When Tattletale half pushed, half dropped Amy in her direction; Victoria swooped in scooping her sister up, wincing in pain as the girl screamed in agony. She stared in horror at her sister before moving to lower her to the ground. Everything about Amy, from the short gasping breaths, to the obvious pain in her eyes, stabbed at Victoria. She’d killed her fucking sister. No, that bitch had murdered her sister. What kind of monster uses a human shield like that against a brute. She stared at Amy as the girl stared up at her pleadingly, lips parting and closing with a sucking sound as she tried to draw in a breath. She stared at her sister, whimpering faintly as she glanced at her and then turned to the Thinker that was staggering away. She growled and launched herself off. She couldn’t...she couldn’t watch Amy die. She had to avenge her.

Justifying it to herself she charged, accelerating as fast as she could, ignoring the scream from the Thinker as she dove to the side, she spun in the air and turned, lunging again, as the Thinker just moaned, blood running in streams from her nose as she collapsed, barely dodging the blow again. Victoria grits her teeth as the blonde girl fell, her entire form screaming for vengeance until shock lanced through her seeing Amy’s friend standing behind where Tattletale had collapsed.

Victoria saw red, they were in on this together, a plant.

Victoria launched herself and screamed as she aimed her strongest, fastest punch at the Thinkers head uncaring what happened to the bitch that had killed her sister. The brunette reacted, using her
powers to push the bloody girl away, but it was too little, too late and her fist connected with the smug bitch’s jaw, and she knew that she wouldn’t be smirking at anyone any time soon. She turned on the brunette, intent on castigating the doublecrossing bitch about her poor choice in friends, her mouth going dry at the look of anger on the girl’s face.

Feeling something wrapping around her, she felt herself lifted and smashed into the roof and she coughed. That twiggy bitch would have to do better than that if she wanted to stop Glory G- The sound of her leg snapping like a twig as she crashed into the floor was the last thing that she heard before the blessed blackness of unconsciousness took her.

Agony. That’s what Taylor felt. It was like her entire head was on fire as she kept a furious grip on her Force powers, eyes clenched shut as she spread the force over the section of falling debris, waiting till she had the entire thing before stopping its downward momentum. Taylor stood there, arms shaking, her whole body aching as she cracked one eye open and then the other. She glanced around, taking in the remaining hostages, Panacea, Glory Girl, and Tattletale all staring at her. Taylor carefully breathed as her form screamed at her to release what she held and then she glanced down at the shocked green eyes of Panacea.

“M-Mousy, c-can you get the hostages out from under this so I can p-put it down please.” When the girl moved, Taylor closed her eyes, thinking happy thoughts as best she could until she heard the shuffling of feet slow. Opening one eye, and seeing everyone clear she moved carefully, taking one step, then another, keeping her focus entirely on the fifteen-tonne block of concrete that she was barely holding aloft. Only once she was also clear did she allow her powers to lower the block to rest gently on the ground.

Taylor stared blankly at the block, shocked that she’d managed to lift it. It was larger than most cars. ‘I can lift cars?’ Taylor’s mental voice was soft and nervous as she dropped to rest on her bottom, trying to catch her breath.

‘When you’re one with the Force, the size or weight of the object doesn’t matter. I’ve heard of Jedi that could lift entire star destroyers.’ The image of a ship the size of a city flit through Taylor’s mind, and she boggled at the sheer scale of it. Dark brown eyes turned when the sound of Glory Girl and ‘Tats’ battling continued, the pair of them charging around the ground floor, doing even more damage as the blonde continued to dodge every one of Glory Girl’s strikes at the last possible second. Taylor’s eyes narrowed.

‘Is she using Battle Precognition?’ Taylor’s voice was curious, reaching out with the Force and finding nothing going through the girl, but considering the powers out there it wasn’t impossible, right?

‘Something like that, I think she’s twisting her power to do it because it looks it’s very draining for her,’ Taylor frowned slowly, nodding as she observed the girl’s minute winces each time she dodged, it seemed like there was a cost to using her power this way. Watching the girl, she frowned as the force whispered into her mind. The girl was manipulating their positions again, lining up something. Taylor dipped into the effect more fully, mapping out her movements, watching as she ducked and wove. She saw too late when Amy suddenly got in the way when the girl moved and reacted with
She was going to- Panacea! Taylor surged to her feet as the girl suddenly rolled to dodge a fist, curling around to snag Mousy, dragging her up and spinning her around to use her as a human shield to absorb one of Glory Girl’s punches. Taylor heard the crunch of bones breaking, and the gurgling of an un-vocalized scream as Tats tossed her into Glory Girls arms. Taylor felt a stirring of rage building in her as she watched as the blonde teen hero allowed Panacea to slide to the ground as she charged after Tats. They’d both just dropped mousy onto the ground, and Taylor stared in mounting horror at the girl as she gasped and failed to find her breath as the others fought.

Taylor’s eyes snapped to the pair as she felt the heat of that familiar righteous fury building in her. Glory Girl had given up any pretense of avoiding collateral damage at this point flying at the other girl in a blind rage. Each time she lunged at Tats, and the girl dodged, Glory Girl ended up smashing through large sections of the floor before trying to swing back around in a berserker rage to continue to the assault. Staring at the girl on the floor with her bluing lips, Taylor snarled quietly, didn’t they fucking understand what they were doing.

She moved behind Tats, lining herself up and when the girl dodged to the side, Glory Girl came barreling at Taylor. Eyes didn’t even seem to notice as she turned to snarl after Tats and Taylor lashed out swinging a hand around in a backhand motion and using the force to viciously slap Glory Girl to the side, sending her careening off through the air and through one of the bulletproof teller stations.

When Tattletale turned to look at her Taylor reached out snapping her up in the force and dragging her close, holding her aloft. Taylor's eyes narrowed, this girl had tried to kill them all at least once, and she just forced Glory Girl to break at least half of her sister's ribs. She also looked like utter shit. Her skin was deathly pale, twin streaks of blood dripping down her face, and her eyes rolling as she kept glancing around.

"Y-You can’t afford to keep doing this.” The blonde spoke, keeping her gaze averted from Taylor's face, gritting her teeth. “She’s going to die if she goes much longer with air. J-Just let me go and-”

The girl's comment cut short when a scream of rage emerged from the destroyed stands and a blur of white and gold came flying at the suspended Tats. Taylor raised a hand and used the force to push Tats away, the fist that Glory girl was leading with only grazing the girl’s cheek, shattering her jaw instead of crushing her head like a ripe melon. The thinker was sent rolling across the ground, and Taylor’s fists clenched as she turned on Glory Girl. The girl was a god damn hero, and she couldn’t control herself.

With a single thought Taylors, powers lashed out, grasping Glory Girl’s form and lifting her upwards with enough force to dent the floor above, then Taylor gestured with a hand smashing the girl into the tiled floor with enough strength to crack bone. The scream of pain was enough to tell Taylor that she had made her point. Taylor stared at the collapsed blonde to see if she was going to move. When she didn't, Taylor reached out, scooping Tattletale up in her power and staring at her.

“If she wakes up with you in here, you’re dead. Say hi to the Wards for me.” She ignored the wince of pain and the dirty look from the girl before tossing her gently out the door using enough force to let her roll out of the smoke cloud hopefully so that someone could get her before Glory Girl regained her senses.

Turning quickly, she dashed over to the gasping form of Panacea, dropping to sit next to her mind, starting to fill with panic. The girl’s face was deathly pale, her lips dark blue as she gasped weakly, eyes unfocused. Taylor stared down, reaching out with her power, and the panic became even
brighter, as she saw all the damage. Nine broken ribs, pulverized sternum, lacerations to the heart, lungs, and the thoracic cavity. She couldn’t do this. She could barely heal a god-damned nose. Taylor’s mind started to race as she stared down at Mousy, her hands shaking, Bastila’s shouts unheard in her mind.

The sound of footsteps made her look up, and she stared at the Leather boots with simple lacinings, eyes drifting up over loose leather pants, past the robe he wore, and odd silver cylinder on his waist. The man moved up to stand over her and Panacea, his old black face staring at her curiously. A white goatee covered his face, and his head was completely bald. He lowered himself down to stare into Taylor’s eyes.

“Taylor Hebert. Breathe.” The words cut quickly into her, and she gasped, sucking in a huge breath. “Deeply. Focus. Your friend is very close to dying, and if you do not center yourself, she will not survive the next fifteen minutes. Your fear is justified, your panic valid, but you must push past it. You can do this.”

Taylor stared at the man, mouth opening and closing as she glanced down. Staring in fear at the paling face of the Mousy girl, Taylor closed her eyes for a moment, taking a few deeps breaths, a surge of determination washing through her. Her hands slid out, splaying over the girl’s chest, and light emerged, vanishing into Panacea’s chest.

“Seek out the shards of bone; they’ll have been broken with her ribs, reach out, you know what bone feels like in the force, focus on each one. You’ve used your power to hold multiple objects before; this is no different. Find every single shard within her chest and wrap it in your power.” The spirit waited patiently, watching as Taylor spread her power through the girl’s chest, ignoring everything but the bone shards. Once she couldn’t find any more, she glanced up. “You’ve seen the diagrams, you know the ribcage looks, you need to fit everything back together. Don’t force it; the Force will guide you.”

Taylor let the force work, watching as the shards slid around inside the chest cavity reforming the shape of her chest. Then, she fed power into the bones, encouraging them to heal, to repair themselves. As Taylor broadened her focus, the Force reached out. It re-attached the intercostal muscles to the ribs, healed the damage the bone shards had done, and then it triggered the girl’s diaphragm, forcing her to breathe. Only then did the energy surge out to wash away the effects of hypoxia, healing the damaged tissues in the girl’s brain with astounding ease. Taylor watched this play out, only drawing her hands back when Panacea seemed to have recovered fully.

Taylor lowered her hands, blinking at the lack of strain she felt. That was the hardest thing that she had ever done, and she didn’t feel the familiar feeling of exertion from her powers. Shifting back and glancing where the dark-skinned man had been, Taylor found herself staring at empty air. Before she could continue looking for the new spirit, an inarticulate scream of rage gave her enough warning to dodge Glory Girl’s incoming punch.

Taylor shifted her knees out, dropping her rear onto the tiles, her upper body curling back to lay entirely flat on the ground just in time to see a blur of white and gold to go streaming over as it screamed angrily. The resulting crash told Taylor that Glory Girl had gone through another wall. The gasp from Panacea suddenly saw her sitting up and glancing at the shocked girl. Taylor rubbed her neck nervously.

“You...alright there, Mousy? I’ve uh. I’ve never done anything like that before.” Apprehension flickered through Taylor as she stared at the shocked looking Panacea, wondering if she’s screwed up somehow. As the feeling crept in, Taylor heard another growl, only turning in time to see the pale
backhand coming her way. When the slap connected, Taylor certainly felt the sharp brand of pain in her face, and then the air whistling past her. She used the force to reinforce her body and closed her eyes, waiting for the wave of pain that would signal the blessed release of unconsciousness.

As she approached the wall, a voice whispered through her mind.

‘Never take your eye off a fallen opponent, more then one Sith has been felled even after they’ve won the fight.’ The deep masculine voice tinted with some mechanical alteration, and part of Taylor thought that he sounded almost amused. Taylor wondered who this spirit was, but before she could think on it any further, her world exploded into a wild burst of colour, followed by pain and then blissful darkness.

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here; I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Redid huge chunks of GG’s perspective, and tidied up Taylor’s. Included her losing her temper as an effort to rework the Jolee lecture coming up, and we’ll see this going forward. No significant plot changes here beyond pruning out some of the Mousy’s and cleaning up various bits of narration and separating the long paragraphs some.

UPDATE DATE: 05-21-2019]]
“-ing bitch attacked me, Amy!” Consciousness greeted Taylor like an old friend, the world slowly swimming out of the darkness and coalescing around her. Her entire body braced it for the pain, tensing just a touch when instead of pain she felt a pleasant floating sensation. Finding herself on something soft and plush instead of scattered rubble was confusing as well. Rather than try and move just yet, Taylor lay still taking stock of her body. Everything felt fine, she was laying in a comfortable position and something warm was resting on her neck. Nothing seemed broken, which was a shock considering how fast she’d been flying when the wall had interrupted her trip.

“Yes, Victoria. You’ve said as much.” The voice was familiar, Mousy, or Panacea, or apparently Amy, her words were low and tinged with exasperation, rather surprisingly close to Taylor’s face. And judging by the vibration of the warm thing that had found itself on the side of her neck, Mousy was looming very close over her.

Taylor laid as still as she could, hearing the worn out sigh that the figure over her gave before the hand pulled away, the warmth lingering in its wake along her neck. Taylor mimed unconsciousness as she listened to the private conversation.

“She attacked you as you and that Undersider were playing Rock-em Sock-em Robots with the battered remains of that Lobby. She attacked you both, put you down to stop your rampage, and then captured the only villain we got at this damn outing before going to heal me.” The girl’s irritated tone seemed to trickle away. Taylor heard when the girl’s head shifted back to face her, the words clearer and aimed toward her.

“She saved my life, Vicky, and in response, you shattered her shoulder, clavicle, three ribs and she had compression fractures in every bone in her arm, and her right cheek was in four pieces.” The words were soft and Taylor felt herself tensing at the amount of damage that she’d undergone, feeling the other girl’s hand gently gripping her arm and she settled, waiting quietly.

“She saved my life, Vicky, and in response, you shattered her shoulder, clavicle, three ribs and she had compression fractures in every bone in her arm, and her right cheek was in four pieces.” The words were soft and Taylor felt herself tensing at the amount of damage that she’d undergone, feeling the other girl’s hand gently gripping her arm and she settled, waiting quietly.

“Amy. She was talking to that Villain. You know what Mom used to say. You don’t let them get in your head.” Victoria’s growl was audible from Taylor’s position though something bothered her about the girl’s voice. It was moving around but Taylor couldn’t hear any footsteps. It took Bastila’s wave of exasperation before Taylor caught on. Right, Glory Girl can fly.

“I nearly had that bitch Tattletale and she fucking coldcocked me, and then saved her. And when I tried to finish the damn job she threw me around like a toy before knocking me out.” The girl's tone
was petulant and she seemed to float away as she spoke, the sound of a door opening accompanied by some sort of rattling and a voice commented softly, nearly too quiet for Taylor to hear. “I’m glad that she saved your life, Ames, but I don’t trust her.” Then the door closed in her wake.

Taylor lay there comfortably, idly considering taking a nap when she heard the rustle of cloth as ‘Amy’ shifted above her. The low tired sigh caused Taylor to open her eyes, peering up at the other girl who didn’t seem that shocked by her sudden wakefulness. Taylor stared up at Amy for a moment before glancing around the tiny space that held them. Some sort of office? Glancing over to the side revealed the door that ‘Vicky’ had left through. The blinds, the source of the rattle, hung crookedly, their slats doing little to obscure the reversed letters that spelled out ‘Branch Manager.’ So they were still at the bank then, that was good. Taylor glanced back over at Amy, taking in the girl’s expression.

“Your sister’s got a hell of a right hook, Mousy.” She spoke quietly, enjoying the wry smile that ghosted over the other girl’s face. “Though I feel right as rain. You do good work. How long have I been out? What’d I miss? I’m guessing that since we’re in here the bank heist is over?” The questions slipped out easily and Taylor was a touch shocked at the casual camaraderie that she felt. Apparently, bank heists made for fast friends, or perhaps it was all the tinkering around in each other’s insides.

Amy started at the questions and stared back at Taylor for a moment, her forehead creasing. She’d opened her mouth as if to say something before rolling her eyes and apparently moving to answer the questions.

“Uhm. You’ve been out for about forty minutes, it’s nearly four, I think?” She glanced around but no clock presented itself and she moved on. As she spoke she slipped up from Taylor’s side, and Taylor shifted up to a sitting position, glancing down at the couch that she’d been laid on, turning to put her feet under as she listened to the explanation.

“After V-Glory Girl hit you, you were tossed across the lobby and landed out of view, which is probably for the best. Not long after you went down the rest of the Undersiders came in. Hellhound and Grue were Carrying Regent between them. Apparently, Shadow Stalker saw Grue and started firing Live ammunition into the shadows. Grue, Regent, and two of the hostages ended up getting hit, though Regent was the only one that took anything life-threatening.” The girl paused and glanced over toward the windows, staring out the lobby for a moment before continuing.

“They came in and when they couldn’t find Tattletale they freaked out. They started talking about using some of the hostages as human shields to escape when the one in the Vault came out and said he’d fixed something. They went to leave, and Glory Girl tried to stop them. Regent did something that caused her to fly into the ground, and they managed to escape as she was cursing them out.” At Taylor’s look, Amy paused before chuckling.

“When you uh...Put her down? I guess you one of her legs pretty badly.” The girl offered Taylor a mildly reproachful look and Taylor frowned before slipping to her feet. Taylor studied the girl for a few moments before sitting up and speaking gently.

“They were going to get someone killed, and I didn’t want that on any of our consciences. I’m sorry that I hurt her, but I didn’t really want to see her shattering Tattletale like a meat pinata. And despite how pissed she is, I sincerely doubt that your sister wanted to do it either.” Taylor glanced around, finding her sweater on the desk and she moved over and collected it. She slid it on, feeling much better as she zipped it up over her front, turning back to Amy as she slid her hands into pockets.

“So, uh. You’re the expert here...Panacea. How does this all work? Do we have to go somewhere or uh?” The words slid out easily and she studied the other girl nervously before shrugging up her
shoulders.

Amy gave her that look again but she seemed to snap out of it quicker this time. “We’ll have to talk to the PRT. Armmaster is here I think, and we have to give a report, it’s usually done on sight. After that, we’ll be free to go.” She hesitated when Taylor nodded and headed for the door. Taylor stopped by the door, glancing back curiously.

“About Glory Girl…” She trailed off as if trying to find the words for what she wanted. Taylor stood there conflicted for a moment before she sighed and opened the door.

“I won’t lie, Mousy, but I won’t volunteer anything either.” She gave the girl a look before slipping out. Taylor wasn’t really surprised when Amy fell into step at her side. She moved out, blinking at the two figures in PRT uniforms that were waiting. She glanced at Amy who offered a shrug.

The two troopers gestured for the pair to follow, leading them through the wrecked lobby that was crawling with PRT Troops and toward the closed doors. The men stopped her at the door and they offered out a disposable mask. Taylor blinked as she stared at it before glancing at Amy in confusion. When she looked out the door she saw what the issue was. The Street outside the bank had been cleared for about forty feet, but there was a huge crowd pressed up against the dividers. Taylor had no issue picking out several different commercial cameras and the occasional flash of some sort of camera. She gitted her teeth quietly, holding the mask in her hand tightly.

She studied it a moment only starting when Amy moved past and out the door. She held the mask for a moment before sighing. Jedi didn’t hide with masks, but… Taylor stared at Amy moving stoically along the road toward a tent and she handed the mask back and headed out after her. She moved along, doing what she could to feign disinterest she nervously slipped out to follow in Amy’s wake.

Taylor ignored the shouted questions and did her best to keep from staring at the camera’s as she followed Amy and the two agents toward a pavilion-style tent. There were a few people gathered, and one of them was the familiar armour clad form of Armmaster. Taylor stared at him and touched on the force, chuckling to herself at the idea that he was just as uncomfortable under all this scrutiny as she was. The pair of them came to a stop by the desk he was working at, and Armmaster looked up at them.

“Panacea and Miss Hebert. I was hoping that you might be willing to lend your aid? Several of the Wards received minor injuries during their altercation with the Undersiders.” He’d keep his helmet pointed in Amy’s direction. Taylor frowned quietly and stared at Amy as the girl seemed to shift in place a moment. Taylor shifted her pose into the one that Bastila seemed to consider at ease. Feet shoulder width apart, arms crossed in front of her waist, one hand gripping the wrist of the other. She took on a professional tone and began speaking.

“Mo-“ She paused. Probably not the best time for nicknames. “Panacea was injured in the lobby. I healed her wounds but I’m not as...skilled as Panacea is and it might be best if she was checked over.” She smirked as the healer turned on her, giving her an incredulous look. Taylor returned the look with an amused one of her own before gesturing toward the nearby ambulances and speaking softly.

“There’s an ambulance over there, it’d be best if you got it out of the way, I’d rather be safe then sorry.” Taylor held Amy’s gaze for a few moments before turning to look over at Armmaster. “If wounds are minor, then I can deal with them.” When the armoured figure merely stared at her for a few moments she kept her grasp on the Force to return the stone-faced look.

“You are indeed a healer then? I shall look forward to seeing you at work. Panacea, you’re well
aware of how this works when you’re healed by a parahuman, you should follow her instructions.” Taylor watched as Armsmaster glanced at two of the troopers who drew the grumpy looking healer away, leaving them standing mostly alone.

“Panacea mentioned a report that I would have to give.” Her voice was calm, though Taylor imagined that she could feel a tremor of nervousness in it. When Armsmaster gestured to a nearby chair, Taylor took a seat, slowly crossing her legs and resting her hands in her lap.

“I’m guessing that you’ve never given a field report before.” His tone was almost bored, as he took a seat opposite her and drew out several sheets of paper and pen. “You’ll write down what happened on these, and then we’ll discuss it.” He handed her the paper. Taylor carefully grasped the paper and a pencil. She considered what to write for a few moments before sighing and quickly leaning over and moving to write down everything that she could remember of the fight, doing her best to explain what she understood of everyone’s motivations as well merely what happened.

It took her nearly fifteen minutes to commit the adventure to paper. When she was done she handed the papers to Armsmaster allowing the man to read. Taylor maintained careful control of her connection to the force, seeing the surprise that the man opposite had begun to feel. She waited quietly as the man finished reading before he turned to start asking her questions.

“We were under the impression that generating and manipulating electricity was your power. I assume that from the reports we’ve collected and your own here that this isn’t the case?” Taylor stared at the man for a few moments before shaking her head.

“Not really. On the most simple level, I have the power to manipulate energy but it’s heavily tied into my emotional state. That lightning power only works if I’m very mad and it effects me badly.” The man nodded, carefully checking the folder in front of him.

“So this Telekinesis is your main power? And then there’s healing as well?” Taylor merely nodded quietly, not offering up any more information to the cape. She expected him to press the issue but he seemed to study her for a few moments before smoothly moving on.

“A number of the witnesses claim that there was some sort of altercation between yourself and Glory Girl. You said in your report that you felt that she had lost control of her temper and you were merely trying to get her attention?” When Taylor nodded he continued. “You tossed her through a teller station and then proceeded to bash into several hard surfaces.” Taylor, in response, shifted her pose before speaking simply.

“It got her attention and she stopped her attacks.” When he started to perk up she rolled her eyes. “She hit me when she woke up but she had just been knocked unconscious and I was looming over her sister. I won’t be pressing charges and I will strongly request that no one does either.” Taylor spoke quickly, glancing away from Armsmaster. The man was quiet for a moment before speaking slowly.

“Did Panacea request that you conceal what Glory Girl had done?” His voice was low and quiet. “Did she threaten you, or attempt to entice you by offering to heal you in exchange for silence?” The words saw Taylor turning askance toward Armsmaster shaking her head.

“What? No. She didn’t try to force me to lie to you. She also didn’t try to bribe or threaten to me either. She did speak with me briefly about her sister’s boundless enthusiasm and apologized for her. That’s all.” Taylor stared at the man, studying his entire form. The man seemed to be genuinely concerned, but the emotion faded quickly, her words apparently assuaging his concern. There was a story there, Taylor though, but she couldn’t think of a way to follow it.
The questions after that were more basic, verifying her statement and expanding on a few points where her descriptions were weak. Eventually, the questions stopped and Armsmaster slid to his feet and gestured for Taylor to follow along. They slipped through the cordoned off area and over to a different tent, this one sealed. Armsmaster took a moment to announce himself before slipping into the tent and holding it open for Taylor to follow. When she got in she found quite the tableau awaiting her.

“Wards,” Armsmaster spoke as he moved ahead. The wards looked rather haggard over-all. They were scattered across a number of folding chairs and benches, and it seemed that she’d interrupted some sort of argument. She followed Armsmaster in and suddenly there were seven pairs of eyes on her. Although she could only see half about as many. She stood silently as Armsmaster continued his speech.

“This is Taylor Hebert. She’s a healer that’s offered to patch up your wounds.” Brisk and to the point, he’d move over to stand near the entrance. Taylor stood in place as the eyes studied her, waiting quietly for someone to speak.

It was the girl in green that moved up first, the shortest of the gathered wards approached Taylor and held out a hand. Taylor’s eyes flitted over the girl’s face taking in the long angry scrape along her cheek and jaw.

“Vista,” Taylor smirked, bemused as she moved to take the hand, giving it a firm shake before responding.

“Hello Vista, I’m Taylor. Can you tell me where you’re hurt? Is it just the scrape that needs to be fixed?” When the girl gestured to the scrape Taylor reached out, holding her hands over the skin, a warm light emerging from the digits and gently soothing away the damage.

“So. Did you trip? It looks like it was quite the tumble that led to you landing chin first on the concrete.” Taylor blinked when the girl merely shook her head and glared at one of the other capes in the room.

Taylor’s eyes flicked over to another figure sitting silently in the back. The woman was dressed in black with a mask, a bow over her lap. The one that had been shooting arrows into the crowd. Shadow Stalker. When she stared back Taylor offered a nod before turning her focus back to her patient.

Drawing her hand back she tapped the girl’s skin, seeing no sign of discomfort she offered a smile. The other girl merely bowed her head and glanced back at the bench she’d left. The bench held a figure clad in red and white armour and another wreathed in metal with numerous clocks imprinted all over it. Another chair held a figure in black and purple, and a figure in glowing power armour with a damaged board, standing at his shoulder. The only other occupants of the room were a surly looking Glory Girl and a figure in glowing armour with a medieval bent. All of them fidgetted under her gaze.

“There we go. Right as rain.” Rather than smiling or making a comment the girl shuffled away. This seemed to be the theme for the visit. Most of the wards were polite as Taylor soothed their minor scrapes, but they seemed uncomfortable at her presence. Perhaps because she was the only person that had caught a villain? She considered commenting on it but she merely shrugged and when she’d found there was no one else to heal, she moved to leave the tent.

Offering a friendly smile to Armsmaster, she headed back toward the troopers hoping they could get her out of the building someway that didn’t involve being pressed up amongst the crowd outside the barricades.
She’d almost made it to other tents when a figure grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. Taylor easily corrected the movement and came to a stop facing a familiar pale face and blue eyes, that blonde hair looking just as disastrous as it had when she’d slammed the girl into the floor. Taylor felt a flush of anger at the manhandling, but she quelled it down and offered the girl a curious look. They stood in silence for nearly a minute before Glory Girl finally said something in a rush.

“Thanks for saving my sister.” She scowled at Taylor as she said it but there was serious gratitude in her tone and Taylor, nod in response. “I’m…” Glory Girl sighed. “I’m not sure what I’d do without her. So thanks for that.” As Glory Girl hovered in place, shrinking a bit under Taylor’s eyes, the brunette considered pointing out that she’d gotten a slap as thanks for that already, but instead she offered the girl a half smile and a nod.

“I’m glad I was there to help. Make sure that she doesn’t strain herself. She’s still recovering.” Taylor’s comment was simple and then she turned striding off toward the troopers. They’d apparently had a plan to get out of the scene and it involved a wig, a heavy set of trooper gear and a truck that would drop her off near her jogging path home.

Freshly showered and clad in comfortable pyjama’s and a warm sweater, Taylor sat on her bed, running a brush through her hair, doing her best to ignore the Force Spirit sitting on her desk chair next to her bed. Taylor’s eyes were focused on the wall, as she quietly ran through the bank and everything that’d happened. The brush dragging over her scalp reminded her of her mother, and usually soothed Taylor, but at the moment it merely made her feel worse as she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

‘I fucked up.’ Taylor’s mental voice was low and laced with remorse. When she finally glanced over at Bastila, expecting disappointment or irritation, she was shocked to instead find a curiosity visible in the spirits eyes. Taylor stared at her confused for a moment before turning back to the wall and continuing the soothing gestures. As she did she heard Bastila slipping to her feet and moving to set herself on the edge of the bed, casually staring at Taylor from her new position.

“And how did you mess up Taylor?” When Taylor glanced over at Bastila, she saw nothing recriminating in the woman’s eyes and she let out a tired sigh.

‘How? How didn’t I mess up? I just stood there like an idiot. I let those two…’ Gritting her teeth, Taylor pushed on. ‘I let them have that brawl in a room with over a dozen people. I could have stopped it instantly. I used way too much force on Glory Girl, and nearly got Tattletale killed. It was my first major conflict since I got my damned powers and nearly everyone died.’ Taylor set her brush aside, drawing her knees up and wrapping her arms around them, her chin moving to rest on her knees as she continued to stare at the wall instead of Bastila.

“How about we start with the ‘brawl’ as you put it. How did you let them do it? It was the two of them doing it right? How is any of that your fault.” Bastila’s voice was curious and soothing and she remained quiet once the question had been posed, allowing Taylor to consider her response.

“I could have stopped it,” Taylor spoke softly. “They’re… They’re both idiots. I could have stepped in at any time and pinned them both to the floor and kept them from trying to kill everyone there.”
“And why didn’t you?” Bastila’s response was quickly offered up, almost as if she’d been expecting Taylor’s comment.

“I was…” Taylor paused, considering herself. “I was shocked. I think. I had been expecting heroes to be like... better. These were heroes and villains, the books have all this to say about them right, and these two girls were acting like god-dammed teenagers. Tattletale was winding her up like…” Taylor frowned. “Like ‘people’ at my last school did, and Victoria was falling for it. And she was reacting like a child. Screaming and throwing a tantrum.”

“Taylor. They are teenagers.” Bastila’s voice was laced with amusement and Taylor glanced up at her incredulously. At Bastila’s raised eyebrow, Taylor sighed before responding.

‘I get that they’re teenagers, but they have no... gravity to them. Don’t they understand that this isn’t a game? They were acting like it was a contest about who could win and it.’ Taylor grit her teeth. ‘They were acting like screaming children, except they had loaded weapons, and they didn’t even get that. They didn’t care where they aimed their attacks. We were all bystanders in their war and they couldn’t care if they killed any of us.’

“It’s not unreasonable to get angry about that Taylor. Irritation at the immaturity of others is something of a fact of life in most societies. The question you need to ask yourself is why you did what you did.” The Woman’s voice was gentle and chiding and Taylor’s shoulders hunched down as she toyed with the seam of her pyjama pants.

‘They were going like this and I’d had to save all those people, and they just got back to it like it didn’t matter. I figured that I’d step in right? I’d make them understand that these weren’t toys by showing them what they were truly dealing with.’ Taylor sighed as she glanced at Bastila. ‘But I just pissed off Glory Girl more, and I nearly got that girl killed. I should have restrained them both and offered them the option of stopping. And if they didn’t I could have knocked them out then.’ Taylor muttered softly, staring at her hands. The silence after her comment dragged on before Bastila let out an amused sigh.

“Taylor, honestly?” She waited until Taylor looked at her and smiled before continuing.

"If you were a padawan back home you’d still be ensconced in the academy. These are growing pains. Even if you’d been assigned to a master as out in the open as you are, they would have been in that bank and they’d have stopped the situation, not left it up to you. The concerning thing is the anger.” The woman raised a hand as Taylor opened her mouth, cutting her off.

“You’re not Jedi trained and you’re not as skilled at mastering your emotions, to learn our way of doing things will be difficult. That doesn’t change the fact that you need to learn some way of dealing with your emotions. Your adventure has unlocked Jolee and he’ll be taking over your Emotional Control lessons.” Bastila studied her for a few moments before speaking softly.

“And you should expect us to discuss this more in the coming weeks. There was a lot of Philosophy in the Jedi Order about when to act and when not to act, and that’ll be a bit of a running theme for us until you can find the time to actually locate a weapon so that I can teach you more combat skills.” Taylor blinked before letting out a groan, with everything that had happened, she’d only just remembered that she hadn’t got the money she needed to buy her weapon.

The knock at her door came as a surprise. “Taylor.” Taylor glanced up at the door, as her Father’s tired voice drifted through the wood, “Carol is here, and she wants to speak with you.”

Taylor surged to her feet, glancing down with a dirty look at her poor choice in sleepwear before moving to exit the bedroom. She pointed her finger dangerously at her Father at he’s amused look.
before glowering at him as if daring him to say anything. When he merely raised his hands in defeat, she
turned and headed for the stairs. As she descended to the ground floor, she paused halfway down
seeing her Lawyer standing in the doorway to the dining room with one key difference.

“Danny, when I’m dressed like this you really should refer to me as Brandish.” Clad in white and
orange, Taylor’s lawyer stood in the entrance hall looking as casual as she could be. The brunette
slowly descended the stairs, nervously approaching the cape. She froze when Brandish’s voice
reached her across the hallway.

“So. Taylor, my daughter told me that you broke one of her legs in two different places.” Taylor
glanced up at Carol’s impassive face, ignoring her father’s choking sounds behind her.

Carol reread the message from Piggot on her phone for the third time, sighing and staring blankly out
her window as she set the phone down and gripped the wheel in shaking hands. She was tempted to
just leave, to go back home and confront her daughter about the text messages that had been blasted
into her phone about the altercation at the bank. Victoria had hit her first talking about Taylor and
what the girl had done to her, and Carol had seen red at the idea that someone would hurt her
daughter. She’d already been on her way to the Hebert Residence, in full costume, to give that girl a
piece of her mind, when her phone had notified her that she’d received an email.

Considering that New Wave’s mail servers were heavily screened and the things that could reach
Brandish directly were even more she’d paused in the car to check the email, carefully reading the
Director’s words as she explained what had happened at the bank. The anger she’d felt at her
daughter’s attacker had evaporated but now that she was here, she should probably get this over
with. With a sigh, Carol exited the car and approached the house, carefully rapping on the wood.
When it opened to reveal Danny Hebert in his work clothes she offered a smile that seemed to
confuse the man before he made the connection.

“Oh. Uh. Come in. Are you here to see Taylor?” He blinked slowly glancing around. “I think she’s
upstairs. She was pretty tired when she got back, didn’t even come down for dinner. I’ll get some
coffee brewing and then I’ll grab her.” Carol watched in amusement as the man casually babbled,
moving to get the coffee pot dealt with before turning and ascending the stairs. She listened curiously
to the muttered conversation before they started to descend. Feeling a need to break the nervous
tension she’d offer a joke to see Taylor’s reaction.

When the girl looked shocked and nervous she’d sighed, waiting for Taylor to join her on the ground
floor.

“So. Taylor, my daughter told me that you broke one of her legs in two different places.” Carol
winced at the tone, as the words slipped out a bit harsher than she’d been initially hoping for, and she
smirked when the girl suddenly squared her shoulders and stared right back almost taking a chunk
out of Carol herself with her response.

“Young daughter was going insane in a populated room and she was in danger of bringing the whole
damn place down on our heads. I needed to stop her from murdering tattletale, and I didn’t have a lot
of time to heal Amy, so I couldn’t afford to be gentle. But you can tell her that I’m sorry that it came
to that.” Carol, blinked as she stared curiously at Taylor, glancing from the shocked Danny to his
daughter before speaking curiously.

“Amy? What happened to Amy?” When Taylor’s shoulder’s drooped Carol had frowned, the expression became even worse when Taylor indicated that she should sit. Carol took a seat, watching as a cup of coffee was mixed up for her. She accepted it, watching as the girl saw her dad lurking, and made up another for him handing it over before pouring herself a glass of water and sitting at the table. Danny would join her on her side of the table, both of them turning to Taylor as she started to speak.

Carol considered herself remarkably restrained, especially considering that Danny was seated next to her and doing much worse at keeping his temper as the story came out of Taylor. Every detail filled her with a sense of mounting dread. Victoria had gone too far this time. She’d had suspicions about Victoria in the past few months, rumours circling among the criminals she dealt with about excessive force, and she had hoped she was wrong, but to see it brought to light like this made her terrified. Piggot had seemed almost giddy in her email and she knew that the next meeting they had wouldn’t be a happy one.

As Taylor related the end of the fight where Tattletale used Amy as a human shield, ignoring the hisses of anger from Danny and Carol, merely moving on to mentioned breaking Glory Girl’s legs when her first attempt at breaking up the fight failed. She’d offered Carol an apologetic look when the woman winced at the concept of her daughter in that agony. She continued on to haltingly explain healing Amy, listing every broken bone that Victoria had given her, and explaining the healing. On the conversation went, through Taylor’s own encounter with GG’s fist, and then through the report and what’d happened after. She did offer a nervous smile to Carol when she mentioned Glory Girl offering a thank you but no apology.

Carol was shocked though. Her daughter wasn’t exactly a pushover and the way Taylor described it, she’d been almost negligent in dealing with her. She’d apparently learned not to turn her back on a brute, but she wasn’t aware that Taylor had progressed with her powers this fast, and she studied the girl. Taylor quietly stared at the drink in her hands, letting her and Danny digest as she waited for what was to come. Carol let her eyes drift to Danny taking in the mix of Anger, Fear, and pride on his face. She leaned back and let him go first.

“Taylor. You didn’t tell me any of this when you got home.” His voice soft and when Taylor glanced up she’d carefully shrug up a shoulder.

“I just wanted a shower. I didn’t want to think about it. I was going to tell you, just. Probably not tonight.” She frowned at her drink before sighing. “I’m sorry, I know I should have said something but I didn’t want to get into a fight. You’re pretty stern about the hero-ing thing, and I. It wasn’t my fault you know? I was just there to get some money and everything-” Taylor seemed to shrink into herself.

“Everything just went wrong. I couldn’t just…watch. There were all those people just… on the sidelines. They nearly dropped the floor above us on them… I. I just couldn’t let them all die when I had the power to do something. I couldn’t just stand by and watch like-” Taylor paused and didn’t finish the sentence, frowning when her Dad flinched as if struck anyway. He studied her before pulling off his glasses with a sigh, wiping them clean before nodding.

“I-” He paused and sighed quietly. “Your mom would have gotten in there even though she had no powers. She’d be proud of you, just. I worry.” His voice was rough and Taylor nod, the girl’s eyes shimmering with unspent tears. Eventually, the two would settle before glancing at her. Carol shifted nervously at the angry look in Danny’s eyes and the concerned one in Taylor’s.

“It was wholly inappropriate for Victoria to do that, and if you want I could step down as Taylor’s
attorney.” She stared at them and Danny sighed before shaking his head, and it was Taylor that chimed in.

“No, I uh. You’re good, and you know what you’re doing. I’d rather keep you on if you can handle working with me? I didn’t mean to hurt your daughter.” When the girl glanced nervously at her Carol found herself chuckling.

“Honestly, Taylor, you showed more restraint then I would have in your place. And you saved my other daughter’s life.” When her phone buzzed she ignored it. “If you’re fine with keeping me on, I’d be glad to keep helping you out, we’re near to the end of your legal troubles and it’d good to finish with you.” She’d glanced down when her phone continued to vibrate, sighing and wondering what was going on now, continuing to ignore it as the Heberts stared back at her. The awkward silence wasn’t broken by them, instead, it was shattered by the upbeat peppy song that Victoria had set for herself in Carol’s phone and that Carol hadn’t managed to fix yet.

“Can we pretend that airplane’s in the night sky are like shooting stars?

I could really use a wish right now, wish right now.”

Mortified, Carol would fish out the phone as Taylor and Danny snorted out laughs and glanced at each other. “Victoria.” She’d say rolling her eyes and Danny would nod. He too understood the burden that was children embarrassing their parents for no good reason. Carol turned the phone on and held it up to her ear. “Victoria Dal-”

“Mom, why aren’t you answering your phone? The Hospital’s been trying to call you for like ten minutes. Amy’s collapsed.” Carol stopped, her skin paling as she took the phone from her ear, and accessed the menu, quickly checking her messages, a notification from the hospital and PRT that Amy was in serious condition at St. Elmo’s. Collapsed while treating a patient. At the concerned looks from the other two occupants of the kitchen, she’d hold up her phone quietly.

“It’s Amy. She’s collapsed at the Hospital. They don’t know what’s wrong. I have to go.”

Chapter End Notes

[[So! There wasn't originally an Author's note here; I added this after Ninja updating this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Nothing much changed in this chapter beyond tweaking Taylor’s reactions to keep her characterization in line, cleaning up some speech removing some of the non-spoken ‘Mousy’s’ and removing the ‘WHAT WOULD MOM DO’ reference. Tweaked Taylor’s chat with Bastila some and cleaned up the whole giant paragraphs thing I had going on for a while there.

UPDATE DATE: 05-21-2019]]
Chapter Summary

[[I really enjoyed your feedback on the last chapter, most of you seemed rather invested in the Amy subplot, so we’ll see how you all like how it plays out. This is pretty rough, and I'll be going over it again myself, but as always feel free to point out any mistakes.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 14th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

Carol moved on autopilot. She briefly thanked the Heberts for speaking with her and turned, scurrying from the house. As she approached the car, she fumbled with her keys, dropping them once before grabbing them off the ground and managing to unlock the vehicle. The van itself was rather plain looking, though the interior was comfortable enough. It wasn’t the vehicle that they customarily used for cape business, and it had often ferried Victoria from one sporting event to another before she’d triggered. As she pulled open the door, she heard a scuffle at her back and muttered words, but she didn’t have the time or patience to pay attention to Danny and Taylor at the moment.

Carol was shocked when it took two attempts to slot the key into the ignition, and she nearly screamed when the door on the other side of the car swung open. Turning she was shocked to find Taylor dropping into the passenger seat and moving to buckle herself in. She stared at the girl uncomprehending for nearly a minute before she managed to produce a tired question.

“What are you doing in my car, Taylor?” Carol watched Taylor push her hair back from her eyes, the serious expression on her face even more severe than usual. She remained stoically in place, returning Carol’s incredulous look with one of firm resolve, responding readily.

“I’m coming to the hospital with you. I was the one to heal Amy, and it might have been my fault that something went wrong. If it was me, you might need me to fix it. I need to see what’s going on.” Taylor stared at her and Carol watched as she raised an eyebrow behind her glasses.

The hero considered kicking the teenager out of her car, but she didn’t have time for games like this. Carol glanced up, staring at Taylor’s father standing framed in the light of the door to the house, and she sighed, moving to turn the car on. As the vehicle rumbled, it’s way out into traffic she casually reached out when Taylor told her to put her seat belt on, slipping it on despite its lack of usefulness for her. They drove in nervous quiet, heading out the Docks with surprising ease and heading toward the Hospital that she’d first met Taylor.

“This isn’t what I expected Brandish to drive.” When Taylor spoke it startled the superhero, Carol had expected to travel in this oppressive silence, so the almost casual question was a shock, though she took a moment to consider her ‘ride’ finally offering Taylor a nervous chuckle.
“What? Not a fan of the Brandish-mobile?” She eyed Taylor out of the corner of her eye, watching as the girl’s lips quirked a touch into an almost imperceptible smile.

“Careful, if you’re caught on camera in this thing, they might give you a name like Photon-Mom.” Taylor’s voice was laced with wry amusement, and Carol shuddered at the thought. Sarah had been trying for years to convince the various newspapers to drop that god-damned nickname, and it never entirely went away. Carol personally imagined that the name stuck because of how the press often saw the Pelhams, the family had a sort of synergy that made them seem more approachable. The nuclear family, now with superpowers.

“I doubt that. If the press knew what I was doing now, I certainly wouldn’t be getting any mother of the year awards.” The Lawyer’s words slid free when they came to a stop at a red street light. Her voice was tense with stress as she tapped the wheel, watching the cars cross ahead of them and silently begging the lights to blink faster.

“I can see the headlines now; famed parahuman healer Panacea injured at work, Mother nowhere to be seen.” Carol gritted her teeth as she watched the light on the other road shift to Yellow, blinking there for a few moments. She was startled when she felt Taylor’s hand on her arm.

“You just found out, and you’re heading there. No one can fault you for your reactions tonight.” The girl offered her a sincere smile, and Carol found herself nodding, though deep inside, she wondered on that. They might not fault her for what happened tonight. Power interactions were a tricky thing, and most people understood when accidents happen, but this wasn’t the first night that she’d had no idea what had happened to her daughter, or where she’d been, and the thought made Carol’s neck itch as she considered what her mother would think of that.

“I told her that she should take it easy.” Taylor’s voice was tense, and at the next stop, Carol peered over at the girl, taking in the serious expression and the stoic pose, though the effect somewhat moderated by the unusual sleepwear that Taylor wore.

“When I heal someone with my powers, it takes something out of them, and that’s for common injuries, from the amount of damage that she’d taken she should have been laid up in bed for a few weeks, healing the old fashioned way. I’m not sure what sort of side effects my healing has, and she’s a healer too; she should know not to ignore the attending medic’s advice. What was she doing at the hospital…” Taylor muttered the last line to herself, but Carol heard.

Carol frowned as she remembered the conversations that she and Amy had used to have about the subject of healing and a cape’s life. She frowned as she stared at the road, hands gripping the wheel. Eventually, the silence began to weigh on her, the ire she felt with herself, Amy and the hospital mellowing out. As they were nearing the hospital, Carol found herself unable to resist. She glanced at Taylor out of the corner of her eye, watching the sullen girl’s reaction as she casually spoke.

“So. What’s with the pants, then?” She smirked as Taylor tensed, and did her best to keep from reacting. Sadly for Taylor, the skin of her ears began to darken hinting that Carol had made a hit. When the girl didn’t respond, Carol quickly smirked as she glanced at the Hospital as it came into view. Instead of driving up toward the doors, Brandish turned, descending into the lower floors of the parking garage. She parked the van as close to the entrance as she could, and she hopped out and headed for the door.

Inwardly she was secretly impressed as Taylor kept up at her as they both moved at a near run. Carol brushed past anyone in her way, her expression a hard mask that kept anyone from speaking to them.
In her wake, Taylor occasionally spun, jogging backwards as she shouted apologies at the various occupants of the hall that Brandish went through or over. The girl was spry, dodging around the scattered and fallen people, and when Brandish made her way up to the main reception, Taylor would be right on her heels.

When the woman at the counter had begun to explain that the entrances for the emergency room were on the opposite wing, Carol had slammed her fist into the table to startle the woman and make her look. The young nurse had sat up sharper, seeing the cape looming before her, and she coughed.

“B-Brandish. I wasn’t expecting-” She’ paused floundering around her desk, pulling out a book. “They’ve got her in a room up on 3. They’re keeping her near the PRT guards to be safe; The doctors are saying that only family is allowed, though.” The receptionist added the final comment when her eyes cut to Taylor.

Taylor had stepped back, nervously considering the pair but Carol just waved for her to keep up. Taylor might be able to help, and the hospital could deal. She headed toward the nearby lift, and she and Taylor spent nearly three minutes standing in awkward silence until the doors crept open. Carol emerged from the elevator only to be scooped up in a pair of white-clad arms.

“Carol! They don’t know what’s going on.” The woman dragged Carol out of the elevator and toward the hospital room. Carol noticed the guards standing outside a nearby door, but she entered a different room to see a hospital bed with a large number of devices arrayed around it. They were all hooked up to Amy’s form, and the girl was in bad shape. Her entire body shook, alternating between tremors and seizures, and she was coated in sweat.

Amy’s outfit had been stripped from her form, leaving her in a white tank top and the matching scrub pants that she’d often worn beneath the heavy white and red robe, the actual garment and her scarf hung nearby. Amy’s pallor was deathly pale, and the freckles on her skin stood out like tiny pinpricks of colour.

Three doctors were present in the room arguing furiously near the squirming body of Amy. The monitors beeped haphazardly and occasionally offered loud alarms that didn’t draw the attention of the doctors. Carol stared at Sarah, wondering what was going on. Her sister merely shrugged in confusion. Brandish turned to the doctors and cleared her throat to try and garner their attention. Again the comment failed to slip past the haze of the arguing doctors.

It was a whistle that silenced the heated argument, everyone in the room going utterly silent as the sharp, high pitched whistle went through the room. Everyone turned to the source of the noise to find Taylor standing over Amy’s bed, staring at them all abashedly. When the silence dragged on, the brown haired girl muttered something under her breath before speaking.

“I’m Taylor Hebert. I healed Panacea earlier today. What’s happened to her?” She stared down at the ashen-skinned girl for a few moments before looking back over at the doctors. The silence continued to drag on.

Taylor shifted nervously in place, watching from where she stood behind and to the side of Brandish in the elevator. She fidgeted nervously with her hands, watching the lights on the control panel of the elevator change as they passed each floor, finally coming to a stop with a ding on ‘3’. She’d stepped
back in shock when the door opened, and a white blur flew in and dragged her escort into a crushing hug.

Taylor studied Lady Photon curiously, watching her face and noting the genuine concern and fear and she trailed along as the blonde woman dragged Brandish from the elevator, leading her down the hall. Taylor moved swiftly in their wake, feeling the eyes on her. She saw two other figures in white staring at her in confusion, and a trio of guards further up the hallway staring and coolly as she if she might be dangerous. Taylor curiously inspected the three capes in white, trying to place names to faces. The older man was probably Lady Photon’s husband, and that’d make the younger two their children.

Taylor shrank a bit under the curious gazes, standing and watching as Photon and Brandish vanished into a room. She fiddled with her sweater for a moment before moving to carefully trail after them. When none of the other capes acted to stop her, she ducked into the room, navigating around the edge of the space to come to a stop at the side of Mousy’s bed. She stared down at her, taking in the sorry state of her new...acquaintance. She quietly inspected the girl’s form, frowning before turning as Brandish tried to get the doctor’s attention. Completely ignoring the new occupants of the room, the Doctors continued to throw three syllable long words at each other. When one started yelling about ‘Serotonin Syndrome’ while ignoring Brandish’s second cough, Taylor stepped in. Lifting two fingers to her lips, she hooked them in her lips and blew sharply as her father taught her on a warm summer years before.

The action was surprisingly effective, the prolonged high pitched whistle utterly silenced everyone else in the room, everyone staring at her in confusion. “Huh, guess that’s why Hellhound did it.” Taylor had muttered the words quietly enough that only she could hear, and she chuckled to herself before glancing up to meet the other eyes. Taylor remained rooted to the spot as everyone else stared at her, and as she began to feel more and more uncomfortable, she started to fidget. Eventually, she finally began to speak if for no reason than to get the eyes off of her.

“Hello. I’m Taylor Hebert; I healed Panacea earlier. What’s happened to her?” When the silence dragged on, she sighed softly before glancing down at the girl. “She was fine when I left her. I had told her that she should get checked out by the ambulance and then go home to rest. How did she end up here.” When the silence continued, Taylor turned her attention on the youngest doctor who’d been shouting about Serotonin.

“You. What’s your name?” She called, and the young Indian doctor glanced at his friends before speaking.

“Dr. Vaziri. Who are y-” Taylor stared at him blankly as he paused the question midway through before sighing and nodding. “Of course. Taylor Hebert. I am not sure that I should-” The young doctor began but stopped when Brandish coughed. When he glanced over, and she nodded, he shrugged and moved closer to Amy. The young doctors glanced down at Amy and considered her for a moment before speaking.

“I wasn’t here, but it’s all in the report. She was brought in on the bus. They did some x-rays to make sure that her ribs were properly healed, and then she said she was feeling better and offered to help some patients. She’d used her powers on three when she suddenly collapsed and began to convulse.” The man paused when Amy suddenly arched her back, letting out a long low hiss and then collapsed with a shudder. The doctor glanced at her before speaking slowly.

“Like that,” He gestured to her form when it convulsed again as if it’d been shocked and sighed. “We can’t seem to figure out why. Cat scans show increased brain activity, but there’s nothing to
account for this. No damage at all beyond what you’d expect from the convulsions.” He sighed before stepping back and glancing at the other two doctors who remained silent. “We’ve all got different ideas, but honestly we’re guessing at this point.”

“I told her that she’d need rest to heal.” Taylor sighed and looked at Brandish. “May I heal her?” She waited till she got the woman’s nod before holding her hands out, one over Amy’s head and the other over her heart. Taylor allowed the force to wash up around her, imagining herself sinking into an ocean and becoming one with it. She felt the presence of Bastila in her mind, the warmth and concern matching her own. Taking a few moments to center herself, Taylor carefully brought her power to bear on Amy, allowing the energy to emerge from her hands and to seep into Amy’s form.

The Force washed through the girls ravaged body finding scar tissue everywhere, damaged muscles and over-exerted nerves, and Taylor’s power seeped into it, carefully washing away the damage, healing it. Barely even started, her concentration took a hit as the machines began to go crazy behind her and the body convulsed even worse wild signals driving the girl's muscles and nerves wild. Taylor stopped the healing, but Amy’s form continued to spasm and jerk for several minutes longer. Taylor pulled back, standing there, as the doctors rushed up to the bed and checked Panacea. Taylor remained still, shocked to the core and felt similar concern from Bastila.

‘This sort of thing should only be possible with a dark side curse or wound Taylor, and there are not nearly enough dark side energies lingering around her for that to be the case. She shouldn’t be this sick and healing shouldn’t hurt her. I’ve... I’m not sure what’s wrong.’ The tone was apologetic, and Taylor sighed.

"I can't heal her; Her body is rejecting it. I'll just do a scan, see if I can figure what's causing this." Before they could protest she returned to place, focusing on scanning Amy this time, her body wasn’t handling the stress of the constant spasms at all, and there were patches of almost cancerous growths over her body where cells exploded exponentially and absorbed all around them only to be destroyed by other over-charged white blood cells. The girl’s brain was swimming in a mix of convoluted and complicated hormones that Taylor had no idea how to identify. After taking a moment, she stepped back, lowering her hands and staring at Brandish.

“I...I have no idea, I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s like her body is tearing itself apart or something.” Taylor stared carefully at the others before glancing at Amy once more. ‘Could it have been me Bastila? Could the force have interacted badly with her power?’ Taylors mental question was tentative and terrified, and the concern she got back wasn’t settling. Glancing up to see the devastated look on Brandish’s face, Taylor looked instead to the doctors who all looked disappointed. She shuffled in place for a moment before heading toward the door.

As she passed the doorway, she saw a file sitting in a holder near the door that caused her to pause, the force whispering in her mind. Taking a moment to ensure that no one was looking, she pulled it free, flipping it open to examine the contents. She stared at it quietly before heading out into the hall. When she saw the hopeful looks on the Pelham’s faces, she bit her lip before shaking her head.

“Sorry.” She muttered before moving to get away from them. She walked up the long hall, carefully inspecting the document on the clipboard, doing her best to ignore the suspicious looks from the other men in the hallway, and stared at the door they guarded.

“-ing. We’ll have to change the rotations if you want us to keep an eye on Panacea as well. Tattletale isn’t much danger with her jaw wired shut, but she still needs to be watched in case the Undersiders try to break her out. With her thinker power, she could certainly get them around any patrols once they’d reached her.” The voice came from a taller man, his coarse thin hair peppered with gray. The
man seemed to be in charge if his different uniform was anything to go by, and he was speaking with someone on his cell phone. Taylor considered the man for a moment, staring at the doorway that contained Tattletale. A thinker.

She considered the file in her hand for a few moments before slipping over and approaching the door. When the guards raised their weapons, she halted, and the man shifted in place, speaking into the phone. “Just a moment, Director.” He turned around, and Taylor nervously shifted from foot to foot. His face wasn’t ‘chiselled,’ but it had an unusual shape to it, and he had an odd intensity about him, his dark eyes staring at Taylor curiously.

“Can I help you with something, Miss Hebert.” Taylor frowned at the use of her name, but she figured that a few people in the PRT had figured out who she was. She stood in place for a moment before sighing.

“I was hoping that I could speak with Tattletale.” The man’s trimmed eyebrows raised over his dark eyes and he stared at her for a moment. When one of the men went to speak, he raised a hand and held his phone to his ear.

“Emily. I’ve just had the most interesting request from someone that you’ve been hoping to speak with.” He paused, listening. “Taylor Hebert.” He blinked and listened more. “I’m unsure, but considering Panacea’s condition, I imagine that it’s probably at least tangentially related to the situation.” He waited a bit more and then hummed before speaking. “Well, that’s the interesting part. She wishes to speak with Tattletale.” He paused chuckling. “She didn’t exactly say.” The man waited once more, listening for almost a minute before handing the phone over to her. “She wishes to speak with you.”

“Ah. Thanks.” Taylor lifted the phone to her ear and listened quietly. “Uh. Hello?” She spoke softly and started when a breathy, no-nonsense voice responded.

“Taylor Hebert. My name is Emily Piggot. I am the director of the PRT ENE.” Taylor blinked and nodded before realizing that the woman couldn’t see her.

“It’s uh...nice to speak with you, Director Piggot?” The girl’s voice was tenuous, and the short bark of laughter startled her.

“Manners are a rare commodity in capes, Miss Hebert. Team Leader Carmichael informs me that you wish to speak with Tattletale. Why? And why do you think I should allow it, no matter your reason.” Taylor blinked, frowning as she considered the hallway and the file in her hand. It’d take her a moment to respond, though Piggot seemed patient enough to wait.

“I think she can help me figure out what’s hurting Panacea; I think she can help me stop it from killing her. And as for why... Panacea has saved a lot of your capes. Endbringer fights or otherwise. I think that she deserves all the help that you can offer.” It was a bluff, Taylor didn’t really know how often Amy helped out the PRT, but considering the work she did around endbringer fights that were televised, Taylor assumed it was a safe bet. There was several minutes of drawn-out silence before the voice on the other end of the line responded.

“You make several fair points, Miss Hebert. But I should point out that it’s exceptionally illegal to allow you to speak with a captured villains even if you weren’t both underage. That being said, considering the situation at hand, I could ask Ralph and his men to look the other way for a few moments. But, I’d like to ask you for a favour in exchange.” The voice sounded almost regretful, and Taylor frowned as she tapped her foot. She glanced at Ralph quietly before she spoke softly into the
“What do you want from me?” The director’s voice went silent, and Taylor glanced up to see the trooper watching her with an amused look on his face, as he leaned on the door, his arms crossed.

“You’re an interesting girl, Miss Hebert. The favour is that I want a meeting with you. Where you come down to the Headquarters alone or with your father and we, sit down and talk for at least an hour. Promise me this, and I’ll help you.” Taylor listened to the request and mulled it over in her mind. It could have been worse, and that made her nervous, but she needed to see Tattletale.

“Fine.” Taylor didn’t wait for the response from Director Piggot. Instead, she handed the phone over to the man, and he took it.

“Emily!” His friendly voice drifted over the line, and he paused, listening thoughtfully. He nodded finally, and moved to the side, opening the door smoothly. “The Director says pleasure doing business with you. I’ll get you a business card for you to use to schedule your appointment.” He offered her a wink that caused Taylor to shift nervously in the doorway before she disappeared into the dark room.

The entire room was empty but for the single bed that held the deceptively small looking Tattletale her domino mask still in place. Taylor took two steps before she noticed the girl's eyes staring stonily at her from the middle of the bed and she sighed before stepping closer and seeing the restraints that kept the girl firmly affixed to her bed. Taylor watched as the girl held her eyes for a minute before wincing and looking away. Taylor stood at the side of the bed and spoke softly.

“I need your help.” Her voice was soft, and she heard the scoff from the hurt villainess. “I’ll heal you, and then I’m going to ask you for your help, and if you refuse, then I’ll walk away.” Her voice was soft. She watched as the Villainess tensed and then relaxed. Taylor reached out a hand.

“Do I have permission to heal you?” She spoke softly, and Tattletale nodded silently, still refusing to meet Taylor’s eyes. Once the girl nodded, Taylor’s hand lit up with a soft azure light and the Force washed over Tattletale’s head, the energy moving to heal the girls pulverized jaw, guiding the bones back into place better than the wires had, lining up the shards as best she could before guiding the healing along each fracture. As she came to a stop, she brought her other hand up, moving to carefully use her force powers to unwind and remove the wires that kept Tattletale’s jaw sealed shut. She snorted to herself, considering what Victoria would say if she knew that Taylor had given Tattletale the ability to speak again.

“What?” The words were rough as the voice spoke, and the head turned her way, though the young Thinker’s eyes still refused to settle on Taylor’s form. The Jedi in training blinked a bit. “I was just thinking about what Victoria would say if she found out I gave you the ability to speak again.” The loud bark of laughter was unexpected by Taylor found herself snickering as well. As she stood in silence watching Tattletale, she noted the girl shrinking into herself nervously as she continued to look away.

“Are you afraid of me?” Taylor asked with confusion. The second bark of laughter was even harsher, and Taylor’s lips pressed into a line as it quickly became almost scathing.

“Scared of you? I’m fucking terrified of you Taylor Hebert. You beat down Glory Girl with a gesture of your hand and then proceeded to rebuild the meat pinata that she’d turned her sister into.” She shook her head, taking a deep breath and letting out a hacking cough before continuing to speak.
“I imagine that lots of different capes are getting very nervous about you right now, and that’s not good for you.” The girl continued, glancing back at Taylor finally, and stared her right in the eye. “But that’s not why I’m afraid. I’m afraid because when I look at you, the voice in the back of my head that whispers peoples deepest darkest secrets to me? It just screams.”

Taylor wasn’t sure how to take that, standing in silence as the blonde girl winced and looked away. “You asked for a favour; what do you want.” When she spoke, the profound exhaustion in her tone nearly made Taylor reconsider. Eventually, Taylor decided that it couldn’t hurt to ask. She quietly filed the screaming comment away for later consumption, taking a moment to study the younger girl’s features observing her reactions carefully.

“Panacea is sick, and we’re not sure what’s wrong with her. When you were in the bank, you said that you saw something wrong with her?” Taylor blinked when a more genuine wicked laugh answered back, and the blonde shook her head. “I doubt what I saw is what’s making her sick unless she’s puking.” The blonde glanced in Taylor’s direction, wincing and pointing to the file. “Is that her file? Let me see it.” Taylor hesitated a moment before handing it over and stepping back. The girl stared at the file for a few moments before letting out a long low whistle as she stared at the words that had gone entirely over Taylor’s head.

“You think you killed her?” She watched as the girl opened the file and carefully leafed through the pages, staring at the notes, the various x-rays and images and she slowly closed the file, offering it back to Taylor. “Well, you’re right. She’s dying, but you didn’t do it. Well, not by yourself, anyway.” The words were clearly meant to be comforting, but they came out too harsh for Taylor’s tastes, and she felt her shoulders hunching up.

“What?” Taylor said quickly, dread washing through her. Taylor felt her heart stop as she considered the implications. Could she heal anyone, had she killed Tattletale as well? “What does that mean. She’s dying, but it’s not ‘exactly' my fault?” Taylor stared at Amy, taking the file in hand once more and gripping it nervously.

“She’s sick because she’s using her powers on her own body, and she’s doing it badly. Considering that she’s lived this long, she probably can’t do that normally, so I’m guessing that when you put her back together like Humpty Dumpty, you did something to her that removed her Manton limit.” Taylor frowned at the concept. She’d read about the Manton limits, but she didn’t understand how she could have robbed Panacea of hers.

“H-How?” She stared at the blonde, but Tattletale merely offered a shrug. “I have no idea, that’s not how my power works, but hopefully, you can reverse it.” She went silent then and laid back down, rubbing at her head tiredly. Taylor remained silently in place, considering whether to offer to help before shaking her head and walking toward the door. She opened it and stepped out, holding her hands up at the guns pointed at her. The guards gestured her out and secured the door before backing off.

The Director was standing in place. “Did you heal her?” He seemed curious, and when she nodded, he nodded, taking out his phone. Before dialling, he handed her a card. “This is my card, but I put Director Piggot’s number on the back. I’d suggest calling her sooner rather than later.”

“Oh, Taylor!” As she had turned to head off, he called out a quick comment. “Thanks for healing her up. It means that we can move her over to HQ and it’ll be much safer for everyone. Good luck with Panacea.” Taylor nodded absently before walking back towards Amy’s room. Taylor stepped into
the room and stood in the doorway, observing the collection of people within. The Doctors were conferring among themselves, quietly this time, and the Pelhams were surrounding Carol-Brandish, Taylor corrected herself, and they seemed to be trying to rouse her spirits.

“Brandish,” Taylor called out, and the conversations fell to the wayside as everyone turned to her. Most of them were shocked as if they’d forgotten that she was there at all. She held up the file in her hand and ignored the scandalized looks she got from the doctors. “I uh. I showed this to Tattletale. She had a theory about what happened.” When the others looked at her, she shrugged up a shoulder. “It’s partly my fault. Tattletale seems to think that I somehow affected Panacea’s Mantan limit, and this is cause she’s using her powers on herself.”

Taylor was surprised when everyone turned to stare at the weakly struggling Amy and the looks of dread that spread over most of the faces. She wondered what that was about but figuring that she should at least try, she set the file down and approached the bed. No one attempted to stop her as she moved in and carefully set her hands over Amy’s head and chest once more, dipping back into the Force and letting her power map out the girl’s body. As she worked, Taylor reached out to Bastila.

‘How could I have done that? I don’t even understand how powers work, how can I figure out what I messed up?’ She was terrified, she might have killed someone with her inept fumbling, and she couldn’t even understand how. A wave of warmth and support wrapped around her and Taylor’s grasp on the force strengthened.

"It has to have been something we -could- affect directly, or indirectly. So start there. Scanning Amy's body and try to find differences. Let’s focus on the cells attacking each other, the cancerous ones." Taylor’s mind gently examined the cells, considering them quietly as Bastila continued to speculate. ‘If the computers are what gives people their powers, then the limits can’t only be locked in on this side because there’s no way you could have affected that with your healing skills.’

Taylor’s focus went in more in-depth, and she considered the individual cells, precisely studying one of the cancerous cells and one of the wildly violent ones, and the ones that the girl’s body was using to destroy the other. Only then did she think to check an unaffected cell just as carefully and then she frowned.

“What’s that?” Bastila had cottoned onto Taylor’s concern and she exam the unaffected cell. ‘The DNA is nearly the same; junk DNA was attached here.’ Taylor followed the pull of Bastila’s presence and studied it. It was simple, a few tiny nucleotides that shouldn’t even be there, but seemed to do nothing. Taylor checked another unaffected cell and found the same thing. Recognition flew through her, and it took Taylor a moment to realize that it wasn’t her recognition, but Bastila’s. ‘It’s a marker. Your healing was too broad, you cleansed the affected cells, and she could affect herself.’

‘...How do I fix this, Bastila?’ Taylor’s mental voice was terrified; they’d never even covered this tangentially, she got the feeling that tinkering with DNA wasn’t something that most Padawans had to deal with. She got a mess of conflicting emotions from Taylor, and then Bastila’s voice sighed deep within her mind.

"I wasn’t a healer Taylor, I never..." She paused, frowning, and then she spoke. "It’s an emergency, and one of our spirits could help with this Taylor, but. It’s...It’s not like our Holocrons. You lack the fine control for this, but his Holocron can take direct control for a few minutes to direct it himself. You have to give permission for the Noetikon to allow it though. You should understand Taylor; The way it'd fix this... it's the Dark Side. Deep in the dark side, this won’t make your control any easier." It didn’t even take Taylor a minute to respond, her mental voice ringing with determination.
‘Yes. Do it. I accept.’ Taylor expected for Bastila to ask again, but instead, the connection changed, seemingly deepening. The presence felt completely Alien to Bastila and Jolee’s touches, where they were gentle and contemplative this presence pushed into her, tore at her mind and quested into every dark and broken secret. A masculine voice was radiating through her mind; the words tinged with a mechanical after effect.

‘No niceties today, Taylor Hebert. Our time is short.’ The voice was cultured and proud, and he seemed impatient. ‘This will be unpleasant Taylor; we will need to delve into the darkness in you to access the power that you seek. If it wasn't an emergency, I wouldn't normally agree to push you this far, this fast.’

‘But, If you can produce the correct emotions, then I believe that I can fix this.’ The voice pushed past Taylor somehow, leaving her a passenger as her body shifted, every ounce of tension and unease melting off her as she stood tall and proud. Her hands splayed out, fingers moving to hold themselves out over Amy’s supine form. His voice was contemplative as he used Taylor’s body to scan the broken form of Amy carefully. ‘I will not apologize for this, Taylor Hebert, but I do wish that it wasn’t necessary.’

It was sudden and vicious and then came the pain. Something dug itself into her mind, dredged up every scrap of anger and rage she had. The torture played in her mind over and over, and the horror spread through her, the passion and the pain sparking over her mind. Taylor screamed in her mind, and her body remained perfectly still and stoic. Taylor ached to close her eyes, to hide, but the emotions didn’t stop, and her eyes couldn’t move, her hands remained still, and Taylor watched as Darkness emerged from her hands forcing its way down into the body on the bed.

The Force twisted and bent the girl’s form, savagely erasing every last scrap of material in her body that lacked the marker, using the dark side to force her body to grow flesh to replace it, drawing heavily on the dark-side to replace the mass without using nutrients. Taylor’s mind felt the memories pushing in, remembering the darkness that the spirit drew upon, his own darkened past feeding the twisted powers that they wielded.

She saw the tortures he endured to earn his dark gifts and the terror that he’d wielded. She remembered his pride in service, and his disgust in the failure of that which he served, everything melted together, and then it all ended, and Taylor collapsed back. She hit the ground and kicked backwards as fast as she could, only stopping when her back hit the wall. Taylor sat there, breathing heavily and staring at the bed that held the seemingly healthy looking Panacea, the girl’s form laying there still. Her heart beat like a drum and Taylor did everything she could to keep a savage grip on her gullet to avoid vomiting all over the floor.

She pushed the darkness down, savagely pushing it away and clawing for the Light Side once more. For several terrifying seconds, it didn’t respond, and then tranquillity washed through her and Taylor sagged against the floor, finally feeling the hand on her shoulder. She glanced up into Carol’s worried eyes. She was about to speak when the sound of something smashing drew their attention to Amy’s bed. The girl had lunged from the bed, dragging several monitors with her, sending them scattering to the floor and smashing them as the leads ripped from her body. She ran toward the bathroom and skidded to the ground, violently emptying her stomach.

Carol moved the fastest, getting across the room and carefully pulling Amy’s wild hair back. Taylor pushed herself slowly to her feet and followed, listening as Amy sobbed over the toilet and continued to violently expel the contents of her stomach into the porcelain basin. Taylor paused as she heard the comforting words from Brandish and Lady Photon, who had joined them. She stopped at the door just in time to hear Amy’s terrified response.
“I saw it.” When Lady Photon and Brandish asked her what she’d seen, Taylor tensed, wondering what the girl would reveal. She wasn’t any less concerned when instead of acknowledging the darkness in Taylor, she merely said; "I saw my brain. I saw what it had been doing to my brain." and then she had dissolved into more tears.

Chapter End Notes

[[Original A/N: I'm unsure how this will be received, I know this isn't technically how Manton Limit's work, but I kind of enjoyed the idea of it. Too often Amy's 'Fixed' by Taylor or whatever self insert, and I enjoyed the idea of her, like, being allowed to discover itself in it's stark realities. ]]

[[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

I reworked the story, broke up paragraphs, cleaned up the Taylor stuff, changed the Piggot conversation a bunch to make it seem less ‘Muahahahahaha EVIL’ and more about the woman helping Taylor out and then asking for a favour, as Taylor did with Tats. Barely added a hundred words, so that’s good.

UPDATE DATE: 05-22-2019]]
Chapter Summary

[[This chapter is a minor lull in the rising tension of the arc, mostly focused on character interactions. It’s also finally the last chapter of the 14th, so the next section will include a brief time skip before things move on.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

April 14th, 2011

St. Elmo’s Hospital, Brockton Bay

A heavy silence hung in the air in the wake of Amy's declaration. But then everyone began talking over each other. Several of the members of New Wave had looked in her direction, and she’d swallowed nervously, though Carol at least seemed more concerned with making sure that Amy was okay, soothingly patting the girl’s back as Amy clung to Lady Photon.

It took a few minutes, but the doctors eventually managed to corral everyone, the majority of the group was evicted into the hallway. Taylor then found herself in the enviable position of facing the suspicious looks of the two-thirds of New Wave with energy powers.

Instead of allowing them to interrogate her, Taylor quietly shuffled off to stand near the friendly PRT agent that she’d spoken with earlier in the afternoon. The man seemed confused but didn’t object, and his presence seemed to be enough of a deterrent that New Wave remained on their half of the hall, though the girl, Laserdream if Taylor remembered correctly, did require a hand on her shoulder not to follow.

The hall’s awkward silence continued until Lady Photon emerged from the room nearly twenty minutes later, muttering something to the others that immediately cut off the suspicious looks being tossed her way though the argument that started up wasn’t any easier on Taylor’s frayed nerves.

The entire Pelham branch of New wave was arguing with each other at a furious whisper and Taylor, and the PRT Agent merely stared at each other shocked before shrinking down and doing their best to seem inconspicuous. Luckily, before the argument could get too heated, the doorway opened to disgorge Carol and the doctors. They moved past the Pelhams away from Taylor and toward the elevators, Sarah and the rest of New wave following.

Taylor considered following that group or even just leaving. The idea of riding the city transit in her pyjamas wasn’t exactly appealing, but the idea of facing Amy after whatever had just happened didn’t seem any more bright. Eventually, though, Taylor stubbornly firmed up her resolve, slipping over to the closed door and gently pressing down on the handle. The lack of sunlight through the windows shocked Taylor; she hadn’t realized that it’d gotten that late. Taylor stood in the doorway, the light from the hall throwing a large square across the floor of the darkened hospital room.
The bed that had held Amy had been moved back to its typical position against the wall near the window, and there was a heart monitor next to it that beeped softly, the rest of the equipment that had been attached to the Healer had been moved to the opposite end of the room, clearly not needed anymore.

For the first few minutes, Taylor quietly remained standing in the doorjamb, staring at the hunched figure of Amy on the bed, watching as the girl’s eyes stared back, shimmering faintly in the light from the hall. Taylor considered the door for a moment before letting out a sigh and carefully pushing the door closed in her wake. She walked across the room in the darkness, dragging one of the chairs over to the side of Amy’s bed, sitting and staring at the girl’s back.

The silence lingered around them, heavy with unspoken questions that Taylor knew that Amy would never answer, even if she asked them. Taylor considered asking what had happened; she considered apologizing for what her healing had done to Amy, she also briefly considered telling the classic polar bear joke. Eventually, though, Taylor leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, lacing her fingers carefully and then resting her chin on them before she finally spoke.

“What a fine mess we’re in, Mousy.” The words were low and gentle as if Taylor was thinking to herself, but it drew a reaction from Amy, the girl finally rolling over in the bed to stare at Taylor, her eyes glimmering still in the moonlight that shone in the windows behind Taylor’s chair.

“Why are you still calling me that? You know my name.” The words were low and curious. The thickness in Amy’s voice was new, and if she hadn’t known what’d caused it, Taylor might have assumed that Amy had just awoken from sleep. Taylor blinked at the question, shifting in place as she considered whether to tell Amy the truth or to lie about it.

“You remember earlier when we were in that bathroom?” She paused and waited till Amy offered up a grunt of acknowledgment before continuing. She studied the eyes of the girl in the dark for a few moments before leaning forward on her knees.

“I gave you my name, and you seemed like you didn’t want to give me yours, so I gave you the nickname. After that, it didn’t seem particularly fair to just switch to your name cause other people told me what it was.” Taylor took a moment to think about that, eventually continuing when Amy didn’t seem interested in changing the subject.

“Besides that, you kind of like… tense up? Whenever anyone calls you by your names, any of them. Amy, Panacea.” Taylor lifted a shrug though it’d be hard to see in the dark and hummed in thought.

“You seemed to cringe whenever people spoke of you, and I didn’t really want to make any of that worse, so I kept calling you Mousy. I can stop if you’d prefer?” Amy didn’t respond to the comment, rolling onto her back and staring at the roof in silence. Taylor sat quietly in the dark, listening to Amy’s slow breathing, well aware from it that the girl hadn’t fallen asleep.

As she sat, Taylor considered and discarded numerous questions that she could pose to the other girl, each seeming a bit personal to ask someone and then she finally just let out a sigh and leaned forwards, waiting till Amy’s eyes glanced in her direction before speaking.

“Did you know that studies show that Cynics are better at handling extended periods of stress when compared both to an unbiased control group and a similarly selected group of Optimists.” Taylor’s voice was casual, and when Amy looked at her incredulously, she offered a faint smirk.

“What, you don’t want to talk about whatever happened earlier, and I’m reading a lot of psychology
books lately.” Taylor watched the incredulous look on Amy’s face remain for a moment before she offered a weary sigh and gestured for Taylor to continue.

“So, while Cynics are better at handling ongoing stress, both mentally and physically, optimists generally complain more, and they tend to get sicker when they’re stressed…” Taylor spoke casually to Amy, generally drifting from subject to subject to keep the girl entertained. She dipped into her advancing knowledge of Psychology, and then the pair traded stories and anecdotes about physiology. Amy had a perfect understanding of the human body in a diagrammatic sense, but Taylor had read more on the subject, and she had all sorts of neat anecdotes and facts that even managed to draw a smile or two from the bedridden healer.

This was how they were found a little over an hour later when the door swung open to admit Carol and Doctor Vasiri. When the Indian doctor flipped the light on, Taylor and Amy were left covering their eyes as they adapted to the bright lights, muttering curses under their breath. It was only when Taylor’s eyes cleared that she managed to see the newest addition to the room.

The figure didn’t seem that odd a first, a tall, slim woman with a friendly heart-shaped face. It was when you looked closer that you started to see the oddities. The woman had pearlescent almost shimmering skin, and her eyes glistened with reflected light more then healthy eyes did. The long hair atop her head that had seemed black in the hall shimmered as she moved, changing from colour to colour as she walked, and when she got close to the bed, Taylor looked closer, realizing that it was some type of crystal, that the woman’s entire body was made of that same crystal.

“Hello, girls.” The woman’s voice, despite being gentle, wasn’t what Taylor would call typical. The woman’s voice was altered by her powers, sounding almost like resonating glass. Taylor was reminded when her science teacher in grade school had brought in two dozen wine glasses and had them fill them differently so that the students could play music on them. When the memories turned to other things from her past, Taylor brutally crushed it, turning her attention back to Amy, frowning when the girl continued to stare at her instead of the strange crystal woman staring at her. Taylor glanced up and saw the Crystal woman staring at her as well, and a sidelong glance revealed that Carol was looking shocked as well she tilted her head.

“What?” Taylor’s voice was laced with concern, as she glanced down, wondering if this was another joke about her damn pants.

"Your eyes. They’re yellow.” It was Amy that spoke and Taylor winced as she considered it. “And you look like you haven’t slept in days. There are bags under your eyes, and I can see burst blood vessels in your face.”

“It’s my power. I had to tap very deeply into it in order to properly heal you, and it required darker emotions then I’m used to. Using my powers in that way can cause feedback on my body.” And her mind, but Taylor didn’t voice that comment, doing her best to ignore the concern radiating from Bastila’s presence in the back of her mind. “It’s fine. I can self-heal unlike some people, and I should recover in a day or two.”

Taylor shifted awkwardly under all the gazes before she felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up, seeing Carol’s thankful expression.

“Come on, Taylor, Laserdream’s offered to take you home. Amy’s got to speak with Resonance about a few things.” Taylor stared at Carol for a moment before looking curiously at Amy, who’d be nervously studying the Crystalline woman. She briefly considered arguing, but she coughed to draw the attention of both of the women near the bed, giving Amy a simple glance before staring at
“She’s recovering from having over a third of her body forcefully regrown. If she tells you that she needs to rest, I must insist that you respect her wishes.” Taylor stared the woman down until she nodded with a soft smile before glancing at Amy. “Just uh. Keep your health in mind, Mousy. Don’t do anything crazy. And no healing anyone until you eat six meals that aren’t coffee!” She chuckled as Carol tugged on her, pulling her toward the door.

“Taylor.” The voice brought her up short, and Taylor wondered if Amy had even said her name before. She turned and glanced back at the other Healer, lofting an eyebrow behind her glasses, waiting to see what Amy had for her.

“Nice Pants.” The girl said with a tiny little smile and Taylor felt her cheeks heating up. “They’re comfortable.” She defended herself with as much dignity as she could, before stalking out of the room, her head held high when the door closed behind them. Taylor turned her attention on Carol, giving her a single raised eyebrow.

“You need to keep an eye on her. She’s got to eat real food, and she’s got to sleep. From what I could see she’d been suffering from Chronic lack of both, although, with the amount of rebuilding that we did, she’s mostly healthy, that won’t last if she doesn’t take care of herself.” Before Carol could comment a choked giggle from one side drew Taylor’s attention.

“What?” She spoke slowly, staring at Laserdream, who was biting one of her knuckles. When the girl continued to chuckle, Taylor glanced over at the rest of the Pelhams that stood with her. Seeing that they were all holding back chuckles, she huffed and spoke again.

“What?” Taylor blinked when she saw Shielder pointing down she stared at her pants, cheeks darkening. She took a few moments being horribly embarrassed before she straightened her back and adopted a firm tone before responding.

“They’re just damn pants. My mother bought us matching pants before she died. I outgrew mine, but these are hers, and they’re comfortable.” She continued to glare as they all continued to laugh behind their hands, only pausing when, as one, their eyes turned to stare over her shoulder.

Taylor froze in place. ‘There’s no way.’ She thought to herself, staring down at her Midnight Blue Pajama pants with their silver accents. The tiny little visor emblems scattered haphazardly over their fabric. She dreaded turning, but there was no way to resist. When she finally spun around, she came to a stop to see Armsmaster standing outside Tattletales room staring back at her. The team leader just behind him had a wicked little smirk on his face, and Taylor blushed as she realized that she’d been set up. When the armoured figure approached, she remained stock still until the man stared down at her, his much larger frame looming over her.

“Shall we never speak of this again?” His voice was almost as uncomfortable as Taylor felt and the brunette couldn’t help but let her lips quirk up in amusement. But she nodded, getting the tiniest sense of relief from the man. Once that was done, Taylor let him return to what he had been doing. When he stepped away, Taylor turned, her cheeks still brilliant red as she glared at every other occupant of the hall.

“She’ll never speak of this again?” His voice was almost as uncomfortable as Taylor felt and the brunette couldn’t help but let her lips quirk up in amusement. But she nodded, getting the tiniest sense of relief from the man. Once that was done, Taylor let him return to what he had been doing. When he stepped away, Taylor turned, her cheeks still brilliant red as she glared at every other occupant of the hall.

“We never speak of this. Ever. I believe that Laserdream offered me a lift?” She glanced at the gathered capes, and when Crystal nodded and pulled back, Taylor followed, climbing into the elevator with her. As the doors closed, Taylor started when Crystal grabbed her arm.
“Thanks.” The words startled her, and she blinked, her ears heating up again. “For saving Amy. And uh. Sorry. When she freaked, we all got worried; we didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.” She chuckled as she glanced at Taylor. “Though you seemed rather friendly with that PRT Officer. Do you know him?” Taylor shook her head fishing out the card he gave her.

“No. And I think he’s the one that called Armsmaster. So now, I have to get revenge.” She scrutinized the card. "Field commander Ralph Creighton's going to rue the day that he met me.” Taylor huffed as she stuffed the card away, glancing at the elevator control.

“...Why are we going up?” She glanced at Laserdream before she cottoned on. “Oh. I thought they meant with a car. Is it...safe?” She stared nervously at the cape, ignoring the amused look on her face.

“I will have you know that if I die, then my dad would be very put out with you.”

Amy watched as Taylor and her mother left the room, startled at the look of concern that Carol shot her. The sound of laughter drifting through the doorway tempted Amy, making her wish that she could be out there, instead of in here, but as it closed she finally let her eyes settle on the Cape. The woman seemed to remain still, allowing Amy to study her before speaking.

“Hello, Amy. As your mother mentioned, my name is Resonance.” She moved over to the chair that Taylor had sat in, and she took a seat, seeming almost too big for it for a moment before she adjusted her posture and crossed her legs. “I’m normally based out of Colorado, but your Mother and Aunt contacted me and even arranged for a Mover to bring me here to speak with you. They are understandably concerned about your announcement.” When she didn’t respond, the crystalline woman merely sat patiently and watched her. When Amy remained reluctant to speak, the woman studied her and then spoke casually.

“I can see that you don’t trust me. Perhaps a show of Faith? My name is Melanie Cao; I’m a Doctor.” She shifted in place, her entire form pulsing with light and then the light faded and a smaller woman had replaced the crystal woman. Long straight black hair framed a face with mixed Asian-American features. The woman’s lips curled into a friendly smile, and she resumed her relaxed, almost casual pose in the chair. “I’m a board-certified Therapist on top of being a cape, and I’m not part of the PRT, though my group is affiliated with them. Doctor-Patient confidentiality does apply, so you needn’t worry about me spreading your secrets.” Resonance’s voice was gentle, and she continued to watch until Amy couldn’t take anymore.

“I don’t need a psychologist. I’m not crazy.” She growled. “I know they think that I’m lying for attention, but I’m not crazy, I promise you that. If they don’t believe, then I’ll-I’ll..” Amy paused here, unable to say for sure what exactly she’d do if they didn’t believe her. She wasn’t sure that she could handle going home like this. Her mind was clear for the first time in years, and she shuddered at the idea of being hit with feeling again, and yet, part of her longed for her sister anyway. Victoria had been a part of her for so long that it felt wrong to be away from her, even considering this. Amy lowered her head as she stared at her hands, only glancing up in shock when she heard the other woman’s comment.

“I believe you, Amy.” The woman stared at her and Amy flinched at the thought of it. “You don’t
seem like you’re lying, you certainly believe what you’re saying, and from what the doctors and your Mother and Aunt explained, what you suggest was possible. Truthfully, they believe you as well. Your Aunt Sarah was the most firm about it. I believe that she intends to take you home with her for the moment.” The words robbed Amy’s form of the nervous tension that had been building in her, her form sinking back into the bed. She’d thought that she’d have to face Victoria like this.

“Tell me about Victoria.” The woman’s words were patient and calm, and Amy stared at her for several minutes. Eventually, she sighed and glanced out the window instead of speaking. Amy stared wearily at the dark violet sky and imagined stars, as the healer fantasized about pricks of light, a single glowing white shape shot away from the building, shrinking as it flew north. Amy smiled, imagining that it was a shooting star, and finally she spoke.

She told the doctor everything. She told her about triggering to save Victoria’s life. She talked about her experience at the periphery of Victoria’s and her problems with Carol. She spoke about her work at the hospitals and the various people that she saved. She had intended to start with facts, but other details crept past her as she continued to talk, the understanding eyes of the doctor spurring her on.

She spoke of her troubles with Victoria’s aura, and her continually aching jealousy and desperate need, and she spoke of the crushing expectations of her volunteer work, the way that it had all changed. She talked about when she’d started and the gratitude for the lives she’d saved, and the constant concern and how it had turned to expectation and assumptions. Amy talked until she was spent, and then she lay there, breathing haggardly and trying not to cry or throw up again.

The silence after her verbal deluge dragged on for nearly ten minutes, the woman merely watching her as Amy tried to get her breathing under control. Melanie leaned forward when Amy had started to get nervous about what she’d say, and she gently took Amy’s hand. The healer felt a touch uncomfortable at the physical contact, but she gently gripped the Doctor’s hand.

“You’re not crazy, Amy, so that’s good. But you do need to talk to people more. You’re dealing with far too much stress for a teenage girl.” She sat up quietly and studied Amy. “I’m going to speak with your mother about arranging to speak with you more. It might require a computer, but I think I can convince our mover to continue helping out, bringing me here or you to my offices in Colorado, but I think you need someone to talk to.” When Amy nervously nodded, the doctor stood up quietly.

“I need to speak with your Mother and Aunt.” At Amy’s panicked look, she shook her head. “I won’t repeat anything you said without your permission, Amy, but they need to know more about what you’re going through, and you should certainly speak with them more. I’m also going to speak with them about limiting your work here at the Hospital. You’re just one person, and you can’t keep working yourself to death like this.” At Amy’s rebellious look, Melanie’s features firmed up.

“This is a problem that I’ve dealt with more than you can possibly imagine, Amy. It’s significantly common amongst medical providers Amy, and you need to understand that more than being unhealthy, this is dangerous. It can lead to mistakes, and with powers like yours, that could cost lives.” Amy felt her face heating up as she glanced at her lap shamefully, though the doctor continued as if she hadn’t seen it. “I want you to promise me that you’ll agree to follow whatever the limits that your family sets for you. If you want, I can sit with you when you discuss it with them.”

Amy glanced up at the doctor, feeling those eyes on her, and she nodded rebelliously after a moment. When the woman turned and slipped from the bed, Amy let herself collapse back into it. “I’m going to speak with your family, is there anything that you want?” Amy glanced up at the strange woman, watching as that glow over-took her once more, transforming her into that other form once more.
“My phone.” Amy stared after the woman at the nod. She watched as the crystalline woman left, walking out the door and leaving her alone in the dimly lit hospital room once more. Her gaze drifted over to the window once more, staring quietly at the darkness beyond until she heard the door open to reveal her Uncle.

“Amy…” The man’s voice was strained, and he stared at her quietly before darting toward her. Amy tensed up as he suddenly wrapped her up in his powerful arms. The tingling shocks that she felt up and down her arms hinted at his emotional state. The man held her in his powerful arms for a few moments before softly speaking into her hair.

“You nearly died…” The words were soft and scared, and Amy felt her eyes pricking with tears as she wrapped her arms around her uncle and clung to him as she’d done as a child. She didn’t hear what he muttered into her hair, but she just clung harder to him, crying softly into his shoulder.

The hug lasted nearly fifteen minutes before he pulled back to reveal eyes that Amy suspected matched her own quite well. When the man sniffled and rubbed his face, Amy couldn’t help but let out a wet laugh. She stared at him as he scratched at his neck before smiling when he drew her phone from his pocket and handed it over. Amy accepted it quickly and paused when a scrap of yellow paper accompanied it. Taking the paper, she carefully read the name and number on it, considering it for nearly ten minutes. She didn’t even notice Neal leaving and heading back into the hall; she merely studied the paper before finally taking her phone and carefully inputting the contact information in.

{My Mom gave me your number, is that okay? (It’s Amy if you didn’t know. I’m not sure who else’s Mom would give them your number, do you know a lot of Moms?)} The message sat alone on the screen for nearly five minutes before a response came in.

{Heya, Mousy. Course it’s okay, and as for the second question, I know many Moms. I am secretly the head of a Villainous group dedicated to the eradication of the dreaded Mom-joke.} Amy laughed as she snuggled down into the uncomfortable bed, fingers dancing over the keys, the dim glow of the phone illuminating the tiny smile on her face.

Chapter End Notes

[[Original A/N: Shorter then I’m used to, but this seemed like an excellent place to stop. As always, love feedback! The second half was harder to write, but I hope I did alright. I looked around for a canon Psychologist Cape, but there wasn’t one, so I made my own up. Melanie Cao. She’ll be around, but I don’t see her being a massive part of the story.]]

[[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I’ll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Cleaned up the Taylor section, adjusted a few things, and brought the nickname chat in]
line with earlier changes, cleaned up Amy’s part, tweaked a few things and cleaned up
the general writing quality, this is going much quicker as we push on which is a relief as
I suppose the quality was improving.

UPDATE DATE: 05-22-2019]}


April 16th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

“Taylor!” The sable-haired girl slammed down the cup that she’d been cleaning, her tense shoulders bunching up as she turned and stalked from the kitchen. “Taylor! I’m speaking to you. Stop.” The girl glared blisteringly over her shoulder before storming down the hall and toward the back door. Her father’s continued shouts were trailing after her, heavy demands that she stop and talk. Taylor ignored the surge of reproach from Bastila, throwing open the back door of the house and storming into the backyard. This had been the third god-damned argument today, and she was tired of it. Nothing she said mattered, every word was twisted, and she couldn’t stand constantly correcting herself like this.

When she spun in place and saw her dad standing there, powerful arms crossed and his face red from the argument she just crouched low. “I can’t talk about this again, Dad. If you don’t believe me; that’s on you.” She ignored his attempt to respond, and she leapt, the force carrying her over a dozen feet upwards. Her feet landed on a second-floor window sill, and she sprang backwards, flipping in the air and landing perched on the edge of a neighbour’s roof. She stared down at her father for a few moments before leaping the gap between houses and landing on the roof of the house, quickly pacing up and over the crest.

As the shouts of her father died down behind her, Taylor was tempted to keep going, to run, to leap from the roofs and head into the docks, to look for trouble and get out her aggression. She held herself back with a tremendous force of will. She stood there staring at the setting sun in the distance, and after a few moments the tension in her body melted away, and she dropped back onto the roof, considering the drifting clouds in the distance. Legs dragged up, and Taylor wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin quietly on her knees. This had been her life for the last two days. She’d been deposited on the stoop by Laserdream, and her father had been sitting in his old armchair, waiting for her.

The look on his face when she saw her state had made Taylor's heart ache. Rather than waiting for the brewing argument she'd muttered something about sleep and had vanished up the stairs, but the morning after had been brutal. He'd dragged the entire story of the day out of her, from the bank to the hospital and every word she said made him angrier. It hadn't initially been directed at her, he'd cursed the Undersiders, and the PRT, and even Glory Girl. He cursed his daughter being dragged into all of that and then the lectures started.
He had wanted her to promise to stay out of cape business unless she joined a team. He had wanted her to promise him that she’d not get involved in things like this again. Taylor had stared at him anger at those words as if he’d ask her to stand by if something like that happened. She’d done her best to explain, but it devolved into an ongoing argument they’d been having for the last two days. Taylor refused to back down, to admit that her father might have had a point. She shouldn’t be doing this herself, but she still wasn’t even sure she wanted to be a cape, never mind joining a team, and her father seemed insistent that she choose one or the other.

Her father was worried, and she understood that. She could tell that he didn’t want her to be a hero at all, and he was utterly convinced that she was desperate to be one. Taylor found herself angrier that he didn’t seem to believe her when she said that she herself wasn’t entirely certain what she wanted. She was strong, and she could help people, but from what she’d seen the cape life chewed up heroes and spit them out. Mousy and Victoria were perfect examples of what this sort of life did to people her age. But her dad wouldn’t believe her. Every time she trained a bit too hard, he’d confront her about it. The Bank incident and her poor state in the wake of healing Amy had both unsettled her father, and she wasn’t sure how she could make him understand.

The sound of the door below her opening followed by a truck door slamming and her Father’s ageing truck rumbling off toward the docks made her rather glad that she’d avoided getting into trouble. She didn’t think having her first cape fight broken up by her dad grounding her would be a great start to her career. Taylor rested her chin on her knees quietly and considered just dropping back down and going inside, but the setting sun made her ache for something beyond the cluttered basement of her house, or the backyard. She had been about to dig out her phone and message Amy or Sabah when a flicker in the corner of her vision drew attention.

When she glanced to the side and saw Jolee standing there, staring at the sunset as well, she tensed up. They’d spoken about the training that she needed, but she hadn’t committed to doing it yet, the idea of exploring her emotions wasn’t appealing to her in the slightest. When the dark-skinned ghost merely looked at her, she frowned at the idea of the ghosts reading her thoughts, and she finally stood.

“Fine. Let’s go.” The man stared her for a moment, his whiskered face quirking into the hint of a smile before he turned and leapt toward the nearest roof. Taylor stared after him, watching as he jumped from roof to roof heading north-west. Taylor moved to follow, using the force to augment her abilities and she leaped along ghosting over each roof before leaping to the next, covering distance faster then most cars could. Despite the distance, Taylor wouldn’t have much time to think as the ghost seemed to be headed for the woods that dotted the base of the mountain near Captain’s hill. When the spirit leapt off the last roof and then dashed toward the forest on the ground, Taylor followed, pushing herself to keep the ghost in view.

She lost sight of Jolee, though how that was possible, she didn’t know, but she eventually found a small clearing that the Jedi was waiting in. Taylor stood at the edge of the clearing before slipping in carefully and moving to face Jolee. The old Jedi stood in a relaxed pose, watching Taylor as she caught her breath after the exertion, merely observing as if he couldn’t see every thought that she had.

“Meditate.” The word was given quickly and brusquely, and Taylor started before looking for a place to sit. “Not like that. With the movements. Do the exercises you do in the park and meditate.” Taylor stared curiously at Jolee before shifting into her starting position. She started to move, flowing from one pose to the next, Taylor let herself sink into the art, mind focusing on which pose came next, which attack she needed to do. With the focus, her consciousness started fading into the force as she moves through the Kata. Taylor’s body relaxed a bit as the tiny seed of anger in the
pit of her stomach finally began to shrink away.

“Faster.” The man’s voice was cool and Taylor grit her teeth a bit but accelerated the movements, shifting between forms faster, her focus tightening as she felt more than saw his presence moving around her, seemingly observing her movements. “Bastila’s been training you to use the force. She’s never once claimed to be teaching you to be a Jedi. Do you know why that is Taylor?” His voice wasn’t sarcastic, or smug, but Taylor felt her hackles rising at the calm, serene tone.

“It’s because you can’t be a Jedi.” Taylor nearly turned on the Jedi, but his barked commands kept her moving. “Keep Moving!” As Taylor moved with more force, her movement becoming harsher and firmer. “There is a reason we take children to become Jedi; it’s partly because it’s easier to mould them into ‘proper’ Jedi to help them think as they should, but more of it is the connections. Attachments are dangerous, Taylor; they can lead so easily to the dark side.” Taylor tensed up and gritted her teeth as her punches and kicks became more vicious, anger bubbling under her skin as she desperately tried to control it.

“Your connection to your father is a source of great strength at times, but at other times it erodes your control. Like now. ‘Real’ Jedi wouldn’t feel this conflict you feel, wouldn’t let it erode their control. They are stern, firm. Arguments breed discord, and that can’t be allowed.” The girl continued her motions as she pressed the angry feelings down, held them restrained, eyes glaring at the stump in the center of the clearing. Punch, Punch, Kick, Spin, Flip, Punch, Kick. Over and over, motion to motion motions sharper and more precise as she tried to tune out that voice that wouldn’t stop whispering into her ear. “And there’s more, worse connections... Like, Emma.” The words stabbed into Taylor’s head, and her tenuous grasp slipped, and she released her pose, spinning.

“I don’t want to talk about Emma.” Taylor’s voice was low and dangerous, and Jolee stared at her quietly.

“Why not?” At the growl from Taylor, Jolee continued, his casual disinterest almost palpable as he stared at Taylor. “Do you not think she affected you, still affects you, even to this day?” His eyes followed as Taylor spun and stormed away from him, and when the image flickered back in front of her, Taylor’s entire form tensed up more.

“She’s in my past, I’d rather leave her there, she doesn’t have anything to do with my present. It’s the Jedi way, isn’t it?”. Her voice was a mix of pleading and sarcastic at this point, and Jolee considered her as if tempted to let the matter drop.

“You don’t think she affects your present Taylor? She betrayed you. Do you think she knew?” His voice was calm as he spoke, and Taylor’s eyes narrowed on him. “Those concerns you had crying in that camp that you didn’t want to go to? When you came back from that summer so very desperate to see your only friend. You’ve only ever missed someone like that once before, and she left you too. Do you think it’d even matter to her?” Taylor’s fists clenched as she spun away from Jolee the words stabbing into her mind, dredging up feelings that she’d long ignored. “You think that things like this don’t affect you, Taylor?"

“It’s my past. I’m better now, I-.” Taylor cut off, biting on her lip as she felt the anger and hurt swirling within her, and the girl clenched her fists as she looked for an escape. She shifted and ducked back the way she came, leaving Jolee behind her only to see him in front of her once again, his expression piercing.

“You what? Do you think you are better now, Taylor? That you ignored it for long enough and now that you’ve got powers it doesn’t matter. Do you think that you can run from your past? That just
because she’s incapable of hurting you physically, that she can’t emotionally? Do you think that sight of her wouldn’t still stab deep into you.” Jolee’s voice was cold, and Taylor glared angrily at him, tears pricking at the corner of her eyes. Part of her ached to lash out, to hurt him to make him stop. She kept a tense control of herself, shaking as she stood as still as she could. "Being a Jedi doesn’t mean that you’re better than anyone, Taylor, it just means that you get better sticks to vent your frustration."

Jolee stepped to the side, and Emma stepped up from behind the man. Taylor knew, deep down, that it wasn’t real. She knew that Emma wasn’t here, couldn’t possibly be here, but everything in her screamed out at the perfect image of Emma, the girl’s arms crossed behind her back and that friendly half smile on her face. She stepped up and smiled broadly, seeing Taylor, and something inside of Taylor surged with warmth at the expression resting on her.

A swirl of colour in front of Taylor resolved itself into the back of Sophia’s head, with its dark hair hanging over her defined back and dark shoulders. Sophia walked over, moving to stand next to Emma, both of them grinning and speaking energetically to each other. Then as one, they both seemed to notice Taylor and their expressions fell, the warmth melting away to reveal scorn and dislike. Emma’s expression was haughty and mocking, Sophia’s disinterest almost palpable until Emma leaned over and whispered just loud enough for Taylor to hear.

“Did you know that she…” Was as far as the image got, Taylor’s tentative grasp on her darker emotions snapped, and she lashed out, the force propelling her forward, fist aimed at the redheaded girl’s head. The punch connected and sent Emma spinning head over heels across the clearing to land tangled in a bush. Sophia lunged back with an aborted scream, her expression shocked and angry.

“What the f-” The comment cut off as Taylor slammed her forearm into the girl’s throat the words ending in a wet gurgle. Taylor stared up at the other girl’s dark eyes, watched them widen in fear before curling her hand around under her arm that rested on Sophia’s throat. She held her fingers out and released a blast of Force Lightning that set the girl screaming in such a familiar way as she was tossed across the clearing to smash against a nearby tree with a sickening thud. Taylor reached out and aimed her hand at a nearby stump, the darkness in her swelling with delight as she ripped the stump from the ground and moved to throw it in Emma’s direction.

Taylor’s blood was singing as she exulted in the power and then she froze. Unable to move she stood there, the Stump floating over Emma’s broken form, Sophia laying slumped against a nearby tree with glazed eyes staring back at Taylor. The girl crowed in her mind as she struggled to move and then the rush began to ebb, began to wane, and everything slammed back into her. Disgust hit her like a literal wave, and she let her gaze focus on Emma’s broken body on the ground and suddenly everything shattered, the illusion vanishing as Taylor lunged across the untouched clearing ending up on her knees by the clearing’s edge, vomiting noticeably over the ground, retching over and over as she emptied her stomach.

When her heart stopped racing, she turned to find Jolee sitting on the stump in the middle of the clearing, the man’s entire countenance changed. He slumped against the wood with a heavy weariness about him; his expression was understanding.

“\indent The dark side isn’t as fun when you have to come down off it and stare at the result of your darkness. This sort of thing is why most Jedi fall so hard. They can’t handle the consequences of their actions, and more than that, they can’t anticipate the results of their choices. They think they can take on the darkness without truly falling to it, and when people get in their way bad things happen.” Taylor staggered toward him, staring up at the ghost quietly. When he gestured for her to
take a seat, she complied, sitting uncomfortably and staring up at the spirit.

“Do you know what the point of that was Taylor?” He stared at her quietly, and Taylor flinched as she sat back on haunches, her shoulders shrinking down. She glanced at the Jedi for a few moments, her thoughts swirling around as she briefly considered the possible lesson he could have been trying to impart. About how far she had to go to be a Jedi, how terrible her control was. She was still mulling over her failing when the man stood and let out a sigh, moving to kneel before her, staring her in the eye.

“I’m going to tell you something, Taylor, that I wish someone had told me.” He stared her in the eyes and leaned down, gently gripping her shoulders. She blinked and stared up into his dark eyes, watching him nervously. The man watched her quietly before speaking softly. “You’re doing a good job. Considering the amount of shit that you’ve had to deal with, you’re doing amazing. No one could expect any better of you.” She blinked and flushed at the compliment, glancing away.

“B-But I-” She glanced over where the images of the two girls had been, and he’d chuckled. She turned back to him and frowned. “I- I thought that Jedi had to be-” She spoke nervously, pausing when he gently waved her off and sat opposite her.

“Taylor, I think you’ll find that Jedi, especially good ones, are rarely one thing.” The man stared down at Taylor, and when she nodded, he continued.

“Me, for example. I was raised as a child by the Jedi Order on Coruscant.” As he spoke the clearing around them changed, showing the grand halls of the Jedi Temple on Coruscant before its sacking. “I was a brash and wild as a youngling, and even worse as a padawan. I went through many Masters, and few could keep me under control.” More images flickered of training and a young black man’s furious arguments with men in ornate robes.

“I often ended up going on adventures of my own since I found training to be boring and restrictive. One such adventure happened to involve a good friend of mine. We discovered that a system had been sealed off by its King. The system and its people were starving. So we styled ourselves up as pirates, stole a ship, stole a whole lot of food from rich people that didn’t need it and went about feeding the people. While we were doing this, we were shot down.” He chuckled. “We survived, and we even became friends with the captain that shot us down. Her name was Nayama, and I later married her.” At Taylor’s look, she chuckled.

“It wasn’t ‘common,’ but it wasn’t banned either at the time. So I married her, and when I discovered that she was force sensitive, I trained her. Taught her to use the force despite only being a Padawan myself. We were happy until another Jedi fell. Exar Kun turned to the dark side and began drawing other Jedi to his side, including my wife.” He stared at Taylor, watching her mull this over.

“The dark side feeds off itself, Taylor, it twists emotions, even good ones. Irritation becomes anger; anger turns to rage, then hate. My wife loved me, and the dark side in her twisted that. She came to me and tried to convince me to turn away from the light and to join her. And when that didn’t happen, she attacked me. We fought a duel.” Taylor glanced up as the images around the clearing shifted again to show a young black man and a young woman with red and blue blades dancing around, battling each other with the glowing swords. The man was better by many factors, and he soon brought her to her knees but then hesitated.

“I couldn’t do it. The connection I felt kept me from doing what I needed to do, and I let her go.” The images shifted to show that same woman in a battle from a distance, carving a path of
wanton destruction through an entire field of fighting sith and Jedi. “And she killed so many more after I left her there. Someone else eventually put her down, and when it was all said and done I put myself before the Jedi and sought punishment, or atonement and they offered me a promotion. Sorry about the death of your wife Padawan; we feel you’re ready to be a knight.”

“I was so angry at them. the Council, the galaxy, everything that I’d tried and failed to protect.” Taylor watched as Jolee shook his head. “I wanted to be punished, and they didn’t get it, they thought that I’d learned my lesson. Instead, I went into voluntary exile. I would have never used my powers again if I could have, but I lived a dangerous life, and I was never given that option. I moved on as best I could, kept myself separate from the Jedi until Bastila and her husband to be showed up, demanding my help with some fools errand. I joined up expecting to die, and we won.” He shook his head and hummed before continuing.

“Do you know why I’m telling you this, Taylor?” When the girl shook her head, he slid to his feet and crouched near her. “I spent nearly thirty years after the loss of my wife dealing with that pain, and it never completely goes away. It always hurt, but bottling it up and refusing to speak of it? It made it worse. Imagine how you’d feel if that scene had been real.” He gestured to the clearing.

“You’ve got great power in you Taylor, but you need control to keep from losing yourself in it. We’re going to do this often, and you’re going to talk about how you feel because bottling up everything you feel isn’t going to work. And you can’t just talk to you, Taylor. You need to tell your Father at least part of what’s going on and explain yourself to him. This... This cold war that you have going on? It’s not doing either of you any favours.” Taylor studied him quietly before letting out a tired sigh.

It’d been one of the less pleasant chats of her life, but when Taylor left the forest she felt...lighter. Like a part of the darkness that had been weighing her down had lifted. She walked back toward the houses, waiting till she was in the city streets before using her force powers to get to the rooftops, jumping to the roof of a squat bungalow before jumping onto a larger house and then making her way up onto the roof of a store and then making her way east toward the Docks.

As she headed toward home, Taylor’s movements slowed, and she glanced to the south, watching the moonlight ghosting off the tall windows of the large building downtown. Something whispered in the back of her mind about the view, and she found herself heading that way instead of home. She didn’t want to deal with another fight with her dad, and the light of the moonlight on the glass was rather pleasant. Taylor had been moving past the college when she first heard the scuffle. She paused on a building and glanced down, frowning when she saw a man with a shaved head accosting a woman with a knife, trying to get her purse. Taylor considered moving on, but the woman’s terrified cry saw her reaching out, using the force to slam the poor goon into the wall with enough force to daze him. She grinned when the woman, instead of running screaming, merely glanced around and delivered a kick to the goon’s side before rushing off.

Feeling good Taylor quietly hopped along a few roofs, checking to see if anything was going on, a tiny surge of guilt washing through her. She wasn’t a cape. She was just...nudging things helpfully; no one could get mad about that. She moved through the small residential district coming to a stop on top of the roof of a store of some sort, resting on the edge and letting her legs hang as she enjoyed the view of the moonlight bouncing off the various reflective buildings. As she sat there, she thought of going home, and when that didn’t seem like a good idea, she drew out her phone. She considered
texting Amy, but the girl hadn’t responded to her last text yet, and instead, she scrolled down to Sabah’s name, quickly clicking on it and typing.

{Hey, Sabah. You busy?} The words were sent into the void and Taylor set her phone into her lap, resuming her quiet inspection of the moonlight on the building opposite her. She slowly swayed her legs as she considered the building, rubbing quietly at her chin. The silence lingered until her phone dinged.

{At work, nearly done. What’s up?} The response was quick, and Taylor studied her phone for a few moments before letting out a sigh.

{Had a fight with my Dad, kinda didn’t want to hang around. Do you wanna hang out or talk or something?} The text sailed off, and Taylor was surprised when the response came back immediately.

{I’m just getting off, you can meet me at home?} The girl sent the message before sending another with her address. Taylor considered it for a few moments before quickly sending an assent and then resting quietly. Sabah would need time to get off work and make it home, and getting there before she did would be suspicious. Taylor spent nearly fifteen minutes watching the moonlight on the buildings before getting back to her feet and glancing around, trying to orient herself.

Taylor briefly debated with herself about just going home, before moving and gently leaping across the street, landing on a small apartment building between two large office buildings and walked along through the back streets away from the Financial district. Taylor watched the niche shops and ran down stores drift past beneath her as she leaped from building to building, her eyes narrowed, wondering just where Sabah worked, and if she’d given the woman enough time to make it home.

As she was hopping along, she saw a green shape suddenly burst above the roofline of an abandoned warehouse, wave at her and then vanish out of sight. The image repeated several times, and she paused, staring in confusion.

‘Is that…’ Jolee’s voice was a surprise, Bastila usually slipped out when the others weren’t active, but Taylor merely nodded.

‘A wacky waving inflatable arm flailing tube man? Yeah.’ Taylor shook her head as she hopped across the few buildings, coming to a stop on the roof of an abandoned warehouse, standing on the lip and staring down at the back alley, watching the figure in white that stood next to the giant Giraffe backing nervously away from a half dozen goons in armour with lances. Taylor blinked as she considered what kind of weirdos ran around in period costume accosting strange doll-like girls.

Taylor remained in place, watching the interaction with fascination, and when the Giraffe moved, she felt the surge of shock from Jolee that matched her own. The waving figure moved, lashing out and Taylor watched as it passed right through half the mooks in armour, the that long arms slapping the ground and sending stones scattering across the ground.

‘Some sort of Illusion?’ Jolee’s voice was fascinated, and Taylor found herself equally fascinated as she leaped along to the next building. She headed across the roof, jumping to another warehouse, coming around the other side of the open area, closer to the combatants. Too far to hear, but she could see that the girl was trying to speak with the armoured figures. When one lashed out and smacked her with its lance, the girl screamed, and Taylor reacted a surge of… something was washing up from deep in her chest.
She moved before she realized what she was doing, her sandaled feet clattering as she landed, drawing the attention of the seven figures, scattered around the empty yard. The doll girl stared over at her for a moment before turning back to the armoured figures.

“I don’t know what your boss wants from me. I’m not even a tinker; that’s just a rumour; I can only really control fabric and light things. I’m useless in a fight.” The girl’s voice held a tremor, and she glanced back at the girl, watching as she shrank back into herself before continuing.

“Just…” She glanced at the matching armoured figures and moved to speak softly. “Please just go, I’m not involved with any other gangs, I just want to live my life in peace.”

The armoured figured didn’t even seem to hear her, focused instead on Taylor. Taylor supposed it was understandable. She was in her casual clothes, and she had just dropped two stories to interrupt a cape fight. Taylor didn’t flinch back, striding out of the shadows and into the moonlight, staring curiously over at the armoured figures. Both of the capes seemed surprised by her lack of a mask and her comfortable loose clothes, and the man laughed mockingly before speaking.

“Nice jump there, girl, but you should get out of here before you hurt yourself.” When he had moved to turn his attention back on the blonde-haired doll, Taylor called out casually, dipping herself into the Force and drawing on her meagre skills with Dun Möch.

“She doesn’t seem interested, dude. It might be worth barking up a different tree. I’m sure it’s not the first time that a girl’s said that you weren’t their type.” Taylor winced when of the armoured figures tensed up and then all five turned to glare at her. She offered a friendly smirk and a wave, doing her best to look nonchalant.

“I warned you.” The man’s thick accent was tinged with anger, and one of the ghosts turned and charged at her, hefting up its lace like a baseball bat. Taylor shifted, augmenting her fortitude with the Force before swaying down under the swing and lashing out with a foot, she was satisfied with herself when the strike struck into the illusion’s leg, staggering it. She lashed out with a fist, smashing up into its elbow and freeing the lance which she knocked upwards with a knee.

As the lance spun in mid-air, Taylor moved, throwing herself into a vicious butterfly kick that drove one of her feet into the illusion’s head. The strike sent it skidding away, though it didn't seem to react in pain. She quickly leaped back from a swing from another ghost that had rushed to join the first, flipping over him entirely and snagging the lance from mid-air and lashing out with it at the other ghost. When the weapon passed through it to no effect, Taylor let out a curse, feeling the ghost’s lance slamming into her side and dragging painfully along it leaving a rather unpleasant burning sensation.

“How the fuck is that fair?” Taylor called out flipping back and away, springing off a trashcan to land on a fire escape on the back of the building. Breathing heavily, Taylor drew on the force to ignore her wound and to ignore the mocking laugh from the guy. She glanced his way to watch more and more spirits emerging from his body.

‘Okay. So. I can hit them, but nothing else can. Just. Stop the big guy, right?’ Taylor lunged away from the fire-escape and spirits that were floating up toward it, springing from window to window before launching off the wall, lance in hand, aiming at the guy. When he saw her, he lunged to the side and Taylor cursed as the spirits around him dragged him away before surging after her as she hopped away.
Taylor ducked around the side of a building, trying to catch her breath. She touched her side, wincing as the fingers came away bloody and peered at the corner, watching as the ghosts came at her through the actual stone, and she cursed, dancing away as a lance traced a line of fire along the small of her back that she barely managed to dodge with the force.

‘Jolee, how the fuck can they see me. They don’t have god-damn eyes, and they can see me through walls. If he can’t fucking see me, how can they?’ Taylor leaped to the top of a nearby dumpster, springing off the escape and barely snagging the edge of a building, dragging herself up and rolling away as a ghost sprung the roof below her and lashed at her with the lance. Taylor got her feet under her and ran, ducking past the battered remains of air-con units, and using the force to keep the distance wide but the ghosts were spreading out, the guy on the ground trying to trap her among them.

‘If he’s not controlling them directly, maybe he’s got one of whatever we’re in, and that’s controlling them. Since it cannot physically see you, so it must sense you somehow. What has Bastila taught you about concealing yourself in the force?’ The man’s voice was deceptively calm, and Taylor supposed she could understand that since he wasn’t being chased.

‘I mean we touched on it once, it’s all about compressing your presence in the force to the point that nothing else can see you, right? She said that; if you’re focused enough, you can fool people, and with even more focus, you can affect non-living ‘eyes’ computers and camera’s.’ Taylor huffed at the feeling of being penned in, leaping over the gap of a building to get more room and cursing as a wave of ghosts erupted from the roof where she was about to land. Flipping, Taylor pointed both hands at the building and used her telekinesis to launch herself up and over the flailing spears, flipping again to land on her feet and charging on, cursing under her breath.

‘That’s not exactly a lesson, but okay.’ Taylor snarled as she ran, jumping and leaping, doing her best to split her focus between the force and trying not to die, and the power washed into her and Taylor wrapped it around her, focusing on the idea of being small, tiny, so small nothing could see her, nothing could sense her. Taylor continued to focus, turning all of her attention to it and slowing to a stop.

‘I’m so small that nothing can see me. I’m so small that nothing can see me.’ She continued the mantra in her head over and over, only opening her eyes when she realized that she had stopped running, and she wasn’t dead. She glanced around, keeping a tight grip on the force, watching the ghosts floating around the area looking around for her. Taylor stared in awe at the dozens and dozens of knights in mid-air lances hanging in confusion as they looked around for her.

---

Despite the general ineffectiveness of it, Sabah kept her power wrapped around the tattered remains of the advertising dummy that stood tall and wildly happy just to her left. She stared tiredly through her mask at Crusader. She blinked in confusion when the large armoured man winced and touched his head. The man muttered to himself as he glanced up and followed his gaze to watch the legion of armoured figures floating upwards and spreading out in confusion.

The ghosts drifted around for a moment before Sabah glanced back down to see the ‘Knight’ staring at her through the eyeslits of his helmet. His tone was laced with a smug amusement that made Sabah tempted to smash the doll down on him.
“I don’t know where your would-be rescuer went but considering that mover power of hers, she might have just dodged out before my ghosts could see.” The man shook his head before stabbing his lance into the dirt of the yard, crossing his arms over his chest and speaking casually.

“Since it seems like she won’t be if you’ll pardon the pun, your knight in shining armour, let’s get back to our discussion about your joining up.”

Parian felt her hands clenching as she glanced around, part of her was relieved that Taylor had left, she didn’t want her friend being hurt, but another part was terrified that she’d left her alone to this. That wasn’t even accounting for the parts of her that were confused about Taylor’s powers. The girl had been inhuman, moving in a blur at times and doing jumps and flips that had seemed impossible. She’d dismantled one of the Crusader clones with almost laughable ease.

When he coughed, The doll cape glanced up to see the disinterested look in Crusader’s eyes becoming more dangerous. She saw the ghosts shifting focus and descending around her, she imagined their faces behind the masks, all of them staring dangerously at her through the gloom. She nervously shifted in place until her eyes widened at the sight of a dirty and bleeding Taylor flickered into view at Crusader’s left.

The man must have seen her eyes cause he glanced over, and tried to speak, but Taylor moved, her dirt and blood caked form winding up and slamming a crumbling brick into the side of his helmet hard enough to dent the metal. Taylor watched him crumple and stared at the ghosts looming around and sinking in on them, she cocked her head to the side, held a hand in the armoured figure’s directing and he seemed to lift off his own accord before Taylor gestured and his body slammed back into the ground with a meaty thump. This caused all of the spirits scattered around the yard to flicker out as one. Taylor stared around, swaying on her feet.

“Huh. Th-That was harder, then I was expecting.” The words were low and weary, and Parian couldn’t help but be reminded about the times she’d said something similar about a particularly challenging concept in a book, and she moved closer.

“Are you alright?” She spoke softly in the affected tone she used to conceal her identity when in the mask and Taylor stared at her strangely, studying her for a moment. She opened her mouth as if to ask a question, but she staggered forward instead, nearly ending up her knees before swaying drunkenly back to her feet.

“I think... I think I’m bleeding.” She stared down at herself and began to fall once more, and Parian swooped in, catching the girl and wincing at the low moan of pain that emerged from the younger girl.

“You need a hospital.” She said her voice responding without her affectation, and she winced when Taylor’s tense form relaxed against her.

“Sabah. I saved some crazy capes life. She looked like a doll and was using a wacking wav- wacky wav- A tube man. It was weird.” Her words were light, and she was breathing heavily. “I d-don’t need a hospital. I-I J-Just need to sleep.”

“Taylor! C’mon, don’t fall asleep yet. You’re really hurt; we need to get you to a doctor before you sleep.” She’d not seen the girl hit her head, but she didn’t think that letting her pass out would be a good idea.

“Don’t need a doctor.” Taylor’s voice was thick with exhaustion, and she shifted. “M’Magic. Just
needa sleep and I’ll heal. Was shoved in a locker and nearly died and I healed from that, easy. Just need.” Taylor’s words became less coherent, and she started to slump against Sabah. The girl watched her quietly and frowned. Taylor was a cape and if she didn’t want a hospital, she wouldn’t out her. She shifted, trying to pull the girl up to carry her and sighed as Taylor’s weight slumped heavily on her.

It’d been a chore to get the girl here. She lacked the upper body strength to actually carry the taller girl in any fashion besides an odd limping piggyback, and it’d taken almost twenty minutes. Half a dozen times on the painstaking trip back to her apartment Sabah considered just setting Taylor down and calling an ambulance, but each time the soft, comfortable breathing on her cheek caused her to firm up and push through. Eventually, though, she managed to make her way back to her tiny apartment.

When she finally got Taylor up the stairs and into her place, she had enough strength to deposit the girl on her couch. She took a moment to check Taylor’s breathing and pulse, inspecting the wounds on her side and back to see that they’d both stopped bleeding. With a sigh she left Taylor to rest, vanishing into the bedroom to change out of her costume, and returning after a shower dressed in a pair of track pants and a t-shirt that served as nightwear.

Sabah considered the other woman as she made herself a cup of tea in her apartment’s tiny kitchen, sitting in one of the wooden chairs and staring at the slumbering Taylor. She’d been her first attempt at a regular friend, and apparently, that hadn’t even worked. When the kettle whistled, she moved, taking her cup and adding a tea bag to it, boiling water was poured over, allowing the tea to steep. The woman would study the dark liquid deep in thought, before adding milk and honey. She considered Taylor and frowned at the relaxed and unguarded look on her face. She seemed so at peace, and it made her realize how nervous and cautious Taylor was around her when they had their study dates.

The Basrah born woman sighed deeply, sipping wearily at her tea. Taylor had been amazing, but she clearly wasn’t a ‘cape.’ There was no costume or disguise. She’d just dropped out there in her damn jogging clothes and tried to break up the fight. Sabah shook her head, amused at the nobility of it, having no doubt that Taylor could be like that. She was reminded of the girl’s furious debates about inequality and exploitation, rolling her eyes at her own blindness.

The girl spent every day studying Psychology, Philosophy, History, and Law with bents on the Parahuman and she hadn’t even considered the possibility that Taylor could be a Parahuman as well, merely focused more on seeming disinterested enough not to be suspicious as she made mental notes about things to check up on. As she finished her tea, she flipped out the lights, disposing of her cup. When a nudge to the dark-haired girl didn’t rouse her, Sabah left Taylor to rest with a shake of her head. Grabbing a blanket and pillow from the linen closet, gently tucking the other girl in before heading to bed. They could have the difficult conversations in the morning when they were both rested.

Chapter End Notes
[Original A/N: Hrm. I like this chapter, but it was hard to write, it sets up a lot, but I'm not sure how well it flows. I might have to come back to it later. Thoughts? Also. This is the second last chapter of arc 2. There's one more that's going to be the aftermath of all this, and then I'll probably get the interludes going. Those will be shorter, and as they go out, I'll be going back over 1 and 2 to shore things up. So that's good.]]

[[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

I thought that I'd need to change more than this, but I sort of just tweaked Jolee and Taylor’s chat to make it more about him explaining that Jedi could be different, and less about ‘You need to get your shit together or else you’ll murder everyone, with a small dollop of the dark side can be bad, and you shouldn’t constantly dwell on the bad shit. Not bad, and that just leaves us one last chapter to deal with, huzzah.

Also, removed the coincidental meeting and had Taylor just text her friend cause she was feeling shitty, cause that makes more sense and doesn't make torac grumpy.

UPDATE DATE: 05-22-2019]]
Chapter Summary

[[Fuck it! Two chapters since I'm off. I'm gonna take a few days off here, as I work on cleaning up what we've got so far, but I'll be active in the forum here, and we'll see our first Interlude by Friday! READ TO THE END FOR DETAILS ON WHAT'S TO COME.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 17th, 2011
Downtown/Docks South Border, Brockton Bay

Taylor wasn't sure if it was the persistent buzzing of her phone or the nagging pressure in her bladder that first pulled her from the soft, warm place into which she had drifted off, but ultimately it was the latter that forced her out of that beautiful cocoon to face the dawning day.

Immediately, she was aware of two things. Firstly, she wasn’t in her bedroom, the textured pattern on the ceiling was completely different, then she was used to, and the entire place smelled wrong. The subtle aroma’s of cinnamon and lavender were undoubtedly pleasant, but Taylor wasn’t sure her father knew of any fragrance that wasn’t pine, cedar, or musk. Thinking of her father, Taylor dipped her hand down, snagging the vibrating phone from her pocket, and lifting it to stare at it.

‘9 am. Fifteen missed calls. 12 missed messages.’ Taylor groaned and dropped her phone against her face, slowly sitting up. The thick quilt that had been draped on her pooled around her waist. Taylor stared down at her destroyed shirt, taking in the great rents and blood spatters over her left side, and along her back. She carefully pulled up the fabric a bit, finding long thin lines under the shirt to show where the cuts had healed. Taylor slipped out of the blanket and got her feet under her. Staring down at her socks, she glanced around, noting her shoes by the door and breathing a sigh of relief. She moved around the space of the living room, curiously looking for hints of where she was.

It was the familiar sketchbooks and textbooks on the desk in the corner of the room that told Taylor who’s couch she’d ended up on. ‘Sabah?’ Taylor thought curiously as she glanced around. She remembered training with Jolee; she remembered wandering the city to avoid going home right away and finding the mugging. Texting Sabah and heading toward her, and then the altercation between… The duplicator and the doll girl. She’d won, and she’d collapsed against… ‘Bastila, Jolee? What happened?’ Taylor frowned at the reluctance that washed over the link, and she sighed softly when no one chimed in, turning to carefully pull open one of Sabah’s textbooks, inspecting the homework that had been stuffed haphazardly into it.

Finding a half completed essay in Sabah’s handwriting on psychology, she curiously opened the book to keep the page, carefully removing the paper, and scanning it. Seemingly a treatise on the underlying psychology of various local superstitions, Taylor hummed quietly in thought as she grabbed a nearby pen and made a few notes on a separate piece of paper, quietly jotting down the
title of a book that she’d read and a few tips about structure and layout. She’d gotten so engrossed in her work that she didn’t notice the presence lingering behind her until someone leaned in close and whispered into her ear.

“Taylor, what’re you doing with my homework.” Taylor was so shocked by the arrival that she nearly leaped out of Sabah’s desk, spinning on the chair and putting a hand over her heart.

“Jesus Christ, Sabah, don’t sneak up on me like that. You were sleeping, and I uh.” She shrugged as she handed the notes over. Finally robbed of the distraction, Taylor’s bladder was finally able to make its displeasure known and Taylor hopped to her feet. And scooted past the reading Sabah, vanishing into the bathroom to deal with her biological imperatives.

“Taylor.” The voice drifted through the door as Taylor was tidying herself up and washing her hands. She heard the sound of someone leaning against the wall next to the door, and Sabah’s voice called in over the running water. She paused and glanced at the door listening as Sabah called through it.

“You put a note here that says, 'Perception' and 'Religion.' What’s that all about?” Taylor snorted softly and opened the door casually, peering out. She stood there staring at Sabah, and she felt the tension in the air between them ramp as she waited for Sabah to ask about her powers, and if she was a cape, but when it didn’t come she looked closely, and she saw the tension in the other girl, finally figuring out that Sabah seemed to be dreading that conversation just as much as she was.

“There’s a lot of religious texts on the dangers of superstition and mythology; it could help you make some relevant points up here about the difference between fact, faith, and the mysterious unknown. Otherwise, that point you try to make is kind of weak?” She shrugged as she glanced down at her damaged top. She gave Sabah a once over and hummed.

“Silly question but I don’t suppose you’ve got a t-shirt or something loose enough to fit me? I’d rather not deal with the cops or anyone as I walk home.” Taylor blinked quietly as the diminutive girl gave her a curious once over, cheeks darkening a bit before she glanced at her room.

"Maybe.” Taylor ignored the smaller girls curious look before she disappeared into her room, returning a few minutes later with two different shirts that were hilariously over-sized for Sabah herself. Taylors inspected the shirts, one seemed to have been from a fundraiser of some sort and would be extra long on Taylor, the and the ornate design was a bit wild, the palm-tree and beach themes a bit out of place. The other was a button-down shirt that would still be large on Taylor, but she grabbed it anyway.

Vanishing back into the bathroom and locking the door she set to work swapping shirts and tucking the bottom into her sweatpants. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than blood. She quickly borrowed a hair tie, securing her hair into a messy ponytail and coming out to find Sabah sat at her desk, apparently nose deep in her book. Taylor moved over and peered down at the girl, watching as Sabah made the structural changes to her essay that Taylor had suggested.

“The book I wrote down is about historical superstitions that were tied into psychological disorders, things like the full moon driving people crazy. It might be relevant? It’s got a fair bit of the subject you want, and you could use some of the anecdotes from it in your essay depending on how much of a sense of humour your professor has.” Taylor backed off and then moved to head for her door, snagging her shoes and slipping them on. When Sabah noticed her leaving, she was surprised at the girl’s comment.
“I’m uh, probably not hitting up the library today, I’ve got a few books to smash through, did you wanna grab coffee instead?” Taylor paused and considered. She wasn’t exactly looking forward to going home, and she could do with something in her stomach.

“Yeah, I’m pretty busy today, too, coffee sounds great.” She considered herself, patting herself down and feeling the wallet in her pants. She glanced over at Sabah and nodded, and she waited, while the other woman got dressed for the day. Fifteen minutes later saw them walking the border of Docks South and Downtown, headed toward a small cafe that’d be open at this hour. “My wallet even survived that little adventure.”

When they arrived, Taylor took a seat, and Sabah vanished to collect their drinks. While the other girl was gone, Taylor stared at her phone, curiously inspecting it. After taking a steadying breath, Taylor finally unlocked the device, flipping through the menu’s to get to the notifications. The first dozen were from her Dad; they’d started around an hour after she’d left the house. The texts had initially been angry, and then they’d got more furious as the night crept on, finally shifting into fear in the early hours of the morning. Taylor quickly typed out a message to him, telling him that she was okay and that they’d speak when she got home.

Flipping through her contacts, she sighed, noting the concerned messages from Carol and Amy both who had both asked if she was alright and where she was. Both of the women had offered in their own ways to assist, Amy commenting that Taylor could hide out in her hospital room if she needed, and Carol had offered in their own ways to help her speak with her dad. Touched at the sentiment, Taylor quickly shot off a reply to both briefly explaining that there had been an incident and she’d been away from her phone for a few hours. The sound of cups being set down drew Taylor’s attention, and she glanced up to see Sabah sitting opposite her holding some sort of foamed beverage.

Taylor curiously lifted her mug and sniffed finding it to be a latte of some sort. She inhaled and then took a sip, frowning at the acrid taste, Taylor curiously lifted an eyebrow at Sabah.

“You mentioned that your mother often drank hazelnut lattes.” She gestured to the mug and Taylor took a second deeper sip and smiled softly, savouring the warmth in her hands. As she sat there, Taylor watched Sabah, and she tilted her head. She briefly wondered why the other girl hadn’t brought up the night before, she considered asking herself but decided that an open-air cafe in the middle of the street wasn’t the place to have that kind of conversation. Sabah, though, was the one that broke the silence, finally having consumed half her beverage.

“So. You’re working on studying for finals as well? I’ve got like six more chapters to read for Psychology, and it’s not even my major. That plus another whole section to review in design, and I’ve got to put the finishing touches on my final projects.” Sabah sighed melodramatically as she slumped against the table. Taylor chuckled, and it drew the other woman’s gaze.

“I don’t even know how you do it, you’re at the library reading most days and you never take notes, but you seem perfectly calm about your tests. What’s your major anyway? I’ve seen you spread out wide, but I’m guessing it’s Psychology or Pre-med with a minor in Parahuman studies?”

“Major?” Taylor paused, blinking as she shifted in her chair. “Er...Sabah, I’m not in university.” She shifted nervously in her chair, frowning as she considered. Her grades were improving, and this would be the year that she could do AP classes at the local university. If she could leverage a way to do the fall entrance exams, she could start attending a few lessons to keep Bastila happy and get her father off her back about being out of school all day. Her thoughts were interrupted when she glanced up to see Sabah staring at her in confusion.
“Are you doing an independent study? Or something like that?” Taylor frowned and shook her head, studying Sabah again and frowning quietly when it clicked in her head.

“Sabah, I’m uh, a bit young for University just yet. I’m Sixteen, Seventeen in two months.” She shrugged faintly as she noticed the shock on the woman’s face. “There was an incident at my school, I nearly died, and it allowed me to enroll in an online education course. But I tend to spring through it fast, so I end up doing my own work at the library.” Taylor frowned as she considered the other woman. “Why did you think I was in university?”

“Taylor, you’ve proofread half my Psychology assignments in the last two months, you’ve almost single-handedly gotten me a pass in the course, and you talk about things that fly over my head.” Taylor frowned, shrinking back in her chair at the almost angry tone from the other woman. She bit nervously at her bottom lip as she played with her phone, staring at her half-drank coffee. She stared at it and did what she could to avoid the other woman’s sharp gaze for a few moments before quietly pushing her chair back.

“S-Sorry for the mistake.” Taylor stood there awkwardly for a second. “Thanks for the coffee, I should uh...get back to things. See you around.” She glanced at Sabah, seeing the woman’s conflicting features and she moved to slip off, pausing to stand near Sabah. “Thanks for uh... well, everything you know.” She moved off quickly, though she still heard the woman behind her letting out a tired sigh.

---

‘10:02 am’ Taylor stared silently at her phone, letting her legs hang off the edge of the roof that she was perched on, staring at the truck sitting in the driveway of her house. Her father had called in sick; this wasn’t good. She quietly flicked into the phone, flipping through the two more requests from her dad to return home immediately, and curiously checked the messages from the others. Carol hadn’t responded, probably busy at work, Amy had sent a quick question about what sort of incident she’d been in, and Sabah’s number sat silent.

Taylor sighed faintly and glanced at the house, wondering just what she was going to do. It’d be then that a figure slid up next to her, worn brown robes coming into view as the older man took a seat with a soft grunt and let his legs hang next to Taylors, quietly watching the house across the street from her. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments, legs swaying in time before Jolee finally spoke.

“So, are you waiting to see if the entire house up and vanishes?” At her incredulous look, he offered her a smile. “It’s just a house, Taylor, and your father is just a man. You’ve got nothing to fear from him because he loves you.” Taylor glanced at him, and he smiled quietly.

“He’s your Father, Taylor; he'll forgive you because that's what love is. Just go tell him you're sorry.” Taylor frowned at the quote, shifting quietly. When she glanced up, she found Jolee had gone once more, and she let out a sigh.

‘Time to get this over with.’
Danny stared at his cellphone, and for the fifteenth time this morning, he resisted the urge to physically smash it against the wall. He’d broken his oath about his temper too many times this week already. He’d had a lot of time to think over the last two days, and this last night had been the worst. His daughter had been gone all night. He’d driven up and down the docks, listening for a fight, and apart from finding Leet and Uber sneaking out of yet another hidden warehouse as something in the background exploded, he hadn’t had much luck finding her. He’d eventually headed home and tried to call her. Call after call went to voice mail until the box was full of his angry blustering.

Then he texted her and then texted the only other number that he had. Carol had responded that both she and Amy had sent their own messages and try to get ahold of Taylor and that that hadn’t turned up anything either. He’d entertained the thought of calling the police and had been in process of doing so when the message came through. At first, he’d been relieved that she was okay, and then terrified at the contents of the message.

What could have happened that’d kept her from coming home, from even responding to his messages? He sat there staring at his phone as she continued to ignore his messages. His fingers clenched up as he gripped the phone, teeth gritting as he prepared to throw the stupid hunk of plastic at the nearby wall.

The front door opening with a creak saw him on his feet, leaving his phone in his wake. Heading toward the doorway, the man moved fast, clearing the entrance to the kitchen and passing down the hall to see Taylor standing there and kicking off her sandals in exhaustion. She turned to him, her hair wild and untamed and tied back in a messy ponytail. She was wearing a man’s shirt, and she seemed to be holding the shredded remains of another sweater. And there was blood on it. He stared at her, and a flash of rage went through him at the idea that she’d gone out and gotten into a fight. Then he saw her face, her eyes welling with tears as she stood there. He saw how tiny she seemed, framed in the doorway, and he felt his anger melt away. Danny stepped forward and scooped Taylor up in his arms, crushing her to his chest and holding her quietly. Taylor babbled at a mile a minute her rapid words dissolving into tears, entire sentences mushing together as she sniffled her way through a mess of names, and confusing facts. Danny found himself chuckling at the over a dozen sorry's mushed in with the rest. Danny let it go for a few minutes allowing Taylor to cry herself out before he gently set her down. When she bowed her head, Danny moved to use his hand to gently nudge her chin up, drawing her head up and gestured to the stairs.

“Go get cleaned up. I’ll get you some breakfast, and then we can talk.” He stared until she nodded and then watched her climb the stairs with a weariness around her that he was far too familiar with seeing in the mirror. The man turned and headed for the kitchen, quietly putting together a simple breakfast for Taylor. Scrambled eggs and toast were prepared with care, and when the girl joined him at the table, he set the plate before her. Watching with an amused smile as she voraciously devoured the food, he took a good look at Taylor’s face. She looked fine, but she’d looked fine two days after nearly killing herself healing Carol’s daughter.

“What happened last night, Taylor? Why didn’t you come home?” When his daughter glanced up at him and stared quietly at him, as if considering, he felt a flicker of irritation though it’d wane as she finally began to speak.

“I headed west, out of the city. I just had to...get away. I went and trained some in the woods near
Captain Hill. I was on my way back, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready to just come home, so I kept roof hopping around downtown. I uh, I was kind of upset, and I texted Sabah, asked if we could chat. As I was headed her way, I heard a woman get mugged, and I smacked her attacker into the wall with my powers.” When Danny gave her a look, she held up her hands. “No one saw me, I stayed on the roof, but she did kick him good, so I doubt she’ll tell.” Danny sighed but waved her on.

“I was hopping along afterwards, just, looking around and I came across this abandoned factory complex? There was a yard or something anyway and a bunch of factories. I was just exploring when I heard someone scream, and I saw two capes.” Taylor picked at her fingers, staring at the table and Danny, sighed heavily as she avoided his eyes. “There was this one with like, pale skin and blonde hair and she was cornered by this group of guys that I later found out was just one guy with clones. I was going to mind my own business, but he hit her.” She glanced up and flinched, and Danny felt his features smooth out.

“Your moth-” Danny started to speak, but Taylor didn’t let him finish, sighing softly.

“I’m not, Mom, dad.” The girl stared at him. “I. I’m not going to get dragged into this life as she did, I know that she used to be part of Lustrum’s gang.” Danny felt his mouth dry as he stared at Taylor, frowning as she picked through his concerns. “I can help people, dad. I went in there, and I had no idea what I was doing, and I got hurt, but I beat him, and… I want to help.” Taylor frowned at her hands, and Danny watched her closely.

“You’re right, you know.” When Taylor glanced up, he offered a tired smile as he adjusted his glasses. “What you did wasn’t really what your mother would have done. That seems like my own sort of play.” He shook his head tiredly as he leaned back in his chair, staring at Taylor. The pair studied each other, Taylor carefully finishing the last of her breakfast under Danny’s eyes. He was surprised when she started to speak.

“I’m gonna be a hero, I think.” His heart dropped a bit. “But not yet. I’m… I’m not ready to go by myself, I’ve still got so much to learn, and I’m not even sure who I want to work with.” Danny studied Taylor, briefly considering denying her what she wanted. She would be safer as a regular kid, and he’d breathe easier. But he saw the look in her eyes, and he knew that if he tried she’d just go around him, or wait till she turned eighteen and go and do it anyway to spite him.

“Fine. But you’ve got to start going to school.” Danny was surprised by the lack of rebellious look from his daughter, and she merely gestured that they’d talk about it later. Danny quietly adjusted his pose and stared at Taylor. He watched as she hunched in silently, her ‘planning’ face back in place. Rather than let her vanish into her head, he spoke. “So. For this, for you to become a hero. What do you need to do, what can I do to help?” He watched as she glanced up shyly at him and they started to quietly go over her training schedule, and Danny hunkered down, turning his mind to the plan, even offering a few tips.

Chapter End Notes

[[Original A/N: So this is the end of Arc 2. I'm going to go over everything I've posted thus far and cleaned it up grammar and spelling wise, and I might make minor tweaks to
the stories, and if I do I'll post an update post about changes that I've made, and I'll let you know what's different. Now, as for what you all get to look forward to. There's going to be Four Interludes this Arc. Interlude 1 is going to be Carol and Victoria, Interlude 2 is going to Sophia and Emma, Interlude 3 is going to be Amy and Resonance, and Interlude 4 is going to be Coil/Lisa.]

[[This post does contain a modified quote for Kotor II for the sake of crediting a source.]]

[[So! I've ninja updated this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I've edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Cleaned up the Taylor section, adjusted stuff with Sabah, brought everything in line with earlier changes, altered things so that it made more sense, but this chapter was already pretty clean, so it's not so bad.

UPDATE DATE: 05-22-2019]]
Interlude 2

Chapter Summary

[[The interludes are a bit shorter then chapters, but they're mostly about important bits of character revelations, and foreshadowing upcoming plot threads! All the others are finished and I've begun skimming through everything looking for any errors, Lots of minor tweaking but nothing major has changed yet!]]

April 17th, 2011
Dallon House, Brockton Bay

“Deep breaths, Carol. In and out, slowly.” Speaking softly to herself as she sat in her car, Carol rested her forehead against the cool leather of the steering wheel. Lifting her head, and glancing out at her driveway, Carol wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry or to smash something. Both ideas seemed like they might make her feel better, but neither looked like a great choice at the moment. Rather than doing either, she sat up, scrubbing at her face with her hands. When her phone chimed, she pulled it from her pocket, letting out a half-hearted smile as the message from Danny arrived.

{Taylor is fine, she’s home now, and we’ve spoken. She’s going to try to be a hero, she says.}

Letting out a relieved sigh, she carefully slid her phone away, moving to push open the car door. She grabbed her briefcase from the back of the car and shut the door before heading toward the house. As she ascended the steps, she drew out her keys, unlocking the front door and pushing her way inside into the entrance hall. The sound of something clattering to the floor upstairs preceded her daughter’s arrival at the second-floor landing of the main hall.

(Taylor is fine, she’s home now, and we’ve spoken. She’s going to try to be a hero, she says.) Letting out a relieved sigh, she carefully slid her phone away, moving to push open the car door. She grabbed her briefcase from the back of the car and shut the door before heading toward the house. As she ascended the steps, she drew out her keys, unlocking the front door and pushing her way inside into the entrance hall. The sound of something clattering to the floor upstairs preceded her daughter’s arrival at the second-floor landing of the main hall.

“Mom! How’s Amy doing? Is she with you?” The girl was floating in mid-air, as she spoke, and Carol was tempted to lecture her for flying in the house. Considering what they needed to discuss, she let it slide for the moment. When Victoria moved to glance past her, Carol let out a tired sigh rather than respond immediately. Shrugging off the jacket of her pantsuit, Carol hung it by the door and set her briefcase down. She used the tip of one foot to remove the other’s shoe, then reversed the process on the other. Carol let out a sigh of relief as her finally free toes wiggled and cracked. When she turned, Carol nearly shrieked as she found Victoria looming less than four inches from her, the girl floating in mid-air and peering out the door over her shoulder. The blonde girl’s eager expression turned to concern as she floated back a bit, her blue eyes staring at Carol. “Where’s Amy, Mom?”

Bowing her head and rubbing tiredly at her forehead, Carol took a few moments to collect her briefcase before gesturing for Victoria to follow her. She moved along the hall, continuing to not comment on her daughter’s ongoing flight in the house. She led Victoria toward her office and proceeded into the small professionally appointed room. Carol set her briefcase down on one side of her desk, before taking a seat behind it, staring at Victoria as the girl nervously joined her in the room, landing and taking a seat opposite her.

“Mom, Where’s Amy? What’d that-” When Victoria started to speak, Carol felt her temper flare and she held up a hand to silence her daughter. She took a second to get her temper under control before finally speaking.
“If you’re about to call my client a bitch again, Victoria, don’t. As it stands, Taylor is the only reason you’re not sitting in holding cell at PRT HQ sweating.” When Victoria moved to speak again, Carol held up her hand, giving her daughter the most severe look that she could. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in Victoria? How much trouble you’ve nearly got your sister into? The rest of New Wave?” At the gobsmacked looked from her daughter, Carol paused, taking a breath and continuing at a more normal volume.

“They have you on assault at the very least, Victoria. Signed statements from at least six criminals. Which isn’t even counting the number of civilians that saw you slap Taylor across a bank lobby.” Seeing the nervous look on her daughter’s face, Carol sighed softly. “Though I’m guessing that there were more, to be honest, that doesn’t matter at this point. Director Piggot just had to wait for you to screw up publicly as you did on Thursday.” She glowered at her daughter, watching Victoria shrink into her chair. “Do you have any idea what this would have done to New Wave? What it would have done to your sister? You dragged her into this and made her try and cover up your mistakes. That’s obstruction of Justice, at the very least, and having her force her healing on someone is grounds for her losing her medical license. And if the PRT pushed it, it could even be assault.” Each word seemed to strike at Victoria, and Carol watched her shrinking slowly into her seat. She watched as the girl’s expression hardened, and when she felt the subtle regret and nervous tension spreading through her she subtly tapped into her power, letting the tingle of her breaker state spread into her without actually transforming and the feelings evaporated.

“It was an accident.” The girl said holding the tattered remains of her dignity around her, and when she crossed her arms, Carol had to close her eyes and count backwards in ten to keep from screaming at her daughter.

“The first time is an accident, and there are protocols in place for that, Victoria. When you pass into the double digits, it’s a pattern of behaviour. You should have come to us the first time it happened and said you were having issues controlling your power. Did you even consider what this would do to the rest of the family? I’ve got a job, we would have survived, but this would have ruined your Aunt and Uncle.” Feeling her hands shaking Carol closed them carefully into fists, setting them on the table, and staring at Victoria.

“What does this have to do with that-” At her dark look, Victoria paused, frowning before sullenly changing her word choice. “What does Taylor have to do with any of this.” Carol gave Victoria a look, staring at her quietly before leaning back and speaking as she rubbed at her head.

“Director Piggot is exceedingly interested in getting Taylor into the wards and the Protectorate. Her powers are varied and surprisingly powerful. Apparently, The Protectorate's thinkers give better than even odds that she’ll eventually end up in New Wave.” Carol didn't mention that they also seemed terrified of the girl, and she didn't comment on the dirty look that ghosted over Victoria's face. "So when she called your Aunt and me into a meeting, she offered us one of two choices. We let you take the fall for this mess, and you’d probably take Amy with you, or we agree to PRT Affiliation for all of New Wave.” When Victoria lunged forward and opened her mouth, Carol gave her a blistering glare, staring her down until she sat back down.

“We obviously didn't agree to hand you over, and that means that we’re going to be working a lot closer with the local Protectorate. We'll be coordinating our patrols, and the younger members will be doing the same with the Wards. The Director has also suggested a few things in regards to you.” Before Victoria could even stand Carol shouted over her comments. “Your aunt and I both agreed when we’d seen the evidence.” Waiting until the girl returned to her seat rebelliously.
“You’ll not be allowed to patrol alone anymore. Period.” She stared at Victoria, watching her eyes narrow. “And before you get smart, You’ll also not be allowed to patrol with Amy. Again. Period.” Watching the disbelief on Victoria’s face wasn’t pleasant, but Carol pushed through. “They’ve agreed to allow you and Gallant to work together on a trial basis assuming you can remain professional in the field. Any slip-ups about his secret identity and you’ll be restricted from working with him as well.” Watching Victoria until the girl slumped and began to pick her fingers Carol let out a tired sigh.

“This isn’t all about you; your Aunt’s been considering something like this for a while. New Wave mostly runs on donations, and it’s been getting harder and harder to do that in the last few years. In exchange for all of this, the PRT has agreed to subsidize a lot of the costs, and they’re keeping your Aunt on as the nominal leader of New Wave in the way Armsmaster is in charge of the Protectorate and Ward members in Brockton Bay.” At the miserable nod, Carol sighed once more, leaning back in her chair.

“On top of the professional limitations, you’re grounded. Nowhere but here, school, training and patrols for the next month. If you don’t show improvement, that’ll be extended.” Carol spoke softly and watched Victoria nodded at her. She watched her daughter slip to her feet, moving toward the door. When Victoria paused there, she glanced over, waiting to see what she had to say.

“Where’s Amy mom?” Carol sighed softly before standing and glancing at Victoria.

“She had a bad reaction to Taylor’s healing and it sort of lead to us discovering something about her. She didn’t react well, and she needed some space. Your Aunt’s agreed to let her stay there for as long as she needs to. She said that she’d rather not see any of us for the moment. Since you’re both grounded, that won’t be a problem.” Carol stared at Victoria, sighing when the girl miserably launched herself down the hall, standing in the door of her office, watching Victoria bypass the stairs entirely, flying up out of sight, the sound of her door slamming in her wake apparent.

Carol’s mind drifted to Amy as well, leaning on the jamb as her mind replayed her own last visit with Amy. Listening as Amy brokenly explained everything that she’d been going through during the previous six months and then staring at her as if terrified of what she would say. The shock and nervousness on Amy’s face when she had merely drawn her daughter into a hug had stabbed at Carol. She had been confused, but it occurred to her that she couldn’t even remember the last time that she’d hugged Amy before that hospital visit. Victoria had always needed more attention, needed more support and affection. Amy had always been content to watch from the sidelines, and before she’d known if she’d let the girl think that she didn’t care about her. Carol had allowed her daughter to believe that she hated her. Silently, she resolved to do everything it took to help Amy recover, even if it meant doing everything required to keep her from having to confront Victoria before she was ready.

The hand on her shoulder was a shock and she glanced over to the see the worried features of Mark. She stared at him for a moment, watching the concern in his features, and before she could stop herself, her hands gripped his shirt, bunching up the fabric and she was dragging herself against his form and burying her face in his neck, the tears she’d been holding off for the last several hours pushing free. She felt him tense at the contact, and then those arms closed around, and the comforting touch of his hands dragging over her back as he murmured gently into her ear was all that she felt for a while.
Victoria yearned for the years of her youth where she could stomp up the stairs to her bedroom in a fit of pique, where she could slam her door and scream to let out her frustrations. Instead, she was trapped by her powers. Stomping on the floor would see her careening through it, slamming her door would reduce it to splinters. Instead, she flew gently into her room. She floated in mid-air in her room keeping her wrists to her hips, and her eyes clenched shut, her shaking body doing everything it could to contain the maelstrom of rage and hurt that she felt. She counted backwards from a hundred until her entire body didn’t feel like it was coming apart at the seams.

When her hands finally unclenched she reached out grabbing her phone. Seeing a new message notification, she eagerly unlocked her phone. Her shoulders slumped when swiping a finger over the face in a complicated pattern unlocked it, and Victoria found herself staring sadly at the four unanswered messages that she’d sent to Amy. With a sigh, Victoria gently lowered herself to perch on the edge of the bed, and carefully tapped out a message, her eyes staring at the screen hopefully.

{Amy, Mom said that you needed some space, what happened? She told me about the PRT finding out about the accidents. They weren’t too harsh on you were they? I’m sorry that I got you in trouble.} Taking a moment to stare at the message before sending it, Victoria watched the words sadly as they sat there for a minute, then two, then ten. Eventually she turned her attention to the other texts from her friends, responding to Dean, and the few other messages in her inbox. Dean’s responses were quick, and they struck up a conversation, eventually calling him, but nothing managed to draw her mind from the lack of response from her sister. The night dragged out, her parents ascending and heading to bed and still her phone was silent. Eventually, the girl set her phone down and drew out her laptop.

Logging into PHO, Victoria quickly checked the messages in her Cape and Private accounts. Finding nothing too unusual, she quickly skimmed through the half a dozen pages that she’d commented on herself before turning her attention to the rest of the forum. Eventually, slipped into the one forum post that she’d been avoiding, and she began to read about the bank heist. Gritting her teeth and ignoring the numerous comments about her stupidity and lack of care she skimmed through till they began discussing Taylor. Following links, she began to research the girl. The mods were especially vindictive about comments on the girl, but eventually, Vicky started to find more and more information, from the girl’s public triggering to sightings of her around the city. As she read a plan began to formulate in the back of her mind.
Interlude 3

Chapter Summary

[[ It was interesting trying to put myself into Emma and Sophia's heads for this. =] Lemme know what you guys think! ]]

April 20th, 2011

“You can’t do this.” Sophia’s voice was low and dangerous as she glared at the short fat woman across the desk from her. She felt the low hum of the rage in the back of her mind, and she imagined what it’d be like putting an arrow in the woman’s face to remove that smug little smirk. “We had a deal, I join the Wards, and you don’t send me to lockup.” Sophia felt her hands gripping the hardwood of the arms of her chair hard enough to make them creak.

“We’re not sending you Juvie.” The Director smirked casually over at her, and Sophia felt her blood boiling when the tiny fat woman set her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together. “We should be. We should be sending you to the deepest, darkest pit that we can find, but we can’t afford to do that. We’re in a very tentative position here, and that means that you get to get away with attacking that girl, with nearly killing her. And we’re going to ignore the numerous indiscretions we’ve seen since you joined our wards.” Sophia snarled and moved to open her mouth, and the woman held up her hand, and Sophia stilled herself, glaring hatefully at the woman.

“No, Sophia. You’re right that I’d prefer to put you away, but just like you, what I want doesn’t matter. Someone has stood up for you, and that means that what we’re doing is giving you another second chance — a Fresh start. Since the court case is finally winding down and the Local Police seem to have set aside their investigations, you’re getting off scot-free. But that only lasts as long as you don’t draw the attention of Taylor Hebert.” Sophia felt her face tightening, and she glared at the desk, doing what she could to not meet the Director’s eyes. “You heard what she did to Glory Girl then? That was the least impressive part of her evening. The girl has powers that terrify our Thinkers, and we’re honestly not sure what’ll happen to you if she finds out who you are. So we’re going to remove the temptation.”

“You can’t just transfer me! It’s in the god-damn rules.” Sophia interjected, ignoring the harsh look that the Director sent her, and then shifting her chair back as if to stand. “You can’t fucking force me to go anywhere.” When the director didn’t get angry or yell at her, she faltered, the look on the piggish woman’s features made her nervous, that wide self-satisfied smile forced Sophia back into her seat, despite the rage she felt through her back.

“You’re mistaken, Shadow Stalker. We’re not transferring you. You’re right that we cannot transfer the Wards. I merely suggested that your Mother might have better luck with a job in Austin. And your Father. And when they asked about transferring you to the Wards over there? Well, I mean, I just had to do everything that I could to ensure that your upcoming transfer went smoothly. You’re already out of school on that administrative suspension. It was a small matter to arrange the transfers of everything that you need.” The woman’s smug look and feigned innocence grated on Sophia but she couldn’t reply.
Sophia sat there in an impotent rage, her form trembling as she did her best to burn the PRT Director to death with her eyes alone. As the minutes ticked by and the woman seemed to languish in amusement at the look, Sophia felt her fire dying, and she finally slumped back in her chair, glancing at the door. “May I be excused, I have to pack...apparently.”

“In a moment.” The Director’s amusement seemed to melt away and she leaned forward. The director’s eye held a startling amount of intensity and Sophia felt herself shrinking back just a bit. “I’ve had a long talk with the Local Director in Austin, and even more time than that was spent speaking with your new Team Leader. Hoyden is the head of the Local Wards Team, and as someone with experience in ‘Image Issues’, she’s assured me that she will be personally over-seeing your transition. This is your last chance, Hess. If you fuck up again, that’s it. I will personally come to Austin to take you to the Birdcage myself.” The director stared Sophia down for a long few minutes before finally waving the girl toward the door. Sophia kicked back her chair, slid to her feet and stalked toward the exit.

“You’ve been trying and failing to be a hero for so long, Shadow Stalker. Maybe this is where that changes.” The director’s words were soft enough that Sophia wondered if she’d even heard them right, but she couldn’t stand to turn back and ask so she left. When she heard the boisterous excited conversations in the lounge, she ducked through a side hallway and collected her gear before moving to exit the building, pausing and swallowing at the intense look that Miss Militia sent her when they passed each other in the halls. Rather than arrange a ride, she took what she needed and ducked out past the counter, heading toward the nearest bus stop. Several troopers stared at her, but rather than chase they backed off as she headed for the door.

She was halfway home on the bus when her phone started to ring. Seeing the familiar face on it she let out a sigh, accepting the call and holding it up to her ear. “Hello, Emma.”

---

Boredom. Boredom had been Emma’s constant companion for the last month and a half. When the school had informed her, along with Sophia and Madison, that due to an ongoing criminal and civil case against them that they’d be placed on an administrative suspension, that hadn’t sounded so boring, a month off of school, who could complain, it’d taken a week before the allure of sleeping in every day and watching all the TV that she wanted had faded. The amount of homework that they’d been assigned was staggering, and it took most of Emma’s afternoons doing all the research necessary to actually do it. Without teachers guiding her she had to do a great deal more reading herself, and when you didn’t get the personal touch on handing in assignments, teachers tended to be less forgiving in their grading.

She’d be glad to return to school in the coming weeks. Her father had announced that he’d heard from his firm that... Taylor’s Dad had accepted the settlement from the school, and they’d agreed to drop all three suits and not disclose any of the details. Since the Police hadn’t investigated any of the complaints, and Taylor hadn’t testified apparently, the school had decided that as soon as the details of the suit we’re final they’d be welcome back in classes. Emma was looking forward to speaking with other people, and more than that, being top bee again. Her home had been like a prison, she caught her father watching her when she wasn’t looking, and that was better than the concerned looks that her mother and sister had been sending her. She missed her friends, she missed spending
time with Sophia and Madison both, but Madison had at least texted the entire duration of the suspension.

Sophia was a different kettle of fish entirely. The girl had been grounded heavily, though Emma figured that this had been a way to cover up the fact that there had been some blowback from the Wards about what had happened since Taylor had ended up triggering. Emma had been wrestling with that for a while. Taylor had triggered, and she’d been disturbed to see the almost excited gleam in Sophia’s eyes when the girl had related that to her while they sat alone in her hospital room. Like that made her special or something. Taylor wasn’t special at all, she was ugly and tall and plain. Emma still had no idea why Sophia insisted on putting so much effort on Taylor. Hadn’t she learned from her that Taylor wasn’t worth the time? Didn’t she see that Taylor was pointless?

Emma glared quietly at her phone and the messages that Sophia still hadn’t answered, and she sighed, calmly swiping through the menu’s to bring up her phone. Rather than swiping through the contacts she carefully pressed each number one by one, humming as the last one was entered and the phone began to ring. Flopping back on her bed Emma got comfortable, listening to the rings. She was preparing herself to leave a suitably classy message insisting that her best friend call her back or else when the phone was answered and Sophia’s rough voice washed over her.

“Hello, Emma.”

“Sophia! I’ve been trying to get ahold of you for days! Did you hear? Hebert settled and we’re in the clear. Dad says that the suspension will be done soon and we’ll be back in school by like Monday or Tuesday.” Emma rattled off her comments faintly, humming quietly as she got more comfortable, twirling a finger through her hair. “We’ll have to do something suitably vicious to get the bitches back in line though, considering that they’ve had the place to themselves for a month. Can’t let them get uppity, you know-”

“I’m not coming back. My parents decided to move to Austin apparently. They found out about what we’d done and weren’t too happy about what sort of things I was getting into.” Sophia’s voice was heavy, laced with regret and anger and Emma found her toes curling in the sheet as she gripped the phone harder. ‘Leaving? Sophia can’t leave. She’s been my protector, we’re each other’s right hands...’

“You’re moving? When?” Emma did her best to keep her voice steady but she resisted the urge to smack her head at the low nervous whisper that came out instead. She bit her lip as she heard Sophia sucking in a breath on the other side of the line.

“I don’t know. Soon. I just found out but I’m apparently to start packing immediately. I guess they didn’t want me to miss any more school when we arrive. My dad’s aunt apparently arranged everything, even helped Mom and Dad with finding jobs out there.” Emma winced, they’d invented a code between them to speak about things that Sophia wasn’t to do over the phone. If the Protectorate had arranged to have her moved there wasn’t much that Emma could do to stop that. The sound of something clanging was suddenly audible, and Sophia let out a grunt before speaking. “Look, Emma, I’ve gotta go, I’ll text you or something. Bye.”

And then she hung up without waiting for a response. Emma sat there in her room, staring up at the roof, watching the sunlight washing over it as the sun began to set. She lay there and considered what she’d do now without her partner in crime. Sophia made her strong, and taught her to be cruel, but what would she do without Sophia at her back. Terror, rage, resentment and pain were her only companions that night, and when the sun rose, Emma was still holding her phone, staring sadly at the
unanswered questions she’d sent to Sophia, wondering if the last words she’d hear from her saviour would be ‘I’ll text you or something, Bye.’
It wasn’t the oddness of her life that got to Amy, that was sort of par for the course for her life over the last few years. What had really begun to bug Amy as she sat, arms wrapped around the oversized sketchbook and fingers clasping the coloured pencils tightly, while watching Carol speak briefly with Sarah and Neil before slipping out the house, was that everything was going so well. Parts of her in the deep dark parts of her mind whispered about when the other shoe would drop when everything would fall out from under her.

Amy carefully shifted the book down to rest on her lap, carefully sliding the cover open, gently dragging the tips of her fingers over the rough pages. She considered the pad and the pencils, she was hardly an expert, but they’d seemed expensive, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Amy was so used to Carol barely paying her any attention at all, that a gift like this made her nervous. As she sat there, staring down at the book she started when a voice intruded on her thoughts.

“It was probably Mark.” Amy glanced up in shock, staring over to see that Neil had taken a seat next to her and was studying the pad. “He used to do a lot of drawing and painting when we were younger before…” He trailed off, and Amy understood what he meant. ‘Before’ was a shorthand that all of the older members used. It meant Before Fleur died and before everything had fallen apart on them. Amy sat there, quietly studying the book and firming up her determination. It was a gift from her parents so she’d use it. She stared down at the book she started when a voice intruded on her thoughts.

“Something wrong?”

“It’s mostly about uh... Taylor.” She commented faintly, flushing when she caught Neil’s wry smirk. She turned back to the book, studying the pages and sighing. “I just. I was talking to Taylor about this the other day. Drawing. And today, Mom shows up with this.” She huffed faintly at the amused chuckle that Neil released, and she shrugged. “It’s just. I’d rather not have her running to Carol with everything I say.” She glanced at Neil, and she sighed again when he merely offered her a half smile.

“I think her heart was in the right place, but if it bothers you, maybe you should mention it to her.” She glanced at him and then she idly considered pulling out her phone and doing just that. Images of what might come of it made her stall her hands. Maybe later, Amy told herself with a tiny frown. Before Amy could agonize over it any longer, a surge of golden light erupted in the middle of the room and silenced any further conversation. Amy shielded her eyes at the glare, and when the light faded, she blinked away the spots it had left in her vision, glancing over when her gaze cleared to see...
Nick!” She’d been about to panic when Neil slid to his feet and called out eagerly, and the man spun around. He was clad in typical superhero fashion, his entire outfit in shades of white, purple, and blue, the whole thing shimmering with self-contained light. He threw his arms out, easily scooping Neil into them, laughing when the other man groaned and feigned struggling. Amy felt herself smiling as ‘Nick’ playfully taunted Neil.

“C’mon, Neil don’t be like that. We’re big strong men confident in our masculinity we can totally hug. The young lady certainly seems to appreciate the view.” He kept his arms around Neil until Amy’s uncle gave in and scooped him into a bone crushing hug that saw him lifting the smaller man off the ground with an oof. The guy bounced back when released and let out a whoop of delight.

“That’s the spirit, Neil!”

Nick smirked as he reached up, pulling his mask back to reveal a youthful Asian face. His features were friendly, and he clearly smiled a lot. After a moment, he turned to offer Amy a hand. “Hello there Amy, the name is Nicholas Cao. You’ve met my wife.” When Amy reached out and took his hand, he gave her a firm shake before smirking as he pulled his mask on. “Though most people refer to me as Impulse. Melanie mentioned that you two had an appointment today. I’m here to serve as transportation.”

Amy blinked as she glanced at Neil and found him smiling at her. “Nick and I are old friends from before I joined New Wave. From before I joined the Brockton Brigade at all. We actually grew up together, though we clearly ended up going in somewhat different directions.” Amy glanced at Nick who nodded faintly before gesturing for her to join him. When she slid to her feet, he waited for her to join him before speaking casually.

“I’m a mover. I can teleport, but my powers have an emotional component. It’s how I target my teleportations. More specifically, I can teleport to anyone that I know well enough to have feelings about. Good or bad really. Neil tends to serve as our point of arrival for the East Coast, and Melanie serves as the anchor point for back home in Colorado.” He glanced over at Amy before offering his hand again. “You’ve got a two-hour session, right? I’ll be dropping you there, and then returning you here when we’re done.” When Amy nodded, Nick glanced over at Neil, offering a smirk. “Tell Sarah that I said Hi. We can have a drink later.”

Amy felt the man’s arm settling around her shoulders, but before she could tense up, warmth spread over her form, and the world before her dissolved into scintillating golden waves. She floated there among the light for barely more than two breaths, then an entirely different world coalesced up in a reversed-parody of the Pelham’s living room vanishing. She stood quietly in the room with Nick’s arm around her shoulder, staring curiously over at the elegantly laid out office.

The office was warm and had an attractive layout that appealed to Amy’s sensibilities more than either her mother or Aunt’s offices, both of which tended to be laid out more like a businessman's office, cramped with a great many bookshelves and filing cabinets. Conversely, Melanie’s office held several comfortable pieces of furniture arrayed around a table, and there was a desk with more comfortable chairs, off to one side, where the woman herself sat, typing something into a computer. It left the large room with a more open and elegant feel, which appealed to Amy.

The healer glanced over and watched Impulse as he pulled back, flashed her a wink, and then slipped around the desk, leaning down and kissing the top of his wife’s head. The doctor glanced up from her work, smiling at him before glancing over, and starting at Amy’s presence. The woman stared at her oddly, and Amy glanced down realizing that she still held the sketchpad in her hands,
and she felt her cheeks heating. When Amy glanced up again, she saw Melanie gesturing her toward a chair, and she slid over, taking a seat opposite the doctor. Amy blinked, watching as Impulse slipped around the desk, ruffled her hair and then headed off.

She glanced back toward the Doctor and felt her cheeks heating a bit when the woman tilted her head in amusement. “Welcome to my office, Amy. Sorry, I got caught up in my work, but welcome. What do you think of it?” She gestured around and Amy stared at the space, considering it carefully before smiling quietly and turning back to the Doctor.

“It suits you.”

Melanie sat quietly at her desk, watching as Amy sat opposite her sitting quietly in the large plush chair, gripping the sketchbook in her hands like a life-line. The doctor leaned back and let the girl study the space around her until some of the tension began to bleed out of her form. Mel waited for Amy to look at her with curiosity instead of the nervous tension that was currently wrapped around her. When the girl seemed at ease, Mel finally spoke, offering the girl a friendly smile.

“So. As we discussed last week, we’re going to start meeting here more often. You’ve been very good at speaking, but I could tell that there were certain subjects that you were more reluctant to bring up around your family, and my office here is a bit more private for discussions like that.” She watched the girl’s shoulders start to tense, and she offered her a gentle smile. “Though that’s in the future, for today, why don’t you tell me about your last few days. You’ve been out of the hospital for a week now, yes? Do you feel like you’re settling in better?”

“Little over a week, yeah.” Amy muttered quietly and Melanie relaxed and let the girl mull over her thoughts, watched as she picked them apart and then smiled when she reluctantly continued. “It’s been...strange. Aunt Sarah and Uncle Neil have been great. I’ve got the guest room to myself, and they’ve been talking to me lots. Crystal’s been spending a lot of time with me too.” Melanie raised an eyebrow as the girl picked guiltily at her shirt.

“I’m guessing that you haven’t managed to respond to any of Victoria’s messages yet?” The therapist leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk, watching her patient curiously as Amy shrunk down into her seat. “You know that you don’t have to speak with her, or even respond to her texts yourself, you can always write a letter and have it sent by your mother. Or you could even have someone else explain the... situation to her.”

“N-No. I... I should do the explanations myself, but I m-might try a letter. Maybe.” The girl stared nervously at her lap and hugged the book quieter and Mel felt herself grinning just a touch as she watched the mousy girl using the giant book as a shield almost.

“I’m guessing that you haven’t managed to respond to any of Victoria’s messages yet?” The therapist leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk, watching her patient curiously as Amy shrunk down into her seat. “You know that you don’t have to speak with her, or even respond to her texts yourself, you can always write a letter and have it sent by your mother. Or you could even have someone else explain the... situation to her.”

“N-No. I... I should do the explanations myself, but I m-might try a letter. Maybe.” The girl stared nervously at her lap and hugged the book quieter and Mel felt herself grinning just a touch as she watched the mousy girl using the giant book as a shield almost.

“So what’s that there then? A sketchbook? I didn’t know that you drew.” She chuckled when Amy started and glanced down as if realizing what she was doing and embarrassedly setting the book down on the table, and running her hands absentmindedly over it.

“I don’t.” At her curious look, Amy backpedalled. “Well, I mean, not anymore. Mom got it for me. She uh. Brought it over and sat and talked with me about art. She seemed interested.” She bit quietly at her lip, and Melanie watched the girl, knowing that she’d voice her concerns if given time. “I’m
just… It’s weird okay?” Mel flashed the girl a smile and gestured for her elaborate. “It’s just we never got along before. She was always so busy with other things. So… brusque and now she’s different. She stops by every day to speak with me on her way home from work, and she texts me a few times a day. I’m wondering how long it’ll last.” Amy’s voice was small, and Mel watched the girl finger the edges of the book quietly as if contemplating picking it up.

“She had a pretty traumatic experience too, you know, Amy. You nearly died, most of your family was very shocked, and I imagine they’re all trying to show you that you’re important to them, to seek validation with you, and to let you know that you’re important to them.” Mel sighed faintly when she watched the girl frowning down at the book, and then hummed a bit, changing the subject to keep Amy from dwelling on her own emotions. “So, you were looking at the book oddly when you arrived; why’s that?”

“Well, it’s just…” The girl trailed off and seemed to think quietly, contemplating what she wanted to say before continuing. Mel waited patiently; truthfully it wasn’t that odd considering that Amy was trying to figure out where she started and Victoria ended still. “I didn’t tell Carol about this, about the drawing thing. I was. You remember last week we talked about what I used to do before I spent all my time at the hospital or with Victoria?” Mel nodded quietly, indicating that Amy should continue, chuckling as the girl did. “Well I talked to Taylor about it, I uh. I tend to discuss some stuff with her.” The girl flashed her a concerned and nervous look. “She’s better at explaining some concepts to me; you tend to get…verbose.” She said softly, and Mel grinned.

“I prefer the term exuberant. I’m aware that I can be exuberant, and you’re allowed to discuss your sessions with whoever you want.” The doctor smirked as Amy relaxed and then continued. “Anyway, you were saying.” She gestured to Amy, indicating that the ball was in her court.

“So I talk to her about things, occasionally, she helped me understand the Pavlov concepts you were occasionally bringing up, though the uh…” Amy frowned. “The books about it can be rough… the experiments were difficult to read about.” Mel nodded gravely, her eyes following Amy’s reactions attentively. “Anyway, I mentioned your assignment to her, and we got to talking about hobbies. She told me about her hobbies, and we chatted until I could remember a few things that used to interest me before…” Amy paused and frowned, before continuing. Apparently the older members of the new wave with that tic. “Before high school. Drawing came up, and she said I should give it a shot. That was a few days ago, and Carol got me this. I’m…” Amy trailed off and continued to trace the book.

“It’s complicated then? Does she know? About Victoria?” Seeing Amy’s nervous shake of the head, she offered a small smile. “You should consider talking about it with someone that's less involved. But back to the matter at hand, You love the gift, and the idea behind it, but you don’t want your friends breaking your confidence?” Watching the girl nod, Mel offered a simple smile. “That’s a pretty common reaction you know. I’d suggest perhaps that you gently tell her that you appreciate her efforts but that you’d prefer to talk to your mother about these things on your own.” She tilted her head at the girl’s soft sigh, lifting an eyebrow curiously.

“Uncle Neil said the same thing,” Amy said gently and then glanced at the pad. “When I explained it to him. I just… I’ll think about it.” Mel watched the girl nervously fiddling with her shirt, and she shook her head quietly, lips quirked in a smile. Rather then push there, she moved on.

“Smart man, your uncle. You should take his advice more often.” She studied the girl and watched as she became distracted again, the book holding her eyes as she lost herself in thought. She reached out quietly, drawing out a few of the nicer pencils from her container and offering them out. “We’ve got two hours, why don’t you take a short break over there on the couch, and draw something,
Amy? Whatever comes to your mind, and when you’re done, we can discuss what you drew?” The girl stared nervously at the pencils before gently taking them. Mel had to hide a smile as she scooped up the book and went to get comfortable on the couch.

Mel tapped a few keys on her keyboard, letting a gentle tune play, occasionally glancing up to watch over Amy’s shoulder as the face started to resolve itself into the wild happy grin of her husband. She tilted her head to the side, smirking and wondering if Amy would let her keep the finished image. As she worked, a ghost of a smile slid over Mel’s lips when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Amy draw out her phone, quickly tapping something into it before nervously watching it for nearly a minute. When Amy relaxed and quickly typed back when it dinged a minute later, Mel found herself chuckling softly. After that, the girl lost herself in the act of drawing, which forced Mel to turn her attention back to the forms she’d been filling out, leaving Amy to draw in peace.
Interlude 5

Chapter Summary

[And this is how we get Tattletale back into play, and foreshadow what the major underlying conflict of Arc 3 is gonna be. =] As always, loving the feedback, keep it coming.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Date Unknown

Coil's Super Secret Base, Brockton Bay

Thomas Calvert sat in full costume at a small dining table in his office, an untouched plate of food set before him, a hearty serving of eggs, bacon, and ham with buttered toast, and opposite him, a small girl was eagerly consuming a matching plate of food. As he watched the girl eat, Coil was satisfied that his disgust was hidden by his mask. Seemingly aware of his look the girl glanced up, giving him a rebellious look as if daring him to comment on her poor table manners. As he studied the smug lilt to the expression on the young girl’s face, the man known as Coil once again found himself considering going with his first plan for controlling the precog and keeping her pliable. Though, as soon as the thought passed through his head, he felt a shiver travelling down his spine as he remembered the reason that he’d chosen not to in vivid detail.

Calvert turned his attention from the various screens that monitored his fledgling empire and focused on the image of the girl he’d acquired being restrained on a bed by half a dozen mercenaries the girl’s shouts vicious. Coil casually increased the volume on the feed, watching as a man in a white lab coat moved toward the young girl with an impressive needle in hand.

“Odds that your leader dies screaming in the next three months if you use whatever is in that syringe on me? 89.46 percent.” The words were spoken with cold certainty, and the girl’s panic seemed to melt away. Coil sat there watching as Plinkett ignored her and approached closer, only pausing when the speakers came to life. Coil glanced down, finding his hand on the button.

“Don’t. Miss Alcott.” He waited till the girl glanced up fearfully. “Chance that you die screaming if you attempt to escape today? To one decimal point.” He watched as the girl’s face scrunched up, but he waited and watched and noted the moment that the girl’s face fell. Even when she whispered the feeds on his speakers picked up the words.

“92.6 percent.” The girl sank back into the bench, and he leaned back, watching as the guards quite suddenly had a much easier time getting her adequately restrained on the bed.

“Miss Alcott. I have a one-time offer for you. You’re going to be my guest here for the foreseeable future, and you’re going to answer the questions that I ask you. In exchange, I’ll feed you; keep you clothed, and ensure that no harm comes to you.” When the girl glared up at the camera, he’d casually asked a question. “Chance that you survive the night if you don’t agree to this deal? Once again, to one decimal point.” He watched the screen as the girl shrank into herself, muttering again.
"11.2 percent."

Coil had had to re-arrange his plans a bit, but he’d gotten what he’d wanted out of the situation, a precog on tap to help him fine-tune his plans, and it’d only cost him, Tattletale. Sadly, he wasn’t sure how much he viewed that exchange as net-positive these days. Something had begun interfering with the young precog’s powers. Coil stared at the smug expression on the girl’s face, and he had to restrain himself from slapping her. Instead, he casually set his hands on the table, moving to repeat the daily ritual they’d started. The timeline split as one Coil dismissed Dinah from his office, and the other began to speak with her.

“Finished?” When the girl stared at her empty plate and nodded, he casually rested his elbows on the table, staring at her through his mask. “You know the first two questions.” He watched her casually, observing as she grumped but then started to speak.

“0.316 percent chance there’s any problems here in the next hour. 6.116 percent chance there’s any problems before lunchtime.” Calvert nodded minutely as he considered the girl, silently tapping his fingers on the table. Eventually, he’d look down at the pad next to him, contemplating the questions he had written down for today.

“The chance my grand plan is a success, ignoring any uses of my powers?” Coil’s voice was silky smooth and casual, and he watched the tiny wince the girl gave, this was his revenge on the girl gently taxing her power to ensure that she understood his ire with her.

“Unknown, Everything dissolves into jumbled screaming.” The girl’s voice was nervous, and she shrank back when he set his utensils down. This pleased coil enough that he merely crossed his arms, and considered a way to reword the question.

“Chances that if we continue going as we are now with no changes, that my plan will still be on track and viable in exactly one month.” The questions had to be couched precisely, and time-gated or else the precog’s powers started spitting out strange errors, unknowns, or strange, horrifying visions. As he studied the girl, he smirked as she winced in pain, though the growing grin on her face riled him even more. He knew what was coming before said it.

“43.615 percent.” The girl’s voice was cold as she glared back at him across the table and Coil growled. Down by another three percent and he’d done nothing at all to interfere with it. Sometimes he wished that he could ask the girl questions that weren’t merely numerically significant.

“Chance that my plans suffer a major setback in the next week?” He glanced up when the girl winced and glared at him.

“The questions-” He raised a hand cutting her off. They had a deal; she knew that. So she merely let out a soft growl and then spoke precisely. “77.36 percent.” That was troubling. Coil growled as he quickly skimmed through his various projects wondering what would take the fall. After considering for a moment, he rubbed his head and spoke with resignation, realizing where the most apparent weak link was.

“Chances that the Undersiders are attacked in the next week?” When the girl smirked at him despite the visible pain on her features, he restrained the urge to smack her in the face with the nearest heavy object.

“97.83 percent.” He snarled faintly at the response. The ABB he’d forgotten about them entirely, and they’d been plotting something for weeks. He moved to push his chair back, staring coolly at the young girl.
“Chance that the ABB attacks my holdings besides the Undersiders in the next week.” The small girl let out a small pained chuckle. “97.83 percent.” He growled, wondering how long the brat had known about this. He moved to head for the door, pausing and staring at her.

“Chance that you die screaming if you attempt to escape?” He watched the colour drain from her face like it did every time that he asked that question. Instead of listening to her answer, he dismissed her from his office. Quietly considering the problems that Dinah was starting to cause, and his lack of an appropriate backup, he considered how best to get Tattletale back in play. Taking several minutes to contemplate his various options, eventually, Coil activated his powers to collapse the timeline where he’d questioned Dinah. Next, he quickly started another timeline immediately. One timeline saw him managing his various projects, and in the other, he drew out a notepad, and he began working on a cipher.

Lisa grunted as she was shoved into the small room with the large table. She spun to glare back at the trooper, but he merely shot her a smirk before leaving her to cool her heels. She paced around the room, coming to a stop before the great mirror that covered one wall. She stood there taking out her washed out features, the slightly unkempt blonde hair on her head. The orange suit didn’t really suit her either. She stood there, staring at her reflection until a cough at the door startled her, and she spun.

There was a man in a suit there, staring at her with a friendly smile. The smile was fake, and he was condescending. He worked for Coil, though he didn’t know the name. He knew he worked for a criminal, that he wasn’t doing anything perfectly honest, but he didn’t know who he worked for, and he didn’t care. Lisa scowled as he walked toward her.

“Greetings Miss Tattletale, I’m Brian Wilcox, I’m the solicitor hired by your parents to represent you here.” He drew out a bundle of official looking documentation offered it over. Lisa studied the papers long enough to make sure they weren’t poisoned before she reached out and grabbed them. The man had never met her parents, but the signatures on the paper were theirs. Dead? Probably not, Coil needed to keep her under his thumb, and killing her family would be unwise. She read the document then frowned, rereading it. It took a moment for her power to pull the hidden message out of the cipher that had been threaded into the legal document. Her power spits the concealed message into her head, and she felt a sudden shock whisper through her.

‘ABB going after Undersiders and Me. Need you out of the way for now. Your gifts more important then skirmish. Use any means necessary to keep yourself out of prison. Relate nature of employment, burn any contacts necessary. Don’t fail me; your parents wouldn’t like it.’ Lisa stared at the document and frowned as she considered it quietly.

Something had scared Coil quite a bit to give her this amount of latitude. She stared at the document silently for a few moments before making her way over to the table and taking a seat. She casually glanced at the lawyer when he sat next to her and tried and failed to offer her a reassuring smile. She rolled her eyes as the door opened to admit Armsmaster and a short fat woman. Staring at her, Lisa allowed her power to pick the woman apart. Local Director of the PRT. Doesn’t want to be here, doesn’t want to discuss a deal, forced to play ball. She glanced at the two figures as they moved to sit across from her. She waited for them to settle, allowing them to speak first. It was Armsmaster that finally broke the silence.

“Mister Wilcox, I’m hoping that your client is aware of just what sort of charges she’s up against,
even without factoring in the way she’s used her powers, she’s looking at a sentence in the double
digits. We’re here to see if she’s got any information that might make a judge look upon her situation
more favourably.” The armoured figure spoke casually and stared at her despite addressing the
lawyer. Tattletale shifted, speaking up before the lawyer could, ignoring his dirty look.

“That’s not my lawyer. He’s a plant hired by Coil to keep me from talking.” She glanced at the
Director, noting the widening of her eyes, and then she glanced back at Armsmaster as the man
turned from her to the lawyer, speaking low and casually.

“Truth.” Tattletale felt her powers surge, pressing a hand to her head as pain lanced through it.
Moving quickly she kicked back at the desk, and her chair slid back and away as the lawyer lunged
at her, drawing something sharp from his jacket. From her newly distant position on the chair, Lisa
sat watching as Armsmaster moved. Something twanged, and quite suddenly the lawyer was on the
floor screaming in pain. The heavyset man lay there, his entire form twitching on the floor. She sat
there, staring down at the man before glancing up at Armsmaster. She peered between him and the
Director.

“I was never given a choice about joining the Undersiders. I was held at gunpoint, then later
blackmailed into serving as Coil's inside man on the Undersiders. Truthfully, given a choice, I'd have
rather done nothing at all, as opposed to being forced to serve Coil’s aims. I’ve got plenty of
information to share, including the fact that Coil is fairly certain that the ABB is planning something
big in the next week.” Lisa stared coolly at Armsmaster, her powers lancing pain through her head as
soon the man came to a 'decision'. She knew when the man began to believe her, and she didn't even
need him to tell her, though the verbal confirmation was undoubtedly helpful in keeping the Director
from glaring so harshly at her.

“Truth.”

Chapter End Notes

[[ 3.1 will be dropping Monday Night sometime. I'll also be dropping my arc 2 after
action report then too, and that should be interesting! If any of you guys have any
questions you'd like addressed in the pre-arc post, lemme know and I'll work em in.]]
PHO Interlude 1 by NGamer11

Chapter Summary

Here's an attempt for a PHO Interlude. Based it on a suggestion I made earlier. Hope it's good enough. - NGamer11

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Ninja_man
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

♦ Topic: Trigger in Winslow!
In: Boards ► Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Jan 11th 2011:
Hey everyone, Bagrat here. Now you may have heard this on the news, but if not, there has been a public triggering in Winslow High School over in Brockton Bay. They details are scarce, but there has been at least one person who has been sent to the hospital.

(Showing page 1 of 2)

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
Oh crap. I know who that is. You won't believe what happened to her.

► Acree
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
Seeing as it's you Void, I seriously doubt that.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
No for real. Her name is [REDACTED]
SuperTutor (Mod) You aren't allowed to post a cape's real name here Void. You know the rules.

► Coyote-C
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
Seriously, you think he'd know better. But on to this piece of news. Who do you think is the one who went to the hospital?

► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
The details of this incident are confidential until said otherwise.

► Antigone
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
Guess that means all we can to is speculate for now.

► GstringGirl
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
We should respect their privacy. I'm sure whomever it is doesn't want people poking their noses where they don't belong.

► Vista (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
All I hope for is that it isn't a would-be gangster. There are enough capes in the gangs as there is.

► White Fairy (Veteran Member)
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
It is a person with a problematic life. Hopefully when they awaken, they'll be able to rise up again.

End of Page. 1

(Showing page 2 of 2)

► NoMoreNazis
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
@Vista
I get what you mean. Hopefully whoever it is will join the Wards.

► SssnakesForLife
Replied On Jan 11th 2011:
@NoMoreNazis
With our luck, most likely not.

End of Page. 1, 2
Hey everyone, Bagrat here. Now you may have heard this on the news, but if not, there has been a public triggering in Winslow High School over in Brockton Bay. They details are scarce, but there has been at least one person who has been sent to the hospital.

(Showing page 25 of 26)

- **Bagrat** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  Big news! The identity of the new trigger has been confirmed to be one Taylor Hebert. The name was leaked from various sites and the story of why she triggered is heartbreaking.
  [Link to bully campaign story]

- **XxVoid_CowboyxX**
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  Yeah. What happened to Taylor was terrible. I heard she was trapped in that locker full of rotten tampons for hours. No wonder she's in the hospital.

- **Deadman**
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  There's bullying and then there's this. The girls responsible for this aren't bullies... they're monsters!

- **Acree**
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  I hope she recovers. What is happening in that school? Where were the teachers?

- **Brocktonite03** (Veteran Member)
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  Winslow is a mass of gangbangers and would-be gangbangers. I'm not surprised that the teachers there did nothing to help this girl.

- **Laotsunn** (Kyushu Survivor)
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  If it's that bad, it needs to be inspected or something.

- **Brocktonite03** (Veteran Member)
  Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
  I wouldn't be surprised if some of those teachers ended up being fired for this. On to another topic, is there any news about Taylor's recovery?
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
None so far. Last I heard, it wasn't looking good.

Not_a_Victim
Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
Don't feel sorry for her. She's a bigot. She got everything she deserved.

Answer Key
Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
Whoa. That came out of nowhere. What do you mean by that? How could she possibly deserve what was done to her? She was systematically tortured for years and ended up in the hospital.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 23, 24, 25

(Showing page 26 of 26)

Not_a_Victim
Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
Look her up in the internet. You'll see the proof. She's a close-minded bigot who hates homosexuals.

BadSamurai
Replied On Jan 13th 2011:
Alright. I've looked up Taylor Hebert online and there does seem to be chatter about her being a bigot. Problem is it's all on social media. You know you can't take everything there as true right?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 24, 25, 26

Topic: New Wave Recruiting?
In: Boards ▶ Brockton Bay
Forgotten Creator (Original Poster)
Posted On Apr 14th 2011:
The Undersiders tried to rob the bank today. I don't know much about what happened, but I do know that Panacea and Taylor Hebert were seen healing the hostages. Since the latter is an
unmasked cape, could she be joining New Wave?

(Showing page 1 of 2)

► ArchmageEin
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Someone joining New Wave? I didn't think anyone would do that. Then again, it does make sense. At the very least it'll give her some protection from the gangs. She's not Asian, so the ABB won't come calling, but the E88 and Merchants might make an attempt.

► Acree
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
I love New Wave. It would be awesome they got a new member.

► bothad
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
@ Acree
Why? They don't do much anymore. We mostly just see Panacea healing and Glory Girl destroying the city when off fighting petty criminals.

► Acree
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
@ bothad
Hey, don't underestimate New Wave. Remember, they were the ones who took down Marquis. If they got more members, maybe we would see more of them active.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
She'll probably join. She wasn't exactly social when she was in school, but from what I saw in the pictures, she seemed a lot happier when she was with Panacea.

► Bruce Lao
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Considering what happened to her in school, of course she'd be happier when not talking with the tormentors and the enablers.

► Overload (Moderator)
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Bruce Lao
I'll say this once. Please don't let this thread be filled with people who are going for or against Taylor. If this turns into another long argument, we'll be forced to lock this thread.

► Good Ship Morpheus
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
You heard the moderator. Keep this on topic and civil.

► Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
I'm ambivalent either way. What I'm more curious about is the fact that she can heal. Healers are rare, and thus, valuable. The Protectorate will probably try to scoop her up so that they don't have to rely on Panacea so much.

End of Page. 1

(Showing page 2 of 2)

► Ekul
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Wait, I thought she put someone in the hospital. You can't do that if you're a healer. Is she a grab-bag or... Wait. Is she a bio-tinker?!

► Valkyr (Wiki Warrior)
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
@Ekul.
I don't think she's a bio-tinker. If she were, I sincerely doubt she'd be allowed to heal civilians and the Wards. I am in the process of making a page about her powers. Anyone have a good grasp on what those powers are, cause she has to have more than just healing.

► Vista (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
She can heal and use TK. According to Panacea, she was able to hold up a collapsing ceiling long enough for the people to move out of the way.

► Valkyr (Wiki Warrior)
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Healing and TK? Those don't seem to be related. So she's a grab-bag?

► Brilliger (Moderator: Protectorate Main)
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Okay, this is getting derailed. All speculation on Taylor Hebert's powers will go to this new thread. Remember, this is supposed to be about whether or not she'll join New Wave.

► WagTheDog
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Right, thanks Brilliger. There might be a problem with her joining New Wave. I heard she got into a fight or something with Glory Girl in the bank and she put GG down hard.

► Deimos
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Wait. She downed GG with TK. But she was able to stop a collapsing ceiling. That means her TK isn't Manton-limited. This plus her healing means her value suddenly
went up.

► Coyote-C
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
We were just told to stay on topic. Go to the new thread if you want to discuss her powers.

End of Page. 1, 2

♦ Topic: What the heck are her powers?
In: Boards ► Power Speculation
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Apr 14th 2011:
Alright. I think it's time to try and figure what the heck Taylor Hebert's powers actually are. Let's put down the facts:
1. She can heal. This was proven after the Brockton Bay bank heist.
2. She was reported as having TK. Multiple witnesses claim that she was able to prevent a ceiling from falling onto civilians and was able to easily take down Glory Girl, the person who is considered Alexandria Junior.
3. I was able to get information that she was in the hospital because she electrocuted herself with her powers in the locker.
4. Those same sources told me that she is fine now because she has some sort of self-heal power that requires she go into a coma-like state.

That is a wide array of powers for one cape. Does anyone else have any more info?

(Showing page 1 of 1)

► Laser Augment
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
That is a lot of powers. I'm going with grab-bag.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
I bet she's much more powerful than what we've seen. What if she was actually a powerhouse and both New Wave and the Protectorate want to keep it under wraps and her under the radar. What we've seen could just be the beginning. Maybe she's the next Eidolon!

► Mock Moniker
Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
Let me stop you before you choke on your words and delusions Void. All we know is that she has four powers that don't really make a theme. It's much more believable for her to just be a rather potent grab-bag.

 ► WagTheDog
 Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
 I saw her a few days ago. She seemed to be doing some sort of martial arts exercise or something. Could she be some sort of combat Thinker?

 ► Forgotten Creator
 Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
 That doesn't prove anything. Look at Armsmaster. He can fight really well with his halberd. But that doesn't make him a combat Thinker.

 ► Acree
 Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
 Bit off-topic, but does she have a cape name? I feel a little weird always calling her by her real name.

 ► Bruce Lao
 Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
 No idea. PRT probably gave her a temp name. Haven't seen it but someone could look it up.

 ► ArchmageEin
 Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
 So Blaster (lighting/electricity), Striker (healing), Shaker (TK), and Brute (self-healing). Filling up a third of all the classifications with potent powers is rare. Maybe Void might actually be on to something.

 ► Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
 Replied On Apr 14th 2011:
 Please don't support Void's crazy theory. I don't want to have to read three paragraphs worth of his postings about completely unreasonable and impossible crackpot theories.

End of Page. 1
Chapter Summary

[[ This chapter is deceptively short, because it's mostly a bridge chapter, nothing much happens, but we sort of need to establish what boring stuff Taylor was up to over the week the interludes happened in. 3.2 is more fun, you'll enjoy that when it drops next.]]

April 28th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

Bastila had explained it several times, but Taylor still had issues seeing just how far she’d come over the last few months. When she’d started her runs, she’d been left red-faced and panting at fifteen minutes, and had nearly collapsed at the end of the first length, and now Taylor was running backwards and outpacing her companions, using the force to keep from striking anything as she watched her ‘Running Mates’ struggling to keep up. Both of the older men were red in the face and Taylor felt a bit bad about the strain they were under, but considering the exercise they were getting, Taylor imagined that their hearts would thank her for the work-out.

Feeling the ground levelling off and knowing that she didn’t have long before the hill began its descent, Taylor turned, slowing her pace to allow the two men to catch up. Grinning, Taylor flashed her eyes up at her father, watching as the panting man came up on her left. Considering her Dad quietly, Taylor was honestly astounded by the changes that had overcome the man since their explosive fight the previous week. When he’d sat her down, and they’d began to discuss her plans to get ready to be a hero, she’d expected some help with planning, and perhaps some assistance with running around, or some money if she needed something, she hadn’t expected him to join her on her training, or as much of it as he could do.

The pair of them had become a common sight in the early morning before Danny had to head to work, the pair of them chugging their way toward the western edge of town and back, and Taylor had caught a few amused eyes glancing their way as they went, amused by the idea of a girl and her dad working out like that.

“C’mon boys. Just down the hill and we can stretch out a bit before continuing.” She’d flash a grin to the two men, glancing up to take in the other figure that had become a constant companion over the last few weeks. Ralph Creighton had been at her side not just during her training, but any other time that she left the house as well. The PRT Field Commander and a small team had been assigned to Taylor to keep her from getting attacked at home after her rather public activities over the last few weeks.

Taylor suspected that there were other motivations behind the posting, believing that the man was intended to be a soft sell for the PRT and Protectorate. Ralph was a friendly and amusing man, and he seemed happy to chat with Taylor and had joined Taylor on her work-outs, even offering her tips when he could. Bastila seemed to think that the man was also there to serve as a not-so-subtle reminder of the debt that she owed to Piggot, and Jolee imagined that it was some blending of both motivations, along with perhaps a genuine concern that someone else would get to Taylor before she could make a choice.

As the two men puffed down the hill, Taylor brought her speed up to close to her maximum,
grinning at the groans from the figures behind her as she descended the steep hill with an eager lop, heading toward her house. She ended up beating both men to the house by nearly fifteen minutes, and they’d find her stretching near the dilapidated patio set in the rear of the house. Each of the men took a bottle, drinking quickly before joining Taylor and stretching out before they flopped onto the ground. Taylor glanced at them both before playfully rolling her eyes at their half-hearted whining to each other.

Deciding that they needed to relax a bit before continuing, Taylor reached a hand out toward where her satchel rested, using the force to open it and summoning her weapon to her side. The gun-metal black cylinder that shot out was over a foot long and covered in a thick rubber grip that allowed her to quickly snatch it out of the air. She spun the cylinder in hand and used her grasp on The Force to depress the releases on it causing the twin ends of the retractable bo staff to snap out to full extension as it was rotated.

Taylor moved to test the weapon, ignoring the men’s eyes on her as she stepped into her first Kata, slipping through the practiced motions with ease as she subsumed herself into the force, moving with precision and speed from form to form, her eyes eventually drifting closed as she worked. Taylor eventually became so lost in The Force that it took both men coughing to jar her back to the world around her and she ended up with a bright blush as both men stood on either side of her. She glanced at them, ignoring their smirks and affecting a faux haughty tone.

“So you finally decided to join me, hrm? Fully recovered from your arduous trials then?” She grinned when they both rolled their eyes, settling into a ready stance when both men pulled out expanding batons and snapped them out to full extension. When they both came at her from different sides, Taylor dipped into the force, using her power to counter their attacks, twirling the weapon around and intercepting each attack.

Ralph was by far the more severe threat. The man’s training had left him well skilled with the painful baton he held, and often he gave Taylor the most trouble. Her father’s skills weren’t anything to ignore. Taylor's father was rapidly improving, and somehow he was picking up moves that neither Ralph or herself had been teaching him. Taylor was reasonably sure that he was getting lessons on the side. The ebony haired girl danced between the men, using her staff to block each attack, chuckling to herself as she spun the weapon adroitly between her hands to keep Ralph off guard. A flash of The Force saw her dodging and snapping the staff back over her spine to intercept the clumsy strike at her back.

When she caught the pair of them nodding at each other over her shoulders, she tensed and when the force screamed at her as the pair suddenly attacked as one. Ralph lunged in with a feint that would require both ends of the staff to intercept both it and the follow-up strike, while behind her, Her father moved with a practiced attack toward her lower back. The move had been rehearsed, and Taylor imagined that they were hoping to leave her with the choice of taking a strike across her lower back or thigh. Rather than doing either, Taylor instead chose to use the force to launch herself upwards, flipping over Ralph to land facing both men, holding the weapon before her as the winded men stared back at her incredulously.

“That’s cheating.” Taylor grinned cheekily at her dad as huffed and took a moment to breathe. When Ralph merely grinned and presented a second baton that he extended with a click, Taylor moved to intercept the man before he could charge at her. When the weapons crashed into her own, and her father headed toward her back again, Taylor grinned happily, allowing her mind to sink into the exercise, happily leaving the problems of the world behind for a few blissful minutes of simplistic problem-solving.
Eventually, though, Taylor’s father had gotten a call to go into work early, and Ralph begged off to return to lead his team, leaving Taylor alone in the house. As she stood in the kitchen mixing up and actual breakfast for herself, Taylor considered her schedule for the day. She had some homework to attend to, but that wouldn’t take long. Taylor considered the small pile of books on the table and she moved over, gently tracing the thick tomes.

Part of her wasn’t sure if she wanted to return the library, every time was a disappointment, she kept turning around and expecting to find a puffing Sabah waiting for her, explaining another mishap that had lead to her being late or missing a study session. It hadn’t occurred to Taylor how much she might miss the shy girl’s presence in her life. Sabah had integrated herself into Taylor’s life as a touchstone almost. Taylor hadn’t realized how much she used those quiet morning chats and conversations to ground herself. To make her see that the insanity that plagued the cape worlds wasn’t all that there was.

Conversations both personal and academic were a luxury that Taylor had begun to miss. She missed looking over Sabah’s work and pointing out the spelling errors or suggesting edits, more than that she missed having someone to chat with about the weather, or the news. She missed being able to look up interesting anecdotes and facts and having someone that she could share them with and laugh. Taylor glanced at the phone that sat depressingly silent by the stove and considered adding a fifth unanswered text to the four that she’d already sent to the other girl.

Amy had been a welcome change and Talking with her often helped, but the conversations were different, and the friendship had lacked the casual ease that had factored into Taylor’s friendship with Sabah. Taylor understood why, of course, Capes inherently didn’t trust each other, and it took time and effort to overcome that natural inclination. She couldn’t imagine talking with a random cape about the things that had seemed perfectly reasonable to discuss with Sabah when she’d been the shy nerdy girl with a fascination in bright coloured fabric.

Taylor imagined that the ongoing silence was probably due to similar feelings on Sabah’s part. Though she supposed that the girl’s mistaken impression of her age and intelligence hadn’t been an easy pill to swallow, she’d considered how she’d have felt if someone who’d been four years younger had done that to her and she could easily see herself just pretending that she’d never met the other person.

Taylor’s thoughts continued to whirl like this as she cooked a passable breakfast and muddled through her homework for the day. Eventually, the time rolled around that she’d have left the week before to meet Sabah, and rather than giving up on the idea, Taylor packed the books into her handbag and set off at a fast jog. It might be pointless to try, but that had never really stopped her yet.

“Excellent hustle today, Danny, I think we’ll have her on the ropes soon enough.” Freshly showered and dressed for work, Danny chuckled as he met up with Ralph in the kitchen and walked the man toward the front of the house. As he moved, he casually checking his pockets to make sure that he was ready to head to work. Glancing up he found the PRT trooper watching him curiously.

“So what’s the emergency anyway? You don’t normally have to leave this early.” The man checked
his watch, and Danny rolled his eyes as he slid on his work-boots. Tying them up as he spoke, Danny glanced up toward the other man.

“Some of the guys said they saw an ice cream truck with a demon head on it zipping around the docks by the DWU offices, so we’ve got to check it out.” Standing, Danny brushed his hands off on his jeans and then gestured for the other man to precede him out. When the PRT Trooper had headed off toward the van that served as the small team’s command post, Danny headed for his truck, climbing in and turning it on and heading for work.

As he drove along, quickly following the familiar streets, his thoughts turned introspective, the older man considering how the last week had gone. When he’d suggested assisting Taylor with her training, he imagined that she expected him to keep himself appraised, and help her when she needed it, but she seemed to enjoy having him around more, and if Danny was honest with himself, he enjoyed the chance to connect with his daughter.

They’d started out simply at first. Danny had shown up in the morning as Taylor prepared for her run, and he’d joined her for it. She seemed bemused but allowed him to keep up, showing him the proper stretches afterwards that kept him moving. Then he watched her training her powers or practicing with her weapons. When she meditated he’d initially just sat with her, but after asking her to show him, he’d begun quietly meditating when she did, the mental exercises improving his disposition immensely.

At meals the pair discussed whatever Taylor was writing, and he involved himself in what she was learning. Quite proudly, he’d even occasionally suggested an avenue of research that hadn’t occurred to Taylor or commented on a problem from a direction she hadn’t thought of it. A thoughtful debate wasn’t something that Danny often found himself engaged in, but he did his best to at least keep abreast with what Taylor was focusing on each night.

Currently, he knew that she was focusing on studying for AP classes and put aside her more esoteric research projects for the moment. He occasionally quizzed her, and the family meetings had moved from the kitchen to the living room and they often just chatted for a few hours about what was going on around the house and what Taylor or Danny needed to get done. The weapon training had come last when the PRT Guard had asked to join their daily exercise regime. He’d offered to spar with Taylor, and then he’d even begun showing Danny a few tricks with the baton he had that Danny had been supplementing with help from some of the boys that hung around the docks that were familiar with the weapon.

He was watching the buildings beginning to decay around him visibly as he headed east. Considering the street, Danny shifted, locking the doors of his truck, directing it toward the headquarters of the Dockworkers Association. As he pulled the vehicle into the lot, he rolled his eyes at the small knot of men standing around waiting on him. He hopped out of the truck and adjusted his hat, making his way toward the group.

“All right guys, what’s this about you all freaking out about a haunted ice cream truck?” His voice carried, and the men all chimed in as one, all of them babbling rapidly at him until Danny held up a hand and pointed at the oldest of the lot and lifted an eyebrow. The man shifted in place nervously, drawing a flat cap off his head and wringing it between his hands.

“Wusn’t haunted.” His voice was low and raspy. “Jes’ creepy lookin’. Had a big flaming clown head on top with a terrifying smile on it. And it was playin’ some truly off banging metal. Honestly, s’the weirdest thing I seen since that parahuman burned off his clothes as he tried to rob that cigarette factory.” Danny sighed rubbing at his scruffy beard. Danny took several minutes to consider the lot and the men before gesturing.
“Alright, where did you see it last? We’ll fan out, see what’s going on. If we can locate it, we’ll call the cops. Otherwise, they’ll just ignore us. I doubt anyone else would want to canvas this pile of rotten brick.”
Chapter Summary

[[ I’ve been plotting this chapter since like... mid-way through 2. But uh. Always happy for feedback. Before we start complaining about random meetings, I’d suggest reading the end of 3.1, and there’s a reference back in 2.7 to the foooolks at the end. =] ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

April 28th, 2011
Downtown, Brockton Bay

Taylor had glanced around hopefully as she arrived, and when she found no one awaiting her arrival, she wilted a bit. Standing in the middle of the park she caught sight of Ralph dressed casually, taking a seat on a bench a fair distance away, a thermos of something warm and a newspaper tucked under her arm. Taylor considered immediately starting her meditations, but part of her couldn’t give up hope that Sabah might be lurking around. She gave Ralph a wave, nodding at his friendly nod as she crossed the street and headed up into the library.

As she headed across the polished floor, she casually opened her bag, drawing out the books that she had to return, setting them neatly before the Librarian, standing on her tip toes to peer out over the sea of study stations, frowning before a gentle voice broke into her observations.

“Sorry dearie, still haven’t seen her. It’s a busy week as you know though, probably just got distracted studying for exams right?” The older woman flashed Taylor a smile, and the girl tried to return it with as much realism as she could. Once she’d swiped her card and gotten the nod from the librarian, she quickly ducked away, disappearing through the study stations, keeping her eyes on the carpet.

The girl breathed a bit heavier as her eyes pricked, though this didn’t stop her from quickly scouring the shelves of books for the ones she needed to continue her studying. Collecting all four before returning to the counter, Taylor hurried through the process of checking them out. Taylor clenched her fist, doing her best to keep her breathing even, though once she had her books, she practically scurried across the lobby, bursting out into the fresh air and gasping in huge lungfuls of air. When she recovered, she moved quickly down the stairs, walking to lean against one of the colossal statues that sat to either side of the stairs.

Ignoring the looks she got from the people that passed her on the street just as easily as she was ignoring the looks that Bastila and Jolee’s images gave her when they flickered into view. Instead, Taylor was focusing on getting her breathing back under control. She kept her eyes on the sidewalk, staring at the cracks in the stone path, counting and tracing each until her racing heart stilled and she could finally stand. Seeing Ralph was watching her with concern, Taylor waved him off, moving carefully across the open grass of the park, setting her bag down and assuming her ready stance.

The young woman paused before reaching out to the force, remembering Jolee’s lessons and she
breathed in and out, imagining the concern and panic in her welling and bubbling up through her chest, gathering it in her lungs as she inhaled and slowly expelling it as she exhaled until she felt more at ease. Only then did she reach out, touching The Force and letting the warmth surge through her, washing away the worst of her concerns. She stood in her ready position basking in the comfortable sensation for a few moments before moving into her first pose, holding it and then continuing into the next.

In her mind a shadowy figure formed opposite her, moving in time with her. Each movement was precise and careful, and Taylor imagined that she was dancing with the shadow, matching it with a move for each move the shadow made, dancing around each other and never quite touching, both of their forms twirling around each other like two ribbons on a breeze. She continued like this, submerging deeper into The Force and accentuating her style, bending and twisting through each of the more complicated motions, twirling and dancing along the grass, utterly blind to the occasional pedestrian that stopped to gawk or take images of the skilled martial artist.

Taylor would have continued like this for as long as it took to utterly purge the panic and fear in her mind, but partway through her fourth repetition of the set her senses lit up, and the girl spun rapidly, twirling low and opening her eyes to see a blue and pink blur go screaming past her. Taylor followed it and scowled as the blur resolved itself into Glor-Taylor blinked staring at the pink tank top and jeans that the girl wore and sighing. Victoria Dallon had just attacked her. She watched the girl ramping up for another attack, and she felt irritation swirl up and over her mind.

Before she could think better of it, Taylor’s hand lashed out, and the force wrapped around Victoria’s flying form and slammed her face down into the dirt. When the girl braced herself to try and force herself up, the Force remained constant, and Taylor watched the girls hands and knees forcing themselves into the turf. Glancing up to see Ralph standing and moving toward her Taylor held up her hand and shook her head. Ignoring the PRT trooper’s reproachful look, she walked across the grass and crouched down next to the struggling girl. She stared at the desperation in the girl’s movements, and she eased the pressure enough to keep the brute from digging herself a hole quite literally.

“Why do you keep attacking me Dallon?” Taylor’s voice came out harsher then she’d intended, and she frowned when the girl glanced up at her and growled loudly struggling even now against the force that bound her savagely in place.

“L-Let me go.” She growled and struggled, and Taylor snapped her fingers in front of the blonde girl’s face until her panicked eyes stopped spinning and focused on her. She repeated her question and was shocked at the angry expression on the girl’s face. She couldn’t still be upset about the beat down at the fucking bank.

“What’d you fucking do to my sister?” That shocked Taylor, and she blinked, staring at Victoria askance. She imagined that her shock was showing cause the girl lost a lot of her fire and seemed to shrink into herself. “What’d you do to Amy?” She asked softer this time, voice tinged with desperation. Taylor stared at Victoria for a moment and sighed softly, quietly taking a seat and shifting her grasp on Victoria loosening it enough to let the girl sit up. When Victoria ended up perched on her knees, Taylor studied her for a few moments, speaking when the girl looked like she might start shouting again soon.

“What makes you think that I had anything to do with Amy?” She stared at the girl quietly and blinked, concern splashing through her at the deep sadness and desperation that seemed to wash through the girl opposite her.
“You had to have done something. Amy was hurt in that bank, and you… did something to her. You saved her, but then everything went wrong. She was hurt, and you and Mom went to see her, and now she refuses to even look at me.” Taylor flinched back at the look of raw anguish on the blonde’s features. “She’s my best friend, and now she won’t respond to my texts. My sister won’t answer her phone. She’s not in school, and I can’t visit her at my aunt’s house. They’ve all been keeping us apart, and no one will tell me why.” The girl stared at her accusingly and Taylor rubbed her forehead.

“Before you ask, no I don’t know what’s going on there.” At the look of disbelief. “I don’t. I haven’t asked her about it, and she hasn’t told me. We’ve tried to keep our conversations light. We’re still getting to know each other, and discussing what you and your therapist are trying to deal with is a bit much for new friendships.” Taylor spoke soft, her tone laced with concern and sympathy. And it was the truth, Amy hadn’t told her anything, and Taylor hadn’t asked, though considering the subject that Amy tended to bring up after her Wednesday and Saturday evening sessions with Resonance, Taylor could certainly make an educated guess. But that’d not be fair to Amy or Victoria. She watched the girl opposite her crumpling painfully back onto her haunches, and she sighed faintly.

“Victoria.” When the miserable blue eyes turned on her Taylor found herself running a hand through her own sable coloured hair. “She’s your best friend right? Your sister? And you love her?” She watched the girl nod, and she shifted a bit, sighing as she brought her legs up and rested her elbows on her knees, staring at Victoria as she placed her chin on her crossed arms. “Something did happen, that’s pretty clear, and while I don’t know what it is, what I can tell you is that when I healed her, I didn’t do it perfectly, and it allowed the doctors to discover something going on with her. She’s trying to deal with it, and I don’t think you chasing her like this as she tries to get space is helping her.” She spoke gently but still sighed when the girl before her crumpled anyway.

Running a hand over her face, Taylor considered the blonde quietly. She shifted a bit and settled down, leaning forward and reaching over to very gently and very carefully give the blonde girl a carefully squeeze on the shoulder. Victoria glanced up at her blue eyes sparkling with tears. Taylor took the fact that her arm had remained attached as a good sign.

“She’s still your sister, Victoria. She still loves you, and she’s getting help. Give her time. She’ll come around…” ’Hopefully,’ Taylor added silently to herself after the comment and she chuckled as the blonde girl scrubbed at her face with her hands. She watched the girl as she sat there, muttering quietly. She finally sat back and stared at the irritated girl for a few moments and moved to hop to her feet. She limbered herself up and considered whether distracting Victoria was worth the risk. She glanced off to the side, finally studying Bastila. The woman stared back a moment before offering a shrug. Apparently, it was up to her.

“So. Victoria. Since you’re here, I was thinking maybe we could spar?” She glanced at the blonde as she froze and glanced up at her incredulously. “I won’t use telekinesis. Just uh. Fists. I doubt I can knock you over with my hands, but uh. Tags?” She stared at the girl, snorting when Victoria scoffed and hopped to her feet.

“You might be hot shit with your mind-power voodoo, Hebert—” Taylor chimed in quickly, getting the other girl’s attention before she could finish the sentence.

"Taylor. Your sister’s one of my friends, and your Mom’s my lawyer. You can call me Taylor. And before you shoot it down, give it a shot.” She grinned at the reluctant look on Victoria’s face, shifting into a ready pose and raising her hands. “C’mon. One hit, you can even pull it. If you break anything, I can heal myself, unlike your sister. No harm no foul.” When the girl didn’t step closer, Taylor shifted from foot to foot and waved her arms.
“C’mon! Try and hit me. If you can.”

“C’mon! Try and hit me. If you can.” Victoria had been about to leave when she’d heard that. If the girl had said that. If she wanted a broken nose that badly, she’d get one. She shifted into position, lifting her foot and pausing when Taylor held up her hand. “No flight! Just. Keep your feet on the ground. You’re still strong down here with us mere mortals, right?” Victoria rolled her eyes and raised her fist, stepping forward.

She lashed out with a perfect Jab. She blinked when Taylor raised a hand and casually deflected the punch which could dent steel. She stared and blinked. She shifted back and moved in again, lashing out with a cross, watching closely this time. Taylor’s hands came up again, her flat palm deflecting the punch. When Victoria saw the fist connect with Taylor’s palm, she saw the faint haze of glow around the girl’s hands and the faint sparks. Victoria glanced at the other girl’s face and chuckled as Taylor’s grin grew even broader.

“So, boxing? Interesting. I didn’t take you for a technical fighter like that.” Taylor shifted spryly from foot to foot, and Victoria felt her smile growing as she dropped into a more relaxed stance, lashing out with a harder punch, the effort causing significantly more sparks and Taylor’s hand to jerk back. Victoria was impressed, she could have put Armsmaster through one of Dragon’s suits with one of those punches. But Taylor merely grinned and moved more eagerly, egging Victoria on. “You’re good, your technique is solid if a bit dated. Who taught you?”

“My Grandfather.” Victoria moved faster, lashing out with her fists, starting to mix punches, trying to line up combo’s, her grin spreading as Taylor laughed and danced back. When Taylor started to use her hands, those glowing palms lashing out and deflecting Victoria’s punches from important area’s she felt herself relaxing more and lashing out eagerly. “This was before I had the powers. I was athletic, and he thought a girl should know how to defend herself. Most guys that don’t take no for an answer stop being so pushy when you hit them with a cross or an uppercut.” She found herself chatting quietly as the girl moved around her, egging her on.

“You’re good like this. You know. Controlled. Precise. You’re keeping your strikes away from vital areas in case I miss my blocks. Why don’t you fight like this.” Taylor’s voice was curious, and Victoria tensed up before she caught Taylor’s eyes seeing the earnest curious expression, and she sighed, stepping back and moving to work some footwork into the spar, lashing out with a few of the simple taekwondo kicks that she’d learned. Taylor merely grinned and stepped smoothly out of the way of the clumsy attack.

“You know why. I’m Alexandria Lite. I should fight like her. She’s like…” Victoria trailed off, trying to describe what watching Alexandria's fighting style was like. How she'd felt seeing the woman do battle with villains on the Television? Victoria juggled words in her mind, her expression turning contemplative until she glanced up to see Taylor smirking at her. When Victoria attacked, she was shocked when instead of blocking, Taylor shifted around Victoria's blows like water around a stone. Slipping past her one-two punch, the young girl jumped up at the spinning kick that Victoria attempted, landing on the hero’s leg and using it as a spring-board to vault clear over her. Taylor landed facing Victoria’s back, and with a grin, Taylor reached out, tapping Victoria’s spine playfully.

“Alexandria’s actually indestructible, unlike you,” Taylor commented faintly. “Also, I think that her
flight works differently than yours. You seem to have to deal with momentum a lot more than she does, from what I’ve read about. And so what if you’re Alexandria Lite?” Taylor bent over backwards at the waist, nearly making a 90-degree angle, allowing both of Victoria’s snap punches to swing past her entirely, and she sprang up and playfully tapped the center of Victoria’s forehead.

“You’re strong, fast, and you’ve got that one-hit barrier. With a bit more skill you could be devastating in close quarters combat. Launch yourself into the fight, and go in hard before they can go in hard on you.” She counted faintly under her breath as she moved around Victoria’s slow, heavy punches. “Not so hard. I’m not coated in heavy-duty Titanium plates, and winding up your punches like that slows you down. Even your taps would rattle most brains, you know. You can flick people and hurt them, and that’d be quicker.” Taylor smirked and moved, seemingly blurring as she lashed out, fingers playfully tapping at Victoria’s forehead, shoulders, elbows and wrists before Victoria could do more toss out a punch.

“You’ve got the power, and your technique isn’t terrible. Speed is what you need to work on.” Taylor hummed faintly and waved a hand, and Victoria found herself stilling her attacks as Taylor tilted her head, glancing off to the side as if in thought. She nodded almost to her self and then Victoria found Taylor’s eyes back on her once more.

“You ever played Hot hands?” She grinned at the blank look that Victoria shot her. “Hold your hands out like this.” Taylor demonstrated, holding her hands out arm’s length out with her palms up. When Victoria mimed the pose, she blinked as Taylor stepped in and rested her hands over Victoria’s facing down. “Object is to slap the tops of my hands with both of yours. If you can get the slap off before I can draw my hands back, you win. If you can actually do it at least once, I’ll do my best to keep you from getting grounded forever for skipping school.” Victoria paled as she realized how long she’d been here. She glanced off as Taylor waved at her.

“You needed an emotional day. There’s no point in going back now. Let’s do this.” She grinned competitively and then stared at Victoria, watching her curiously. Victoria glanced down, staring at Taylor’s tense hands and shifted, suddenly spinning her hands and slapping them down on...empty air. She glanced up and found Taylor feigning at buffing her nails on her sweatshirt. “Gonna have to get up earlier than that Dallon if you want to catch me.” She winked cheesily, and Victoria found her smile returning.

“Victoria, and back at it Taylor, let’s do this.” Victoria felt her competitiveness rising as she settled in, watching Taylor’s face and hands to try and judge her reaction times.

The explosion shook the ground and startled everyone in the park, Taylor and Victoria included. The girls had moved on from Hot Hands when Victoria had finally figured out that sacrificing power for speed, and watching Taylor’s face instead of her hands improved her skill. They’d swapped to an overly complicated patty cake style game where they did a chant and slapped their hands together and went faster and faster, Victoria only realized halfway through that it was a test of her control when she accidentally snapped Taylor’s wrist. She’d been shocked, though the girl had waved her off, and healed it almost casually with a glowing hand, before getting back in position with a quick suggestion about what to do next time.

The girls had been going at an almost blurring speed when the flash of light had blinded them, and
they’d thrown themselves down. When the ringing in their ears faded, Taylor had turned to stare, Victoria watching as well as a huge billowing cloud of smoke to the north-east. Taylor recovered first, leaping to her feet and staring in shock in that direction.

“That’s the docks, Victoria. My Dad’s out that way.” She shifted, lunging over and grabbing her bag. Victoria quickly darted over and grabbed onto the other girl’s arm.

“Taylor that was a fucking bomb. Several of them. What’re you planning on doing. We need to get somewhere safe. My house. My Mom will know what to do.” She tugged nervously on the other girl’s arm, confronted with the surreal realization that she of all people was suggesting caution. She watched as Taylor pulled back on her arm and all but growled.

“Victoria. It’s my Dad!” She shifted and tried to free herself. “I can’t just... Look at that cloud; half the docks have to be on fire. We have to go. Your mom wouldn’t get there in time.” Finally, something changed and with a surge of strength, the other girl yanked her arm free and turned. When Taylor started waving at someone, Victoria glanced over to see a man on a nearby bench already on his phone. She frowned at the implication before shifting in time to see that Taylor was already gone, running toward the smoke with rapidly increasing speed. Swearing Victoria leapt into the air and quickly set off after the other girl. Victoria had to go at nearly full speed to close the widening gap between herself and Taylor, barely reaching the other girl who didn’t seem capable of outpacing her at full flight speed. She followed along in Taylor’s wake, getting close to the edge of the park before Taylor shocked her. Floating in place, Victoria gaped at the girl when she leapt fifteen feet into the air to land on a building and started to hop from roof to roof like a demented grasshopper, rapidly heading north.

Only when Victoria lifted herself over the level of the taller buildings, following as quickly in Taylor’s wake as she could, did she see the fires. Half of the docks and the Trainyards had gone up in flames, and numerous small explosions were visibly detonating still toward the middle of the docks. As she flew at full speed after Taylor, Victoria watched thugs dressed in yellow storming down the streets, throwing grenades. She growled as she considered stopping, but she turned and followed the other girl. The bigger fight was that way.

Victoria could only sigh in relief as they seemed to turn toward the coast, Taylor’s path moving to dodge around the worse of the ongoing explosions, heading toward the water. As they moved into the docks proper, Victoria found herself having a harder and harder time keeping Taylor in sight, the girl’s rapid lunges and leaps were outpacing Victoria’s flight in the thick smoke, and the clouds seemed to be thickening around her, leaving it darker and darker. Victoria felt her breath getting shorter as she tried to keep up with Taylor. Taking a moment to wipe at her eyes to try and clear them, Victoria felt herself panting. When she opened her eyes to find no sign of Taylor, she panicked, spinning in place and calling the girl’s name as loud as she could with her raspy voice.

As the darkness closed in around her, the last thing she saw was the ground rushing up around as she weakly shouted Taylor’s name.

The sensation of movement brought her back to wakefulness. Victoria’s eyes pried themselves open, and she stared up to see Taylor’s determined features, the girl’s dark hair flowing around behind her as the world blurred with the speed they were moving. Thick black smoke hung around them. When
she shifted, she felt Taylor’s hand tightening around her arm, and those dark eyes peered down at her through the large bottle-like glasses.

“Your shield isn’t so good with smoke, it seems. I had to catch you to keep you from shattering the road. Luckily my power can bypass your shield partially? We’ll need to stay in physical contact. I can keep myself and anyone I’m touching breathing in most environments, but I can’t do it at a distance.” Victoria blinked and glanced around. Part of her wanted to fly on her own, but she remained in place as she saw Taylor focusing on a colossal towering inferno, heading toward what had once been a six-story building.

When they came to a stop at the end of the lot, Taylor let her down and Victoria took the girl’s hand, staring at the blazing inferno. She stared at it in horror, glancing back at Taylor. “Taylor...that looks bad. I can’t go in there alone since I can’t breathe, and you’re not fireproof.” She paused, eyeing Taylor to try and figure out if she was. Taylor didn’t react; her eyes closed as she clenched Victoria’s hand.

“There are people alive nearby. Not the main building. That warehouse though.” Taylor pointed at a nearby warehouse that looked like it’d been converted into a garage of some sort. Victoria wanted to ask how Taylor could know that, but she merely shook her head and headed toward the garage. Both ends of the building had collapsed under the flames, but the middle of the building seemed to have been spared the worst of the fire, though with the licking fire that wouldn’t last forever. Taylor followed in Victoria’s wake and stared at it.

“At least ten, no more than thirty,” Taylor spoke softly, her tone laced with horror. She stared at the building and shuddered. “Over a hundred people worked here, and that’s nothing for the people that came here to get work.” Taylor’s voice was a traumatized whisper, and Victoria frowned but tugged her along.

“If they’re in there, they won’t be alive much longer. C’mon. She paused a distance from the building staring at the glowing metal siding. She glanced at Taylor. “I’ll hold my breath, and I’ll pull the siding away. If I fall, uh. Stop me from dying please?” She spoke and frowned at the shell-shocked look on Taylor’s face. “Taylor! Do you understand, I do not want to die in a warehouse fire.” The young woman snapped, and Taylor seemed to jerk out of it, staring off to the side before firming up and nodding at Victoria.

“Just uh. Be careful Victoria. Amy wouldn’t forgive me if you died.” She stepped back, releasing Victoria, and suddenly the superhero felt the oppressive heat against her shield, and she coughed at the smoke. She held her breath and stepped forward, gripping the metal and ignoring how her clothing began to smoulder. She seized the metal and ripped the entire super hot sheet off ignoring the burning sensation her hands and tossed the whole section of the siding toward the water. She lifted a hand, and ignored the screaming from Taylor, slamming her fist into the interior wall of the building.

She barely felt Taylor lunging toward her, and wrapping her arms around her before the wall cracked and a wave of super-heated air exploded out over them both. Victoria flinched and closed her eyes but paused when the pain didn’t come, staring down at Taylor who’d clung to her back. The girl was muttering curses into her back, but she’d kept them both from being incinerated. That was a plus. Victoria took a moment to peek in before stepping through the hole she’d created, Taylor attached to her back, the pair crept around the burning wreckage, coming across a truly odd sight.

Twenty-three dockworkers with various degrees of burns and scorched clothes were crouched around a tiny glowing object that projected a dome that barely covered them. Standing between the
workers, the object and them were two figures in armour. Victoria was initially reminded of Gallant, but the armour was different. One figure was tall and broad, cloaked in inky black armour and chain with devil horns. He carried a massive sword rested over one shoulder, and a heavy shield in the other. The faint glow from the joints and the shimmers over the armour told her that this was some sort of power armour despite its appearance. The other figure was so massive that he had to crouch down to fit inside the building and he was actually outside the bubble, seemingly exposed to the fire.

If this was power armour, it was unique. It looked like a hunched over giant with a massive head with a single glowing eye in the visor. A mace the size of a pickup truck rested next to the reclined giant’s leg. Both of the armoured figures turned to stare at them, and the one in the bubble with the horn called out caustically.

“These are civilians. We don’t care about your damn turf war, you Asian bastards. We didn’t do anything to piss you off, and they certainly didn’t. So back off or we’ll use these suits on you.” Confused at the vague threats, Victoria tried to glance at Taylor, sighing at the girl gripping her shirt. She stepped forward, emerging from the smoke to stand before the two figures. She stared at them curiously wondering who the two independents were. It wasn’t until she saw the fluttering snitch around the massive figure that she caught on.

Leet and Uber. Victoria stared for nearly a minute before casually releasing her confusion in a single encapsulated word.

“What.”

Chapter End Notes

[[ =D MORE CHAPTERS FOR EVERYONE. EVERYONE. EDIT: Also, the uh. How's will be explained in the next chapter. First perspective is Danny's and explains all the crazy shit going down. >_> ]]
It had been deceptively easy to locate the ‘haunted’ ice cream truck. All of the workers had scattered in different directions, but in less than twenty minutes one of the younger lads had called over the walkie-talkies to say they’d sighted the thing. Having drawn the short straw, Danny found himself quietly appreciating the artistry of the vehicle as he approached the vehicle. It was, in fact, an ice cream truck as they’d claimed. At first glance, if you ignored the massive flaming clown head atop the vehicle, it looked almost normal.

The vehicle had been painted white with pink Polka Dots, and there were windows on either side, both displaying menu’s, though when he got closer enough, Dan doubted that he’d enjoy a Molotov Milkshake all that much. He walked around the truck, taking in the cutesy but still disturbing imagery, and he peeked into the driver’s seat to see a backpack several boxes, and a handful of scattered looking battered electronics. Realization hit Danny, and he rolled his eyes as he hopped down. Taking his walkie-talkie from his belt he depressed it, speaking into the receiver with wry amusement.

“It’s Uber and Leet, I guess this is a video game thing.” He stared at the truck, figuring that it was from some game that he’d never seen. Taking a moment to glance at the rest of the workers, watching them head back toward the DWA building nearby. Danny hadn’t thought that the villains were so close to the Association building, they typically set up further away to maintain their privacy. It was a bit of an open secret among the Dockworkers that Uber and Leet were among the broken parts of the docks with them, the group as a whole treated them more as unofficial mascots. The kids seemed to buy into it, tossing the occasional bit of less than legal work to the DWA and its members. Danny was typically against gooning, but others were less particular about feeding their families. Danny had often wondered if one of the boys’ parents had been members since they seemed oddly fond of the Dockworkers despite their typically caustic treatment of most people that weren’t also criminals.

Heading over to the Warehouse, Danny shook off his thoughts, hand raising and moving to rap heavily on the rusted door with his knuckles. Danny was surprised when the door opened almost immediately, and he found a shotgun shoved into his face. Holding up his hands and backing up, the older man watched the concerned look on the muscular young man’s face. The boy stared at him in concern and then gently lowered his weapon.
“Mr. Hebert? What are you-” The massive young man, Uber almost certainly, glanced over his shoulder and toward the interior of the long-abandoned factory. Danny watched the younger man’s concerned disposition, and he frowned.

“Danny is fine, lad. You’re not in trouble, we just saw the truck screaming around the docks earlier, and we were wondering why you guys had gotten so close to the offices. Don’t you usually stay closer to the middle of the docks? I thought I saw you moving bases last week.” Danny spoke curiously, pausing when Uber kept his attention on the interior of the shop. Going silent Danny listened to the panicked cursing and rustling toward the rear of the warehouse. “Everything alright there Kid?”

“Something's going on, ” Uber replied distractedly as he hung the shotgun over his back by a strap, staring around before waving Danny in. Danny entered the shop at Uber's back, following him toward the panicked noises. “We were test driving the Sweet Tooth out there when Leet’s bomb detectors started going off.” Danny frowned as he glanced around, the pair coming into a room with a massive central space that was a colossal mess, dozens of, as far as Danny could tell, half-completed projects covered every open surface of every table in the cavernous room. A few completed ones were around; the Mario carts hung up on a nearby wall from the kids’ Mario adventure. Other weapons and various bits of tech had also been hung on the walls like trophies. Danny paused at the sight of two large somethings covered in tarps, only turning when he heard the muttering.

There was a large desk that had once held massive reams of paper and a computer if the scattered and broken junk around it's base was anything to go by. Currently, the surface had been cleared and Leet was standing before it, the wiry man's face white with terror as he rapidly assembled something. Leet was muttering under his breath to himself as he worked, and Danny found himself stepping closer, watching the work carefully.

“Can’t do that, did that with-” Leet muttered faintly and trailed off and he was rapidly cannibalizing various bits of tech from every other project making an even bigger mess of the room as he ripped components free and attached them to the strange device he was building. Danny glanced over at Uber, watching as Leet moved to keep packing up a bag. Part of him was worried that the boy was messing with him, but terrified way that he held his shoulders made Danny concerned.

“You said there’s a bomb around here somewhere, we could call the police, they could help.” Uber barked out a laugh and Danny winced.

“A bomb? Danny, the detector was going crazy. There are Dozens, hundreds of them. We couldn’t go more than ten feet without seeing more. Leet found one, and they’re tinker tech of some sort. We tried to get out, and we found that all the exits from the docks are rigged to explode. There are goddamn depth charges in the bay. Someone desperately wants to keep someone inside this area, and they’re doing their damnedest to kill them.” Danny felt his face drain of colour and he moved to glance over toward Leet as the kid worked. As if sensing his direction, Uber spoke again. “He’s building something. Got an idea as we headed back here, Apparently, the bombs are timed and we have a bit of time.” Danny glanced over when Uber checked his watch and frowned severely. “Not much time mind. Hey! Wait, where are you going?”

“Where? There are over 3 dozen dockworkers at the HQ, Uber. I have to go and get them out of there.” Danny had turned and headed toward the exit at the words, and he paused at the young man's outburst. When the boy looked concerned, Danny just waved at him. “It’s fine, kid, watch out for him, okay? Good luck!” Danny turned and started to jog for the exit.
“You’ve got twelve minutes Danny! Try not to fucking die!” The shout carried through to him and Danny chuckled darkly as he headed out of the warehouse. He grabbed his walkie-talkie as he jogged toward the headquarters of the Dockworkers Association, lifting it to his mouth.

“There’s a credible bomb threat, I repeat, there’s a bomb threat. You all need to get out of the building.” Danny held the Talkie up and listened to the crackling silence before another voice came over the talkie.

“Funny Danny, some of us have actual work to—” Dannie pressed the button and spoke over the voice of the young man that handled the communication station.

“Eric, so help me god. There are bombs over half of the god-dammed docks, and I need you to do what I tell you. You need to go and pull the nearest fire alarm, and then go and tell everyone in the offices that they need to get out of the building, now!” Danny let a bit of the anger he was feeling leak into his voice as he kept up the jog. He switched through the various frequencies the Union used, quickly repeating the conversation as he headed for the offices.

It was ten minutes later that he was rounding the corner. He watched the stream people rushing out the front doors of the building. The man let out a sigh, coming to a stop, and resting his hands on his knees as he puffed, watching the building disgorging people. Danny had been checking his watch to see how long he had when the building before him detonated. The entire building went up in flames and the shockwave from the explosion blew half of the slower escapees across the parking lot, most of them ended up flying into the others who had made it out faster, and the others ended up rolling painfully along the cracked gravel of the lot.

The rest were vaporized by the fires, the entire building going up at once, and leaving it a massive flaming torch. The shockwave had blown Danny off of his feet and that’s the only thing that saved him from the waves of shrapnel as half the buildings on the street he’d been running down detonated like dominoes, going off one after another. As the explosions became more and more distant, Danny rolled over, getting to his feet. Ignoring the numerous tiny bleeding wounds that he had, Danny headed for the building.

Seeing that Eric had already gotten to one of the downed people, Danny crouched down, taking in the sight of the bleeding woman, Danny thought her name might be Marjory, an accountant, and the pressure that the young secretary was putting on her middle. Danny patted the kid’s shoulder. “Keep the pressure there. Did you get the fire alarm?” When Eric nodded in shock, Danny moved quickly, checking out the wounds. There were several bad scrapes and burns, but there didn’t seem to be any more severe piercing injuries among the rest of the fallen.

Taking a few minutes to get everything sorted, Danny did his best to ignore the ongoing sound of not-so-distant explosions, forcefully pushing the panic that he felt aside. He glanced at the others. “We’ve got enough vehicles here to get most of us out. Start pairing off and fill your cars.” Danny called out, marshalling the attention on him. “I doubt that staying this close to an ongoing cape fight will be wise. We’ll try and get as far from the middle of the docks as we can. Apparently, the exits are blocked, but we’ll see what we can do.” The others started nodding and gathering up the wounded, everyone heading toward the old warehouse that served as their parking garage.

Danny had almost reached the building when the rear of the building detonated entirely, followed shortly by another section, the explosions growing more and more violent as they grew closer to the approaching group, numerous secondary explosions joining them as the vehicles parked in the garage went up as the flames reached them. Danny froze in place, the world around him slowing to a halt as he watched the onrushing wall of flame approaching him. The sound of heavy thumping
behind them didn’t penetrate Danny’s mind until something rattled him as it passed like an onrushing Train.

Interposing itself between Danny, the rest of the Dockworkers and the explosion it viciously slammed...something into the ground and with a sudden surge of light, a wall of scintillating colours grew up between them and the ‘garage, the wave of fire washing over the dome and shooting upwards. Danny stared up at the giant until he felt a hand on his shoulder. He glanced to the left seeing a heavily built figure in inky black armour staring back. He stood there in shock as he glanced toward the flaming remains of the garage.

“We need to get inside somewhere, I don’t trust the ABB to not take a shot at a group of us standing around like this.” Danny glanced over at the massive figure as Leet’s tinny tiny voice emerged from it. He removed the ball of gadgetry from the ground, hafting it over his shoulder along with a mace.

“The ABB?” Danny stared toward Uber in shock and the armoured villain nodded while leading the group toward the smaller warehouse that the Dockworkers typically used for storage.

“We saw Oni Lee from a distance as we were heading this way. He was tossing bombs at anything that moved. We hid out, but I doubt we have much time.” The kid sounded genuinely worried, and Danny glanced at the others, speaking quickly to get them up and moving. Most were in shock but between Uber, Leet and himself they moved at a quick pace to the so far undamaged warehouse.

“What?” Danny had heard the tearing but he’d remained inside the bubble with the rest of civilians as Leet and Uber had insisted. The shield kept the smoke out of their area while allowing the oxygen to flow freely. The glowing bubble could apparently take the weight of the building, but Uber seemed concerned that they might suffocate if it had to. The entire group had all been playing very close attention to ends of the building that had already collapsed with all the damage that the spreading fires had done. Once again Danny considered trying to make a break for it. It’d been nearly twenty minutes, and things were just growing more and more dangerous.

Danny glanced up at the sounds of footsteps, watching quietly as a figure slowly resolved itself out of the smoke. When it was still mostly concealed, Danny let out a chuckle at Uber’s brusque tone, and the way the boy lifted his sword, clearly intent on taking out anyone that got too close. The older man stood up straighter when a familiar face emerged from the smoke. Despite the soot-stained pink shirt and blue jeans, the ash smudged face was still recognizable as Glory Girl. The girl strode up toward the group and stared. She stared more, frowning at the image before her. Danny could appreciate the amusement factor of Leet and Uber shielding a bunch of random bystanders from a cape fight, and when the flat what emerged from Victoria’s lips, he let out a chuckle.

Leet and Uber stared at each other in confusion before glancing back at the strange teenager. Danny stepped up to edge of the shield, sighing quietly as he stared out toward the strange blonde girl.

“Glory Girl.” He spoke simply and chuckled when Leet and Uber tensed, staring in concern at the blonde. Danny stared at the girl and said the first thing that came to his mind. “I thought your mother said that you were grounded.” As one, all three capes turned to stare at him with different levels of
confusion and shock on their faces.

“Glory Girl.” The words caused Taylor’s racing thoughts to still, and her racing heart to ease its rapid pitter patter. She gently weakened the death grip that she had around Victoria’s middle. She shifted, peering out and past the other blonde girl. Despite the incongruity, Taylor found herself boggling at the fact that she was the same height as Glory Girl, if not Taller. Shaking off the though Taylor peered around the other girl, blinking when she heard her Father’s voice continue. “I thought your mother said that you were grounded?”

Taylor took a moment to consider the fact that her father and Brandish apparently discussed disciplining their children with each other and shifted around Glory Girl. She knew the moment her dad saw her when his eyes widened with shock that rapidly slipped between a look of intense concern and anger. As she approached the bubble, she felt herself jerking to a stop, glancing back to see Victoria holding one of her hands and lofting an eyebrow. Right. Breathing. She merely tugged the girl forward, ignoring the confused looks from Leet and Uber.

“Taylor! What are you doing here? Half the god-damned docks are on fire at this point, and there are maniacs blowing up the rest of it. Why would you even think this is close to a good idea?” He turned and glanced toward Victoria who raised her free hand in defence.

“Hey! I tried to stop her, she just took off. But I think that uh. Mook that was following her called in the PRT.” Taylor glanced at Victoria, finding her glancing back in confusion. Taylor took a moment to work out what the girl was talking about before sighing.

“Ralph.” She said turning to face her dad. “He was on his phone as we left. Hopefully, he was calling in the PRT. New Wave will probably be coming along too if he tells the PRT that Victoria’s here.” Taylor shrugged and frowned quietly. Taylor shifted and stepped closer, glancing at the two metal-clad geeks who were just staring at her in shock. “That’s my dad.” She pointed at her glowering father. “Can you uh. Let me in? I need to see to the injured.” Leet glanced between Danny and her a moment before doing something and causing the barrier to flicker out.

When the workes began to cough, Taylor quickly dragged Victoria in. The shield immediately re-established and Taylor grasped the force, pushing the smoke out of the field, relaxing and releasing the other cape’s clammy hand when the air was safe to breathe. Taylor moved to crouch down near a younger man that was still holding a wound on a bleeding woman’s side. Taylor smiled at him and chuckled at the relieved look on his face as he drew back.

Taylor quickly set her own hand over the wound, reaching into the force and healing the wound. She ignored the looks that her father was sending her as she worked. She healed the worst of the serious wounds, leaving the scrapes and scratches for now. Eventually, the shivers down her spine and the -very- awkward silence from everyone else drove Taylor to stand and spin on her father.

“Stop staring at me like that. What dad? What did you expect me to do? Leave you here to die?” She ignored the shocked look on his face. “I’ve got these amazing powers, and you were in danger and you didn’t expect me to come and help you. More help is on the way, and I’m a god-damned healer.
on top of everything. What if they’d arrived ten minutes too late, and you’d bled out before they could get you to a hospital.” Taylor wiped at her smoke irritated eyes. “I couldn’t…” She trailed off, pausing at the hand on her shoulder. She glanced up to see her father staring at her and she huffed.

“I-” She paused, taking a deep breath. “I’m not going to say sorry for coming after you.” She glared at the man who merely rolled his eyes and chuckled, though they were both brought out of it by the sound of a soft cough. She glanced over and stared at Leet and Uber watching her. Leet had raised a single massive hand, pointing a finger up as he prepared to voice a thought when a -very- close explosion rocked them all.

“Olly Olly Oxen Free” The mechanically altered voice seemed feminine with a faint undercurrent of insane. It penetrated the thick black smoke, and Taylor frowned at Victoria and her father. It was Uber cursing that drew their attention though. Everyone turned to Dark Knight.

“Bakuda.” He said simply, shifting over to peer out of the hole that Victoria and Taylor had used as their entrance. When he cursed and ducked back, Taylor figured that they’d been caught, the sound of the mechanized voice continuing was just confirmation.

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in.” Part of Taylor was tempted to shout that they wouldn’t come out by the hairs of their chinny chin chins, but the idea of Bakuda huffing and puffing and blowing their ‘house’ down wasn’t appealing. Taylor glanced at the others as Leet and Uber stood up, moving toward the door. When Danny tried to speak up, Uber stared at him severely.

“Stay here. This is a cape fight, you’re bystanders. Just. Stay.” He sighed and moved out of the door. Taylor heard Uber calling out as they exited the building, Leet expanding the hole as he emerged.

“Stay here. This is a cape fight, you’re bystanders. Just. Stay.” He sighed and moved out of the door. Taylor heard Uber calling out as they exited the building, Leet expanding the hole as he emerged. “My, what big eyes you have.” The demented cackling showed that the boy had landed a hit, and he continued. “There are civilians in there. Let them be, we’re just keeping them out of the line of fire until you’ve done what you’re here to do.”

“See. I would. I don’t give a rats ass about some random plebs, but Lung, he really dislikes these guys. He wanted to be sure that this place was the first thing to go up when this kicked off. If I went and let all those piggies live, well he’d be pretty disappointed in me.” The voice had affected a faux conciliatory tone and Taylor clenched her first, growling as her father gripped her shoulders. “How about this. If you two strapping lads can put me on my back, well, then I won’t murder every big burly men that you’ve got hiding behind you? Deal?” Taylor heard the sound of pounding feet and the cackling laughter faded away.

“Fuck this.” Taylor had reached into the force, trying to restrain her temper, but it wasn’t her that cracked first. Taylor had looked over to see an irritated Victoria gripping the long staff that held the field projector. “I’m not gonna let Uber and Leet get martyred saving my ass.” When the rest of Dockworkers nodded, Victoria reached out, touching something and the field snapped out.

Taylor’s powers came up and pushed back the smoke, and she stepped out of the area. Taylor held her hands up when her dad tried to follow, waiting for Victoria to join her. “Dad. I can’t fight and keep you moving at the same time. Sorry.” She used the force to activate the device once more and grabbed Victoria’s hand and let the smoke rush back in. When her dad yelled, she called over her shoulder.

“You can ground me later, at least you’ll be alive to do it.” She glanced at Victoria, rolling her eyes at the amused smirk, and dragged the girl out the hole in the wall. “I’m sure your mom will hear all about my punishment too.” She grinned as Victoria groaned but pulled the girl along. The sounds of
battle were louder out here, and she headed toward the burned out remains of the other warehouse that had once sat on the lot.

As they passed the corner of the ruin, Taylor caught sight of them. Something crystalline had trapped Leet’s much larger mech in place. Taylor and Victoria approached Leet, watching Uber doing his best to strike at Bakuda, the demented woman was firing her grenade launcher with almost insane speed, shrieking as the armoured kid deflected half the bombs and allowed the rest to explode, the flames of each generic explosion having little to no effect on his armour.

“Black Knights are almost entirely immune to fire damage.” The words came from Leet’s suit and Taylor glanced up, shocked that despite the spike through him he was still moving. Taylor glanced at Victoria, and the girl moved, using precise strikes to break key parts of the sculpture like crystal that trapped leet. When she went to grab the one that was embedded in the chest of the suit, Taylor saw the blood and stopped her.

“It’s hit Leet, if you pull it out, he might die before we can get him out of the suit.” Taylor frowned when Leet merely waved her off.

“It’s not important, I can fight, we can get it treated later.” She glared up at the mech and then sighed, glancing at Victoria. The blonde shrugged and Taylor rubbed her forehead. Before they could convince Leet to be less of an idiot, the sound of metal scraping across stone was heard drew everyone’s focus from Leet’s damaged suit to the ongoing fight. They’d missed the explosion that had blown Uber off his feet, but they did see the poor kid skid nearly 80 feet across the shattered gravel of the parking lot. Glancing over they found Bakuda’s eyes on them.

“Oh, What’s this then? Didn’t think that Leet and Uber could save your asses? Picked a poor place for a date.” The woman cackled and Taylor rolled her eyes at the woman as she lined up a shot. Taylor reached out with the force and ripped the weapon from the Tinker’s hands. Rather than stopping her, this seemed to enrage Bakuda. “Well, that just isn’t fucking fair. I hate sharing my toys.” The deranged woman snarled and grabbed something off her chest and hurled it at them.

Before Taylor could react, Uber was between them, his shield coming up. The mocking laugh from Bakuda was all they heard before something activated and Uber was suddenly frozen in place a shimmering field separating them from Bakuda.

Taylor watched the woman turn through the haze and start running deeper into the docks. She stared at Victoria who lofted an eyebrow and she sighed. They couldn’t run like this, and it was simply easier for Victoria to carry her, as opposed to the other way around. She glanced at Leet and sighed. “Don’t do anything stupid. I’ll heal once we deal with her.” She glanced at Victoria and sighed. “Do it.” She glared at the other girl as she smirked and scooped Taylor up bridal style, lifting off and rocketing after the fleeing tinker. Taylor watched as they headed toward the suddenly silent woman who was running at full neck toward the middle of the fight.

“We need to stop her without giving her a chance to bomb us.” Victoria’s voice was cool and Taylor glanced at her seeing her glaring at the psychotic woman. Apparently, Uber taking a shot meant for them had upset the girl. Taylor stared down, watching the fleeing tinker before reaching out with the force. It wasn’t exactly sporting, but she quickly scooped up the tinker, ignoring her undignified shrieking as Taylor simply tossed the woman into the wall with enough force to break bones. Feeling Victoria slow, Taylor glanced up to see the odd look on her face. “...Remind me never to attack you like that again, you’re fucking terrifying.” Taylor rolled her eyes as Victoria set them down.

The girls approached the battered form of the tinker and Taylor held out a hand, scanning the battered form. With a thought, The Force washed over the woman’s form, deepening her slumber.
and healing the worst of her injuries. Taylor’s touch on The Force as she healed was the only thing that saved them. Feeling the warning screaming at her, Taylor hooked an arm around Victoria and leapt away quickly, barely clearing the suddenly growing cloud of vibrant red smoke that looked very unpleasant.

She glanced around, looking for the source of the attack. Keeping her connection to the force down, Taylor looked around, suddenly carrying Victoria across the street to one of the burned out building’s roofs as another explosion turned the spot they’d been standing to a crater. The ash that had been the cape gave away her opponent. Oni Lee. She glanced at the terrified look on Victoria’s face, and she frowned.

“You can hold your breath for a few minutes. Grab Bakuda and get her back to the others, I’ll lead him away.” Raising a hand to cut off Victoria’s comments, she leapt carrying them to another building to avoid another explosion. “Take a deep breath.” She stared till Victoria till she obeyed and then released her, lunging across the street toward where the force said she should go. Seeing a clone appearing at her destination and dropping something told her that was the right bet and she forced herself up and over the worst of the explosion, allowing the shockwave to buffet her further up.

Taylor landed on a different roof and sank herself into the force, using it to track the cloning Cape. She turned and leapt off toward a different building, barely staying in place longer than a moment and using her precognition to keep the cape from attacking her in flight.

The game of cat and mouse had been going on for a bit, Oni Lee’s teleporting made him faster then Taylor could possibly chase, but it also meant that he was no longer doing his level best to destroy half of the god-damned docks. Taylor chased the cape around the periphery of the docks, using the force to ensure that he couldn’t get too far away, cutting him off when she could, and keeping his focus solely on her.

She’d seen the battle toward the middle of the docks, the explosions of fire going into the sky were startling, along with the waves of darkness and the horrendous howling of battle. Lung’s growing dragon form was becoming oppressive, and Oni Lee seemed to be avoiding the fight, probably trying to keep Taylor from interfering. Taylor knew that it was only a matter of time before Lung became big enough that his opponents lost or fled, and then she’d be in a much less tenuous position.

When Oni Lee suddenly turned and headed North toward where her Father and Victoria were, Taylor felt dread wash through her. She moved to follow, using the force to go even faster, dodging the clones with bombs entirely and doing her best to over-take Oni Lee and get to the others before he could. As she crested a tall building, she saw that the building had finally collapsed, and the group was outside of it still under the shield. Uber was still restrained in the glowing field, and Leet was holding off a half dozen gangbangers with assault weapons, using his heavy mace to smash through their number. Inside the barrier, Victoria had a screaming Bakuda pinned under her foot and she was watching the battle with concern.

Taylor watched the black flicker that was One Lee arriving at the end of the street with his teleportation. She lunged, but the man glanced up in time for him to see her coming. As she
approached, his form began to shimmer and then he drew out a pair of grenades. Taylor reached out and grasped the force and flicked the cape with enough force to send him through the nearby building which collapsed when the bombs went off. She spun around seeking out that vibrant mask. She sank into the force again and considered the area, growling as it pointed out where she had to go.

“Taylor.” As she landed on a building, Jolee’s voice whispered into her head. “*His powers seem to be tied to his sight. If he can’t see where he’s going, he can’t teleport...Hopefully.*” Taylor blinked, wondering how that helped her as she lunged after the cape, watching him blink away again, and dodging the resulting the explosion, keeping Oni Lee from using those bombs of his against her friends.

“There’s a technique. It’s similar to the Telekinesis that you use. You gather The Force into your hand like you were going to move something, but then instead you force it to condense as tightly as you can. When it starts to get unstable, release it and close your eyes.” Taylor ran the words through her mind, carefully considering them. When the Cape teleported again, Taylor lunged away from the explosion, lunging high into the air and releasing the glowing ball of the light.

Loud screams from every direction were a good sign that it’d hit something and Taylor opened her eyes and landed on the ground. Following the pull of the force, she arrived on a roof to see Oni Lee had ripped off his mask and was scrubbing at his face. Shocked that it’d actually worked, Taylor hesitated long enough at the oriental man managed to glance up, seeing her there he balanced and then suddenly his form shimmered again. Taylor kicked back off the building, flipping through the air to watch the building she’d been on going up in flames again. When she reached into the force though, the presence she’d been chasing had gotten far away and was moving much faster than before. Running.

Turning, Taylor paused as she saw a glowing four-armed dragon floating over the parking lot. Fifteen feet long with spread wings and looking for everything to be an oriental dragon, Taylor just stared up at the floating figure as it stared down at the glowing field and the Heavy mech that was Leet standing guard over the battered remains of his gangsters and a handful of civilians. Taylor watched as he considered the situation for a moment before inhaling deeply.

Something in the force began shrieking at Taylor and deciding that it was a bad idea if whatever that was happened, Taylor reached out, wrapping the force around a burned out car husk next to her, lashing the object viciously against the dragon, the wreck deforming around his from before pinging away, but hitting him hard enough to send his body rearing back and letting a gout of flame shoot up into the sky.

When the dragon turned its eyes on her, Taylor wished that she had her staff, though a moment later wondered what the hell she’d manage to do with something like that against a Dragon. When the dragon let out a thunderous roar and shot toward her, she leapt up, landing on a building and leaping away. She kept his focus on her as she headed away from the rest, occasionally lobbing bits of the scenery at the dragon to keep its focus on her. Cars, Mailboxes, the neon sign from one very unpopular biker bar. All of it simply glanced off the charging dragon. Taylor kept running until she heard the sound of an explosion behind her.

Pausing on a roof, she turned to see that the Dragon wasn’t chasing her. She watched as it clawed it’s way out of a building, a figure in a black and blue bodysuit escaping before the dragon could attack and speeding away in a blur. When more figures arrived and joined her, a entirely red figure launching himself at Lung to keep him from standing, and a figure in red and black zipping around the struggling dragon to keep him from rolling away. Several other figures arrived, stark white outfits
rimed with colour standing out as they flew in formation. Lasers lanced viciously from the trio smashing into the struggling form of Lung, blasting him further and further back toward the water.

Rather than remain and watch the fight, Taylor quickly headed back north toward where she’d left the rest.

---

Taylor’s feet had begun to sting when she finally landed on the gravel to see Victoria shrinking under her mother’s severe lecture. Taylor crossed the lot, glancing at her Father where he was talking to Miss Militia. Near them the wards were gathered around zip-tying gangsters, Aegis physically standing next to a restrained Bakuda as a disgusted PRT Agent was doing his best to disarm the screaming woman.

Taylor considered joining her dad but as she watched Victoria’s shoulder’s shrinking, she moved toward that pair instead, walking up and coughing before she got close enough to hear the angry words being said. She blinked at the relieved look on Victoria’s face and flashed Brandish a smile.

“Something wrong here?” She stared at the woman for a moment and Brandish sighed quietly as she rubbed at her head.

“Taylor, what are you doing here? It’s dangerous, you and Victoria shouldn’t have come here.” When Brandish paused to stare at her Taylor shrugged a shoulder.

“That’s what Victoria said.” Taylor paused when Brandish glanced toward her daughter with shock. Taylor ignored the mildly offended look on Victoria’s face before continuing. “We were talking in the park about her issues with control, and when we saw the explosions. She tried to stop me, but… It’s my dad.” She glanced at Brandish and gave her a look that plainly said; ‘What would you do?’ The woman stared at her for a moment before rubbing her face. Rather than continue the conversation the woman strode off toward Danny after giving Victoria a look implying that they would speak later.

Taylor moved to stand next to Victoria, grinning when the girl next to her let out a sigh that seemed to encompass her own thoughts for the afternoon.

“What happened to Lung?” Victoria’s question startled her and Taylor glanced over.

“We played tag for a bit, I was winning, but then the Protectorate, and your Aunt and Cousins kibitzed. They seemed more intent on the bout so I let them deal with him. I’m magnanimous like that.” Taylor feigned a snooty tone and buffed her nails on her shirt, a more genuine grin growing on her face as she heard the blonde girl laughing at her side.

Taylor dropped to sit on the uncomfortable gravel and watched Victoria sitting next to her, the pair just quietly watching the aftermath in companionable silence.

---
“Yeah. She’s still here, she nearly passed out during dinner, and last I saw she was dozing on the couch while Taylor read a book.” Taylor paused at the door of the kitchen, listening as her dad spoke on the phone. “No, it’s fine. It sounds like you’ve got a lot of stuff to deal with, and I’d not send her back to an empty house in a cab this late. Taylor hasn’t had a sleepover in a few years, it’s fine, You can collect her tomorrow.” Taylor listened as her dad went silent and then chuckled tiredly. “Yeah. You as well. Try to get some sleep at some point?” Whatever Carol said drew a snort from him and then he hung up the phone.

Taylor slid into the kitchen and glanced at her dad. She watched him peering at the phone in his hand and offered a polite cough that startled him. “Missed the glory days of us begging to stay up late to watch movies that much?” She grinned over at him when he scoffed. When he made a muttered comment about missing his sleep more, she moved to collect a packet of popcorn from the cupboard, unwrapping it and setting it to pop. When her dad slid past her to wash out his mug, she glanced at him, watching him wash his hands as the sound of popping popcorn was heard. “So what happened?” She gestured to the phone.

“Lung ended up getting away eventually, he got so large that they couldn’t stop him. Carol has to still deal with a debrief at PRT and then she has work in a few hours, so she’s gonna let Victoria stay the night. I’m gonna get some sleep, make sure that she ends up sleeping in a bed, and doesn’t remain draped over the couch like that? She looks like she’s gonna have a hell of a crick in her neck come morning.” Taylor nodded, watching as her dad slid out of the kitchen and headed to bed. Taylor thought quietly as the popcorn’s popping continued unabated. When the microwave dinged, she quickly opened the steaming bag and added it to the large bowl before sprinkling a few things over it. Collecting her wonderfully buttery bounty, Taylor headed out of the kitchen and back into the darkened living room.

The light of the TV washed over the dozing blonde’s form, Taylor was amused at the sight of Glory Girl in sweat pants and hoodie. The frumpy look suited the exhausted looking girl though. Though Taylor imagined that she wasn’t fond of deep gray as a colour. Taylor considered the young woman for a moment before taking out her phone and lining it up. She took a picture, freezing when the flash caused Victoria to shift and rub at her face. Waiting to see if the girl would wake, Taylor counted to ten before opening up her messaging app and sending out a quick message.

{Look what I found on my morning run. It followed me home and I’ve decided to keep it.} Taylor attached the image of the sleeping cape and sent it along to Amy. She didn’t have to wait long before a series of dings caused her to draw the phone out.

{Where are you, and why is Victoria there? What did she do?}
{Also what is she wearing?}

Taylor grinned at the comments, quickly settling in and typing out a response.

{We’re at my house. She’s currently drooling over my very chic 15-year-old flower print couch. She ran into me while I was exercising at the bank. She’s pretty worried about you, we talked a bit. We were still talking when the explosions started. When I went to find Dad, she followed. She helped a lot, despite everything.} Taylor bit her lip and considered the message before sighing and adding a few lines. {She skipped school to come see me. She said that you’re not responding to anything she says and she’s getting upset. I managed to talk her down, but uh. She lost her best
friend too, you know? Something to consider maybe?}

Taylor let the message sit, sighing when Amy didn’t respond, she casually put her phone away, settling more comfortably into her half of the couch and munching on her popcorn as the strange movie played. When a particularly loud shriek filled the room, she laughed when Victoria jerked up, wiping at her face.

“I’m awake.” Taylor chuckled when the girl glanced around the dark room before flopping onto the couch. Taylor glanced at the girl wondering if she’d go back to sleep but eventually the blonde rolled over and edged close enough to steal some popcorn and crunch on it quietly. “What’re we watching?” She peered over at the TV and Taylor shrugged.

“Something old. It’s a horror movie about Birds. Kind of funny.” She held the bowl over, watching as Victoria settled in and quietly munched on the popcorn and watched the black and white movie. When the other girl’s phone on the table buzzed, Victoria picked it up. She read the message before smiling softly and quietly typing something into the phone and holding it close to her side, dividing her attention between it and the TV.

[[ So, I mean, that's a thing. Lemme know what you think! Also we're over 90k words now. Jesus. ]]
Chapter Summary

[[ Sorry about the wait! Plot heavy chapters tend to be longer, and I got distracted halfway through this one. Hope it was worth the wait my doods and doodettes! ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 29th, 2011

Protectorate HQ, Brockton Bay

Emily Piggot sat and glared silently at the food on display before her. A tiny part of her was thankful that the Protectorate Doctors had gone to all the work of actually prescribing her a meal plan that would keep her from dying in the next year from salt or fat consumption, but that didn’t mean that she appreciated the things that she was expected to eat now. Add to that the fact that her new personal assistant took an almost sadistic delight in ensuring that she was following her diet, even going so far as raiding her candy stashes, and the Director was in a rather poor mood. Eventually, when the growling of her stomach overcame her distaste, she cracked open the container, removing the utensils and adding in the pouch of cold chicken, and the tiny packet of fat-free dressing. As she shook up the salad, the Director let her mind drift to the disaster that her morning had been.

After moving a third of her personnel, along with the entire Wards program, to the Protectorate HQ, she had spent the afternoon fielding calls from various Director’s in the PRT that felt that they had excellent advice for a ‘Woman in her position.’ And she’d had bite back her sarcasm and accept the advice graciously so that none of the decrepit old men tried to have her removed and replaced with one of their underlings. The call with Director Costa-Brown had been the easiest and the most uncomfortable of the lot. The woman had been furious that she’d lost Lung. Truthfully, Emily couldn’t blame her; she was just as upset. The man had been twenty feet long and breathing fire, and he’d managed to vanish by diving into the damn bay? Worse, the Undersiders had escaped his wrath as well.

They’d had the Protectorate and New Wave scouring the docks till the sun had come up, but the pyromancer had somehow managed to escape in the chaos of the efforts to quell the burning in the docks before it spread to the rest of the city. Worse still, the only two captures that had been made had either been directly, or indirectly due to the Hebert girl. She and Glory Girl had captured Bakuda, and their capture of his Lieutenant had distracted Lung to the point that he'd lost the only Undersider that he'd captured, allowing New Wave to scoop them up in the clean-up. Even now when the Director glanced out the window of her appropriated office she could see lingering smoke and ash drifting up and over the city through the glimmering shield that surrounded HQ.

It wasn’t all bad though, she had several carrots to dangle past Director Costa Brown to deter her wrath, and they’d worked. Letting the woman in on New Wave’s recent change in status had shocked the woman into admitting that she was impressed, that paired with their acquisition of Leet had kept the woman from tearing too many strips off her hide. Emily herself had found the Leet issue
odd, the young man had shown up at the Ferry Point and turned himself over to the troopers on hand and merely requested to speak with Armsmaster. Whatever the Tinker and the boy had discussed had impressed Wallis, and Armsmaster had personally asked that he be allowed to assist the boy with his project. It seemed that the tinker wanted to rescue his friend from the time-stop bomb that Bakuda had used on him. Wallis seemed to think that if he succeeded, the technology could even be used to rescue those trapped by Grey Boy. When Costa Brown had heard that, she’d immediately allocated the necessary funding and ordered Emily to do everything required to get the project done. That paired with her final achievement of the day had put Piggot in a good mood before the sight of her lunch had defeated it.

Additionally, she had finally managed to get Taylor Hebert to agree to come to a meeting here at the HQ. Oddly, she was looking forward to meeting the young cape for herself. The reports she had heard on Hebert were varied, and it concerned her. Half the people she interacted with on an ongoing basis described Taylor as genuinely caring and thoughtful, slow to anger, and deceptively insightful for her age. The rest were filled with dread at the things she could do when her ire was raised. From her putting Glory Girl down with laughable ease at the Bank, and if the report from Creighton was to be believed, again the day previous, to facing off with Lung and Oni Lee, and keeping them both distracted from the wanton destruction that had up to now defined their careers. Even those that were fond of her admitted that her power was staggering, even if she seemed reluctant to unleash the full force of her skills, no matter how dangerous the enemy she was faced up against.

Savagely stabbing her fork into the offending salad, she munched on it grumpily as she logged back into her computer and called up the PRT’s files on Taylor. The power ratings merely had large red ‘Pendings’ next to each section, and she skimmed down past it to Taylor’s suspected and confirmed activities. The confusion around the girl was the main the reason that she had assigned the squad of troopers to her, so she could at least know if every other random assault by unseen capes in the city was her. Half a dozen attacks from bolts of lightning coming from the darkness to random telekinetic attacks on muggers were possibly tied back to her. Ralph had turned out to be a wealth of information, and some of it was more disturbing than others. The girl’s skills with hand to hand combat and her more esoteric powers were growing in leaps and bounds, according to the field commander. Creighton, who’d worked with nearly a dozen capes in his various postings, found Taylor’s typical serenity to be almost unsettling in a cape. Most parahumans weren’t known for their restraint, after all.

The trooper had begun joining Taylor and her Father on their morning exercises, and he seemed impressed with her skills with her chosen weapon. Emily found herself fascinated in the choice, Taylor wielded a modified bo staff, and according to Creighton, she used it in an oddly defensive nature, though he mentioned that she was capable of using it in devastating assaults when she wished. Strangely, according to Creighton, she seemed more content move around the fight and use her powers to manipulate her opponents into making mistakes. Other reports were compiled, details gleaned from numerous sources, comments by Dragon even pointing out the girl’s easy camaraderie with much of New Wave and the widely spreading ripples that her interaction was having.

They’d not missed the changes among the Pelhams and Dallons, and Panacea’s change of address was a matter of curiosity, as was her unexpected visits to a well known PRT affiliated Psychologist turned cape. That had startled Emily since she wasn’t aware that PRT affiliated psychologists were required to notify the PRT that a cape was seeking mental help. Details were still confidential without a congressional order, but the fact that they were seeking help was known to the PRT. Add to that the growing unease around Glory Girl, though Emily imagined that her revelations had no small amount of influence on that, and the Director found herself wondering if New Wave would dissolve completely before young Hebert could join it.
As she considered the file she sighed faintly, checking her watch and noting the time. She slipped to her feet, and move toward the door that separated her office, from the reception area. Opening to hear that familiar coy mocking voice speaking in sibilant tones.

“Do you intend Director Piggot or any other person on this base any harm?” The question was rote, and Emily found herself leaning on the door fascinated in the Hebert girl’s response. The playful teasing comment surprised her.

“Would you be able to tell if I did?” When her secretary didn’t respond, Emily stepped out into the room and coughed.

“Miss Hebert, I’d appreciate it if you don’t harass my assistant any more than necessary.” She glanced around and found herself shocked that the girl was alone. She blinked and snorted. She guessed that she owed Dragon ten dollars. She gestured Taylor through into her office. She invited her to take a seat before the desk before waddling around it and seating herself opposite the new cape.

The wind blowing her thick hair around brought a smile to Taylor’s face. The young woman was sat in a comfortable leather chair in the odd little speed-boat as it skimmed across the bay toward PRT HQ. As the converted Oil Rig grew before her eyes, the sable-haired teen was distracted by how she’d ended up here by herself. Her father had initially planned to attend along with Carol, but Brandish had been out most of the night attempting to pin Lung down, and her father had been called in to help with the Association.

When the headquarters had been destroyed, her dad’s boss had died in the explosion, and most people were looking to Danny to deal with the aftermath. Luckily, enough insurance and public aid grants were going around to keep things afloat for a bit. Less fortunately, her dad had been called in to deal with a vast amount of paperwork. Taylor had expected more of a fight from her dad about coming here alone, but he’d agreed after she explained that she just wanted to get the meeting out of the way and she wouldn’t sign anything without him or Carol present.

Thinking of her Lawyer reminded her of the other person who’d hung around her house most of the morning and early afternoon. Taylor had been disabused of a number of her assumptions about the blonde girl throughout the morning. Rather than sleeping in, Victoria had been up at the crack of dawn with her and her father and had eagerly joined them on the run. Part of Taylor had wondered if Victoria’s impressive stamina had been an aspect of her flight or her shield, though she had kept the thought to herself. Ralph had been a bit less diplomatic about his thoughts on the matter, but the other girl had had no issue keeping up on their run and had explained to the Trooper that before triggering she had been active in several different sports, and a bit of a fitness nut.

Taylor had come to know Victoria a bit better beyond her super-powered persona. They’d discussed Victoria’s past as they ran, and stretched, and Taylor began to understand the girl a bit better. Even before triggering, Vicky had been competitive, a true Type-A personality. She’d apparently been rather self-conscious and she’d had a heck of a chip on her shoulder. It must have been devastating...
for Victoria to be cut off from every method of venting she had acquired the moment she’d gotten powers to keep things fair to ordinary people. Taylor could undoubtedly see the source of some of the other girl’s anger issues.

Instead of focusing on her meditations that morning, she’d chosen to carefully run Victoria through each pose in the first Kata she’d learned. Taylor had corrected Victoria's poses until she’d gotten each perfect. When she felt that Victoria was ready, Taylor had joined the girl in running through the kata a few times to show the girl how the repetition allowed one to center themselves. Ralph and her Dad had begged off from weapon training, each understandably busy in light of the attacks of the day before. Left on their own, Taylor and Victoria had used the time to practice their abilities, which meant that Taylor had an entertaining time using her telekinetic powers tossing obstacles in front of Victoria to improve her reaction times while in flight.

They’d been halfway through lunch when Carol had finally come to collect Victoria, and that’d left Taylor sitting alone at her house, staring at the books that she’d not had a read the evening before. Part of her had been tempted to go to the Library like she had done every day earlier that week, but instead, she sent a text to her dad letting him know that she was going to her meeting and that’s how she found herself sitting in a private speed boat skimming across the water. Taylor initially intended to ride the ferry, but the Director and her Father had nixed that when the meeting was being arranged. She didn’t mind mingling with regular tourists, but apparently, security demanded that she ride alone in a boat that was being helmed by a young trooper that kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. Slightly uncomfortable at the attention, Taylor watched the rig growing as they approached, curiously studying the odd saturation effect of the shield.

“It’s an odd design for a shield. Most shields back home were invisible unless they were blocking something. I suppose it’s a function of the technology level. Cobbling advanced technology from garbage rarely gives you the best results.” Taylor glanced over to see Jolee’s image sitting on one of the other leather seats. She snorted faintly before glancing back up. “I was never much of an engineer, but I imagine the saturation is caused by the shield refracting light. I’m guessing that they couldn’t get the shield’s tensile strength up without increasing the actual thickness of the shield, which would refract the light like that.”

The boat continued across the bay, and Taylor watched the various things that the older Jedi playfully pointed out and mocked. The Rig’s repulsors were over-sized and over-engineered, but he didn’t think they had the capacity to create repulsors, so their version was plausible if inelegant. When they reached the base of the Rig, the trooper pulled the boat into a small covered Jetty, joining another five boats that were of similar design to the one she’d been on. The young man hopped quickly out before moving to offer Taylor his hand nervously.

“The kid looks like he’s afraid you’re gonna bite him. Wonder what you did to make that impression.” Grinning to herself saw the colour draining from the kid’s face, but she took his hand and allowed him to haul her up and out of the boat. Once her feet were on solid concrete, she wiped her hands before following the trooper toward the large freight elevator at the back of the Jetty. As they ascended into the Rig, Taylor let her eyes peek out the open sides of the Freight elevator. She watched the water shrink away as they travelled up one of the Rig’s supports, getting a closer view of one of the Repulsors for a moment before they vanished into the Rig popular, and the only view past the sides of the lift was the various wires and mechanisms of the Elevator shaft.

When the Elevator came to a stop, she stepped out and glanced at her escort, smirking when he didn’t exit the elevator with her. “There’s a purple line on the ground. Follow it, and you’ll reach the director’s office.” Taylor gave the young man a nod and stepped back. Watching him close the door in her wake and descend out of sight, Taylor turned her attention to the ground, finding the dotted
purple line and moving to walk along it. The elevator had disgorged Taylor in a stark hallway. Concrete-lined floors were painted with arrows and lines, and the walls were almost entirely bare and painted a pristine white.

Off to one side, the rattling of metal and conversation drew her attention, and Taylor peeked through the small window on the door to see a kitchen bustling with activity. Moving along Taylor guessed that the other doors she was passing were storage rooms and similar spaces area’s dedicated to the Rig’s cantina and it’s various staff. As Taylor followed the arrows, she came to a large double door, pushing it open to reveal something like what she’d been expecting.

The doors marked ‘Staff only’ closed behind her and she stood in a hallway that looked more like what you expected to see in a military base. Taylor glanced to the left and saw a pair of heavy doors marked ‘Cantina’, and she glanced down. Seeing the line leading in a different direction she moved to follow, politely nodding at anyone that she passed in the halls, eventually coming to a stop when the arrow terminated at the door. She rapped on the door and when a familiar voice called out “Enter” she pushed the doorway open, slipping in.

Taylor froze in place, staring in shock at the figure sitting opposite her. The girl’s immaculate blonde hair was coiffed into a severe-looking bun that Taylor found funny for some reason, the domino mask was still in place, but the girl’s purple and black cat-suit had been replaced with a matching pantsuit with a skirt. Taylor stared at the girl for a few moments before pushing a hand against her mouth to stifle a chuckle. She ignored the glare from the blonde girl, walking over and taking a seat opposite her desk.

“This is entirely your fault, you know.” The blonde girl glowered across the desk, and Taylor shrugged in amusement. The girl had opened her mouth to speak, but a loud beep from her left arm drew both girl’s attention. A black metal band had been fitted around the girl’s upper left arm, and a red light was blinking on off. Taylor watched as Tattletale let out a weary sigh, moving to glance back at Taylor and speaking words in a monotone that could only come from constant repetition. “As we are in a two-party consent state, I am required by law to inform you that as part of my parole, all conversations with me are recorded by this, and can be reviewed at any time. Should you remain, you’re declaring your consent to be recorded.” The girl stared at Taylor lofting an eyebrow. After a second the light on the band flicked to green, and she relaxed.

“Interesting accessory. Parole?” She tilted her head curiously at Tattletale, crossing her legs and checking her watch. She had nearly half an hour till her meeting was to start so she could chat with the villainess a bit. However Tattletale had ended up in that suit was a story that she absolutely had to hear.

“Mhm. The Director wasn’t exactly happy to hear that her organization was riddled with spies from every gang in the city. She was even more displeased that I couldn’t name names because I’d only ever been shown what they’d shared as opposed to who they were. Armsmaster and Dragon came up with this.” She gestured to the band. “And Piggot decided that a work release would be a ‘fascinating experiment.’” The girl seemed somewhat irritated, and Taylor found herself chuckling faintly, the sound growing more noticeable as the girl glared at her once more.

“I mean, you’ve been leading quite the merry life of crime lately, and you did rob a bank and take a half dozen people hostage. Considering what you did to Amy, I’m surprised they were this lenient. I looked up the laws around that after it happened. State and Federal Law has all sorts of Felony Enhancement charges on the books for forcing Parahumans to use their powers as you did. And considering your Thinker power, they wouldn’t have been so gentle in their sentencing.” She watched the girl’s expression shift, the irritated look shifting in guilt for a moment before he haughty
mask slid back into place. “She’s fine by the way. Amy. I figured out what my power had done to her, and we fixed it.” Taylor found herself smiling at the minute nod, straightening up when the girl spoke earnestly.

“All right, so, back to business. You’re here for an interview with the Director?” She glanced at Taylor and then frowned. “Where’s your escort?” She glanced toward the door and then sighed as she wrote something down on a pad of paper. “Alright. So. Before I let you in the room, I have to ask you a question.” Taylor nodded easily and watched as Tattletale stared at her. “Do you intend Director Piggot or any other person on this base any harm?” Taylor found herself grinning at the wince the girl gave before drawing her eyes back.

“Would you be able to tell if I did?” She watched as Tattletale huffed and glanced off, rubbing tiredly at her head. The sound of a cough and a woman’s deeper voice startled Taylor. She glanced over to see the severe expression on the Director’s face, and Taylor felt herself swallowing nervously.

“Miss Hebert, I’d appreciate it if you don’t harass my assistant any more than necessary.” Taylor nodded and slid to her feet, offering Tattletale a nod as she passed. She stepped into the woman’s office, curiously looking around at the spartan place, taking in the woman’s displayed art and the half-finished salad on her desk. The view behind her would have been lovely if not for the lingering smoke over the city. She stood until the Director nodded toward a chair, and then she moved, taking a seat in the plush chair, watching as the other woman scooted around and took a seat. “Welcome to PRT HQ. What’ve you thought of the facilities so far?”

“It’s interesting.” Taylor was briefly tempted to related Jolee’s thoughts on the shield and the repulsors but decided to be more polite and merely crossed her legs. “I only saw a small part of it on my way from the lift near the kitchens, but it seems like an interesting place to work. Tattletale was a pleasant surprise.” She hummed faintly. “She helped me save Amy’s life; I’m glad that she didn’t end up in prison over it.” Taylor frowned at the cold look the Director gave her and then shrugged at the woman’s response.

“She’s useful, and that earns her leniency, perhaps with a few more good deeds, she might eventually buy her freedom. But that’s not what we’re here to discuss Miss Hebert.” Taylor watched the director close up the salad and deposit the remains of her lunch in her trashcan. She tilted her head watching the woman as she continued. “You might have seen the news about Shadow Stalker’s transfer, that leaves the wards a bit short. I’ve invited you here to invite you to join the Wards personally. There are numerous perks associated with the program from the pay, to the support and help with your powers.” The director produced a colourful booklet that she offered over. Taylor took the book, quickly skimming it to see that it was the same one that she’d examined online.

“I’m flattered, Director Piggot. I had considered joining the Wards initially, but there are a few issues that would make us not a perfect match.” When the older woman gestured for her to Continue Taylor sighed and leaned back. “The biggest is that the Youth Guard requires that all Wards attend school. My Power’s effect on my brain means that I absorb and process information at an accelerated rate. I’m working through an accelerated online course load to get my high school diploma at the moment, and I plan to test into placement into an Advanced Placement Program at the University, but as far as I can tell the Youth Guard requirements preclude a program like that entirely, something about social experiences?”

“The Youth Guard feels that the secondary school system functions both as a means of education and a means of encouraging the social development of young people. They wouldn’t approve of your education scheme.” Taylor watched as the Director sighed, offering an amused smile.
“I’m also a lot closer to New Wave. I’ve met most of the members, and we get along fairly well. I get the impression that they’ll offer me membership again shortly. Considering the huge mess that we got into yesterday,” Taylor paused and snorted. “I doubt they want me running around on my own, and my Dad certainly doesn’t.”

“Yes, about that.” Taylor watched as the Director drew a file up, carefully opening it and reading it carefully. “Team Leader Creighton mentioned something about an incident with Miss Dallon last night?” When Taylor felt the woman’s gaze on her, she waved a hand watching as the woman swallowed a cough.

“There was a disagreement. We spoke about it, and we’ve come to an understanding. Victoria was worried about her sister and thought that I was involved. We’ve decided to train together though to help with her power control.” The words caused the director to glance at her and open her mouth, almost as if shocked before she could say what she was going to say though the woman let out another cough, this one rooted in the chest and hacking.

Taylor frowned deeply, studying the Director curiously and when the force pulled at her. She leaned into the power, allowing it to guide her eyes. She watched the cough wracking her form and tilted her head. ‘Pneumonia of some sort, not the main issue, side effect, caused by a compromised immune system.’ The woman’s pallor, the way her cheeks had sunk in, the scent in the air. The colour of her nails, and the dullness of her eyes. ‘Extended Dialysis.’ Taylor stared at the woman quietly and frowned, slowly speaking. “You’re dying.” She studied the woman. “Slowly, but your kidneys have already failed.”

“How could you know that?” Taylor shifted back when the woman’s shocked expression shifted quickly to anger. “That’s personal and wholly private. It’s utterly inappropriate that you’d use your powers to discover things like that.” Taylor held up her hands quietly and shifted back as far in her chair as she could to try and defuse the woman anger. She watched as the Director took two deep breaths, glowering over at her. Taylor waited a few moments for the woman to get her temper back under control.

“I could heal you.” She watched the woman’s expression turning thoughtful, the force allowing her to see to conflict on the chubby woman’s face. She stared and sighed when the woman’s face shut down, and she stonily responded.

“And what’s in it for you, hm? No. I’m not exactly fond of the idea of parahuman healing. Thank you for hearing me out Miss Hebert. Miss Militia has offered to give you a tour, and I hope that we’ll see each other in the coming weeks.” Taylor offered the woman a confused look and Director waved a hand. “New Wave has recently accepted a PRT affiliate status, and we’re going to be working more closely in the coming weeks.” Taylor watched the woman, noting the interested spark in her eyes. She was supposed to react to that. She used her grip on the force to keep her expression calm, nodding as she slid to her feet.

She had nearly reached the door when the Force brushed along her mind, and she paused, her hand on the handle. She quietly decoded the impressions she was getting. She glanced over her shoulder at the Director, humming faintly. “I owe you a second time, you know.” The words were spoken casually, and she watched the Director looking at her. “You sent New Wave and Protectorate to save me when Ralph called you. That and helping me fix my mistake with Panacea. That’s two debts I’ve got to you. I’d rather discharge those debts.” She watched the words penetrate the woman’s mind and the self-satisfied smile that crossed the woman’s face.
Taylor had been shocked that the Director was still on her feet. Both Kidneys had failed, and her liver had been in its death throes. The woman’s scarred heart and damaged cardiovascular system had made Taylor nervous about even coughing near her. With the practice and reading that she’d been doing Taylor had been able to repair the worst of the damage, working with care and it’d only cost the director roughly thirty pounds of body fat to replace the dead materials. After getting the doctor to sign off on the healing, The director had sent Taylor off with Miss Militia.

Taylor had been a fan of the strange cape, but the woman’s rather stoic appearance was oddly unsettling in person. Taylor had allowed the woman to show her around the base, she’d casually checked out the various amenities, and she had even met Aegis and Vista, who’d been in the common room. Kid Win and Gallant had been on patrol, and she’d missed them, and Clockblocker was assisting Armsmaster with a project. The two Wards had seemed more at ease and friendly with her, and Taylor had taken the time to speak with each. When they’d asked if she intended to join up, she had deferred politely, grinning when Vista had groaned quietly about never evening the gender disparity in the government-sanctioned superhero team. Taylor decided to keep the fact that she was probably going to join New wave to herself; it seemed a bit premature to discuss it.

Miss Militia had been more friendly after she’d talked with the wards and the rest of the tour had been fascinating, but it hadn’t changed her mind. Eventually, she had been escorted back to the boat to find her nervous shadow waiting for her, and they’d headed back toward shore. The trip had been as awkwardly silent as the trip in. They’d been nearly two-thirds of the way back to shore when a surge of violet light had exploded in the distance. Taylor frowned and waved at the trooper.

“Stop the boat. Now.” The kid had reacted, immediately cutting the engine. Taylor was already counting under her breath, tapping her thigh with one finger. ‘One Mississippi, two Mississippi.’ Hazy memories of hiding from storms under her bead with a red-haired child and counting out loud in the wake of lightning flashes accompanied the counting. Taylor made it up Eighteen before the roar of the explosion had washed past them, whipping the water up in a mist around them. Eighteen seconds, over three miles. It had come from Downtown.

Taylor stared at the cloud of black smoke that had replaced the violet light, watching as it rose. Something about it struck her as odd, but it wasn’t until the kid next to her spoke that she realized what it was.

“It’s perfectly cuboid.” The kid muttered softly, and Taylor glanced at him before glancing back as the ‘smoke’ continued to rise perfectly in a cuboid, extending what had probably been a building slowly toward the clouds. When the black cloud reached the lower clouds it’d suddenly expanded outwards in every direction, and Taylor found herself sitting in the boat in inky darkness with the Trooper, the black ‘cloud’ had blotted the sky out above them. Looking toward the ocean revealed that enforced darkness effectively ended a few miles out, but it seemed to cover most of the city.

When the entire cloud shimmered, Taylor turned and peered toward the city as the cloud over where it had started expanded and shimmered into a view of a masked man. His form was powerfully and covered with tattoos, and more concerning, he was sitting in an operating chair. A Doctor in a mask was quietly stitching up the man’s left side as he stared at ‘The Camera.’ As he shifted, his voice
boomed down from seemingly directly above Taylor.

“Greetings Brockton Bay. Some of you may know who I am. For those of you that were lucky enough to have not heard of me, My name is Lung. I am the leader of the Azn Bad Boys. I am not a man of many words.” The man paused as the doctor took a pair of scissors and snipped a thin wire, standing and backing off. The masked figure waited for the doctor to leave before sitting forward on his chair, his 50-75 foot tall image glaring out over the bay.

“For too long have me and mine been relegated to the sidelines, forced to contend with racist pigs and drugged out maniacs. This is a declaration of war. We will be coming for the Empire Eighty-Eight. We’ll be coming for the Merchants. We will go through any means necessary to cleanse this city of the filth, and we’ll free to you live under my rule. This is war, and unfortunately, that means that there will be collateral damage in this assault. Starting tomorrow, bombs will begin going off, the longer this campaign takes, the worse the bombs will become.” The man’s accented voice was chillingly calm, and Taylor felt herself shivering at the words. “You might be aware of that attack that we carried out over the Docks this past evening. That was an attempt to root out the vermin that had infested the docks. We used only conventional weapons in that assault, and I assure that Bakuda has gifted us with a great many more...fascinating weapons.”

“Make this easier for yourself. Anyone that helps direct us toward the other gangs will be shielded from the attacks, anyone that is found to shield them will burn. And before anyone in the PRT or the American Pigs decide to get involved in this mess,” The man shifted back and pushed out of his chair standing. The angry red wound on his side was visible, and he gestured to it. “This is a dead-man switch. It’s tied to this.” The image cut back to reveal something large and round and glowing - very- ominously. It dominated the rear of the bunker-like structure. “If I die, it goes off. It’s been heavily re-designed to function as an EMP, and while that means that the explosive potential is small, it’d only destroy a third of Brockton Bay, the EMP would utterly destroy the East Coast of the United States. This location is hardened, and if a missile strikes the bay, it’ll detonate.”

“The PRT has failed to deal with the other Parahumans in this city, and so I’ve decided to do it for them. All I ask is that they stand aside and allow me to do so.” The man spoke, waving a hand magnanimously before turning back to the camera. “I know that despite my efforts last night, some of you will doubt me. This should prove the sincerity of my intentions. Do it.” The masked man nodded at the ‘Camera,’ and the view shifted to the side, showing a circle that had been spray painted on the floor of the bunker. A table was set in the middle, and then a case laid on it. The case was opened and a complicated bit of machinery revealed. Taylor glanced over at the kid’s sucking in of breath and assumed it was some form of a bomb.

Lung walked into the circle, holding a strange looking grenade. He pulled a pin, set the device atop the open case, tapped a key that set the timer counting down from one minute, and then exited the ring. As soon as the gang leader cleared the ring, the ‘grenade’ activated, expanding out a circular field that stopped right at the edge of the painted circle, a swirl of light had Taylor suddenly raising an arm and shielding her eyes, and when the glow cleared the ring had shifted, and was filled with an odd sight.

The circle of concrete had been utterly replaced by a circular patch of reinforced steel. Across the middle of the circle a wall was present, and from it hung a bed. Atop the bed sat a familiar figure. The Orange robe and lack of mask were startling, but the maniacal cackling was familiar. Taylor stared at the Giant Bakuda for a moment before she and the trooper both turned and looked back
toward the rig in time to see a massive explosion erupt from it. A ball of flame exploded viciously from the Northern edge of the structure, raining debris out toward the water the shield flickering ominously for a second before stabilizing.

Taylor looked at the Trooper and then back toward the view. Lung had stepped back into view, crossing his arms. The image stilled suddenly and then a flicker saw the still image of the gang leader collapsing, melting as the objects that made up the projections fell. Taylor glanced up as the cloud above them started to fall, holes already forming in the cover to let through shafts of sunlight. She turned and sighed at the Trooper.

“Let’s get back to the Rig. I imagine that a healer might be helpful.” She glanced up, watching the black specks floating down around them. The engine roared to life, and the trooper spun the boat around and returned them both toward the rig.

Chapter End Notes

[[So Lung's got a plan. I’m unsure how this will be received, but I kind of enjoy the idea of Lung waging war on the city instead of Bakuda.]]
Taylor pulled her gaze back from the traffic outside her window, focusing instead on her hands. Gently turning each hand over she inspected the pale slightly pink skin quietly. Taylor unbuttoned the sleeves of her white shirt, rolling them up and checking her arms. Despite the evidence available to her eyes, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d missed some of the blood that had coated her hands the day before. Looking close and finding that even under her finger-nails were pristine she sighed faintly, glancing out the window. The day before had been brutal.

They’d arrived back at the Rig to find it in chaos. Half the place was being evacuated, and she’d briefly seen Miss Militia hurrying the Wards through the Rig toward the upper levels as her trooper escort led her toward Medical. When she’d entered, she’d found three doctors shouting and the director standing nearby, her face a mask of rage. The woman’s expression had shifted to shock at seeing her, but Taylor hadn’t even needed to explain. The director announced her, a look of mild respect on her face and Taylor had been elbow deep patching people up before she could comment.

It’d been harder than she’d expected. Healing with The Force was taxing on the mind and the body, the act of healing was difficult, focusing and controlling The Force like that exacted a toll. Mentally, it was even worse. It seemed to Taylor that for every person she healed, another showed up too damaged for her to do anything. She had seen several people die as she held their hands and found her powers lacking. Bastila and Jolee had tried to be consoling, but a failure like that ate at a Jedi, and Taylor almost felt like it was intended to. A way for the universe to remind her that she wasn’t perfect.

She’d worked until she had nearly dropped until every person injured in the explosion that didn’t die was able to walk out of the infirmary. She’d almost passed out on the boat ride back, surprised to find that same trooper waiting to take her home. She’d learned his name was Jeremy, and he’d seemed much more respectful and calm on the trip back, far less nervous. Taylor hadn’t been surprised to find Ralph waiting for her at the docks, and she’d been bundled into his modified PRT Jeep, and the trip home had passed in a blur.

Someone, probably the director or Tattletale, had evidently called him because he’d greeted her at the door with a hug that had done wonders in soothing her raw bones and hadn’t commented on her spending nearly an hour in the bathroom scrubbing every last remaining inch of the blood from her hands and body. It had made her feel better, but that wasn’t what had allowed her to sleep peacefully
last night.

The shower had helped a bit, but the long chat with Amy had soothed her aches more. Amy had sat and listened as Taylor told her about what happened, and the girl hadn’t commented or offered assurances. Oddly, Amy shared stories about the times she’d felt the best about using her gifts, the people that came back to thank her, and to speak with her. She’d told Taylor a story about a woman who’s leukemia she’d cured, and how the old Russian woman who couldn’t speak a lick of English had come back the next day with her three children, nine grandchildren, and fifteen great-grandchildren, and how Amy had had to accept a hug and heartfelt thanks from each. The girl had sounded mortified, but when Taylor had broken into laughter, Amy had joined her, and it’d felt good.

It had been Amy that had indicated that her aunt was interested in speaking with Taylor, and Taylor had offered to come out today. She’d not had much on her plate, and when she’d told her father, he’d seemed relieved that she’d finally be speaking with someone about her Hero-ing. Taylor had initially intended to take the bus since her Father was growing increasingly busy with the Dockworkers, but Ralph had told her this morning that the director had increased her security detail in light of the threats from the ABB and now Taylor was escorted most places by Ralph or one of his men.

Currently, Ralph was in the driver's seat, and he’d been complaining about the traffic, though as the man ranted, Taylor felt her attention being drawn in.

“-idiots. Half the city is in chaos because of the ABB, and people are out in the streets Protestig the arrival of Watchdog.” Taylor perked up frowning. She glanced at Ralph and spoke curiously.

“Watchdog?” She felt the older man flick his eyes at her and he shifted the wheel, changing lanes and moving minutely forward.

“In light of Lung’s threat, The Protectorate has dispatched a task force to the bay. It was initially going to be the Triumvirate, but Congress got worried about their typically...direct approach, and it was decided that they’d work on a more subtle team. It’s being headed up by Myrrdin, the Leader of the Protectorate in Chicago. They’ve brought in a few of the Strangers, but the big name was Watchdog. They’re the Thinker Thinktank. They usually handle Thinkers using their powers on the stock market and the like, but they’ve been diverted here to deal with the Bomb Threat.” Taylor hummed and glanced around, noting the crowds with signs on the street. Most of the rest of the cars in traffic obscured the signs the picketers held, though one man was tall enough that his board stood out, that the Government and PRT hadn't cared about his city until it was their necks on the line.

“Why’re the mad? Because of Lung’s threat?” Taylor studied the angry faces around the cars and shivered a bit.

“Partly.” Ralph let out out a grunt as the traffic picked up once more and carried them along the street a bit before it screeched to a halt again. “It’s partly that and partly that Lung’s a lot smarter than most of us gave him credit for. Last night folks were scared, people were talking about what the government was going to do to put him down, but then the ABB moved out. They were different, precise, well trained. They moved in units with Tinker-tech weapons and grenade, and they hit the Merchants and the Empire Eighty-Eight hard. They burned 6 of the Merchant’s buildings to the ground, and they shut down every dog-fighting ring in the city last night. We were expecting that. What we weren’t expecting was their methodology.” When Taylor glanced up, she found Ralph frowning at the road ahead.

“The ABB removed every single addict from the buildings before burning them down with the
Merchants trapped within. They let the gamblers leave the Dog-fighting rings, keeping the Empire thugs pinned down and again burning the shops down around them. They even ended up freeing all the dogs as well, delivering them to a half dozen shelters across the city. The ABB has been breaking up street crime in other territories as they do this, we’ve had nearly a dozen reports about ABB gang members taking out muggers and helping people to the hospital. We expected this to be a flash-fire, a massive war that burned the city around us, but Lung’s being careful. He’s playing the public against us.” Taylor shivered at the thought as she glanced around, watching as the traffic started to move again, the car speeding up.

“The rest of the Troopers seem to think opinion will shift when he starts bombing buildings, but considering what he’s done so far, I’m guessing he’ll be opting for borderline targets. Going after criminal enterprises first, and then later on sympathizers. He’s trying to spin this as a war amongst the criminals, and he’s playing himself off as honourable but brutal, like the dragons that he’s named after. When he’s up against Nazis and drug pushers, it’s hard to argue.” The older man sighed, as they finally left the main streets and exited into side streets, quickly getting up to speed as they headed into the more affluent parts of the city. The two rode in silence after this revelation, carefully watching the buildings pass until the GPS announced that they’d arrived.

Taylor was surprised. She’d expected a small mansion at the top of a hill with large fences, but the house seemed almost normal — a split level ranch-style house at the end of a Cul-de-sac. The white picket fence and neatly trimmed yard were a surprise. As the car rolled to a stop on the street outside, Taylor glanced nervously over at Ralph. She'd gone out especially to get the clothes for this interview, the first time she’d dipped into her earnings from the court case, a new outfit, new glasses, and rather suddenly, she felt very over-dressed in her dress shirt and pants. Taylor had dressed like this was a job interview, and now it felt more like her friend's aunt inviting her over for a chat. When she started to nervously panic the older man rolled his eyes.

“'You look fine, Taylor. Go and talk to them. We all know that they want you on the team, and it’s where you want to be.” Taylor whined a bit but shifted a bit and slipped out. She adjusted the dark blue shirt that she wore, trying to look like less of a dork as she headed up the steps. Pausing at the doorway, Taylor glanced back at Ralph,able to see him through the windows but knowing that he was rolling his eyes. She turned and rang the doorbell, waiting nervously on the stoop. There was a be a beat of shoes over the tiles inside, and the door swung open.

Taylor blinked, finding herself face to face with a boy her age. His bright blue hair and interesting hair-cut gave him away, and he stared at her in shock glancing her up and down in confusion before shrugging and leaning back.

“Mom! Taylor’s here.” Taylor blushed at the look before nervously running a hand along the side of her head. Having pulled her hair back into a pony-tail kept the stuff out of her face, but it also meant that she couldn’t indulge in her nervous tick of running her hands through it. When the young man stepped back and gestured her in she slipped in, kicking off her shoes and smiling at him. “We’ve met, but never been introduced. I'm Eric, though I go by 'Shielder' in costume.” Taylor chuckled at his nervous smile and took his hand offering a quick shake. Before the conversation could move into more awkward small talk, a low whistle drew her attention to the top of the stairs.

“Well.” The words came from the top of the stairs, and Taylor glanced up to see a blonde girl standing there. Taylor blinked at Laserdream, or rather Crystal, dressed in jeans and a halter and she was be grinning a grin that made Taylor want to bounce the poor girl off the walls. “Well~” The girl’s mocking words made Taylor cringe. “Doesn’t someone look all dressed up. Here for a job interview? Or something else, hrm?” Taylor blinked in confusion, before grinning when Sarah stepped out into the foyer and called up at her daughter.
“Crystal. Behave.” The woman turned, and Taylor found herself searching the woman’s face, tracing the features that she shared with Carol and her children. She studied the woman in her non-cape attire, startled that she seemed like your average working mom. Casual blouse and comfortable pants. When the woman grinned at her Taylor felt her cheeks heating up. “Though I do feel a touch under-dressed.” Taylor rolled her eyes and followed along when the laughing woman indicated that she should.

They eventually ended up in Sarah’s office, though Taylor did pause long enough to toss a wave to Amy when she saw the girl peeking out of a sitting room on the way. Grinning at the small, encouraging smile she received, she headed into the office and glanced around curiously. The office space was small, a bedroom that had been converted into an office but it felt warm, lived in. A large desk was scuffed and battered from constant use, and the desktop was an expression of organized chaos. Around the walls of the room were shelves. Some held books, but most were filled with more interesting trinkets and pictures. Slipping closer, Taylor examined it all, seeing many images of Sarah, Neil and their kids, in or out of uniform. Studying a few, she turned to find Sarah smiling at her.

“I like to keep what I love around me. Keeps it in my heart, yeah? And helps me deal with bureaucrats.” The woman took a seat and indicated the seat opposite, and Taylor scooted over taking a seat. Taylor was fascinated by the contrast of sitting here with sitting opposite Director Piggot and chuckled at how much more at ease this situation felt. At the look from Sarah Taylor waved off a hand. “Alright. So. I know that Carol offered you a place in New Wave before, and you weren’t interested at the time, but you’ve been a lot more active lately, and you seem to have a more firm grasp of your powers. In light of this, Carol and I both felt that it might be time to recheck your interest, considering your friendships with Amy and Victoria, we both feel that you might prove to be a valuable addition to New Wave.”

“Oh.” Taylor blushed a bit. “I’m flattered. And uh, I’m certainly interested, I know all of you, and I could see myself working with you. I’d love to hear more, with the caveat that I’ve got to go over everything with my father?” She smiled when Sarah nodded, smoothly drawing a packet out of a nearby drawer.

“You’re in luck. Up to recently the positions were non-paying for most of the junior members of the team, considering they were mostly family it didn’t matter. But as we’ve recently been accepted into the PRT affiliation umbrella, they’ve sent some funding our way. Enough to help with the day to day cost of running the team, and to ensure that everyone gets a stipend. It’s not as generous as the one that the Wards get, but it’s impressive.” She offered a booklet over, and Taylor opened it up, skimming the details. Same basic concept as the Wards with the trust being set up in her name and having her earnings entered into it although the amounts were about a third what the Wards earned. Still, Taylor reasoned, it’d be enough to fund her college if nothing else.

“I spoke with Director Piggot yesterday, before the uh...incident.” She waved a hand. “She had intended to offer me a place in the Wards, but my unique learning situation made it difficult.” When Sarah tilted her head, Taylor sighed, continuing. “Due to how I practice controlling my powers, my focus, retention and reading speed are all greatly improved. It means that I perform exceptionally well in online schooling. As it is, I’m nearly six months ahead on course-work, and I’ve begun working toward testing into the advanced placement classes at the University. That’s not exactly a Youth-Guard approved learning schedule. Would that be an issue with your affiliation?” Taylor blinked when the woman seemed to consider it, drawing out a book.

“I don’t think so, I’m still new to the system, and I’ll have to go over it with Carol, but as we’re not
The conversation had been interesting, and Taylor had been fascinated with the process of joining. She’d go over everything with her father, but Taylor was reasonably sure that this is the deal that she’d be accepting. As the conversation wound down, Taylor finally dragged herself to her feet, grinning toward Sarah and offering her a quick thank you. She’d started to back up when the woman called her back quickly.

“Oh. Taylor. One more thing.” Taylor paused, glancing up at the woman. “We all were a bit adventurous when we first got our powers, but if you join New Wave, we’re going to have to ask that you keep your crime-fighting efforts to the official patrols. I’m sure that you enjoy your late night patrols, but it’s unsafe for you to be out by yourself.” The woman spoke sternly, and Taylor frowned, tilting her head the woman’s words. Her confusion must have been obvious because Sarah’s earnest expression shifted to concern. “...You’ve not been going out, have you?”

“No.” Taylor frowned and slid over and back into the chair. “What makes you think that I have?”

“There have been a number of interrupted crimes fairly close to areas that you’re often seen exercising and your house, that have been attributed to you. The PRT assumed it was you due to the relative closeness to your house and the way the Cape was taking out their targets.” Taylor frowned quietly, and after a moment Sarah continued. “According to the perpetrators, they’d been in the midst of their crimes when a voice came from the shadows, drawing their focus. Then, the moment they released their victims to investigate or confront the voice, they were struck down by lightning.”

“I can’t use that power,” Taylor spoke softly and blinked at Sarah’s confused look. “My powers, they’ve got emotional components tied to their use. Certain emotions evoke certain powers. The Lightning that I used when I triggered? It requires deep rage or hate, and it’s not a healthy power to use. I’ve noticed that my powers tend to wash back into me, making me wallow in what I use to conjure them. Telekinesis is almost as effective as the lightning, more versatile and I can conjure it feeling happiness or serenity.” The older woman studied her for a moment, and apparently satisfied, nodded.

“I’ll make a note about it to the director. She’ll have some of the capes look around if they’re in the area, if it’s a new cape operating out there, it’s rather dangerous. They’ve been skirting close to ABB territory and considering current events, that’s getting more and more dangerous.” Taylor nodded and studied Sarah seeing if there was anything else. The woman merely smiled. “That’s all I’ve got, but I hope to hear from you soon?” Taylor nodded quickly and took the woman’s outstretched hand, shaking it quickly and then standing. This time she was able to exit the office, and she wandered back toward where she’d seen Amy.

She and the other healer had texted a lot, even talked over the phone a few times, but this was the
first time that she’d seen the other girl in person since the hospital. Taylor perched on the doorjamb of the living room, staring across the room at the sight of Amy curled up in the bay window, using the natural light for her sketching. The girl’s face was creased up with focus, and the sound of the pencil scratching over paper was apparent. Taylor paused, briefly considering just letting the girl focus on her art, but then the idea of going home to her empty house ghosted over her mind. So she marshalled her courage, stepping into the room and rapping on the door.

When the other girl jerked up and stared at her before clutching the pad a wicked smile crossed her lips. She tilted her head to the side before speaking. “Mousy.” She waited for the girl to meet her eyes before dipping her hands into her pockets. “I’ve got an entire empty day ahead of me. You should come and entertain me.” She grinned a bit. “We can get out of here. Do something fun, maybe?” She paused when the girl frowned and clutched the book a bit tighter.

“I mean, as fun as it sounds running around and entertaining you Taylor, I’m still grounded.” The girl spoke with a touch of playful sarcasm, though Taylor suspected it masked a bit of nervousness. The sound of someone behind Taylor coughing drew their gazes. Taylor braced herself to keep from jumping at the shock of someone suddenly speaking less than four inches from her, but her tension must have been apparent because when she glanced back, she found Neil smirking at her.

“Hey there, Taylor right? I’m Neil.” The man offered out a hand, and Taylor spun and took it. “Nice to meet you properly. Thanks by the way, for saving Amy, we’re kind of fond of her around here.” Taylor found herself smiling at the man’s casual friendliness. When he glanced over at Amy and spoke, Taylor felt her smile growing. “As for your grounding, Amy, I figure we can give you a short break. You’ve not left the house in over a week, and if your Aunt or Mother ask I’ll just say you’re schmoozing the new recruit to convince her to take the deal.” Taylor saw him grinning at her, and she felt her cheeks heating for some reason. Glancing over at Amy saw that she was in a similar predicament.

The mousy girl shifted nervously in place for a few moments, holding that sketchpad like a life-line. The girl seemed conflicted for a few moments before she sighed and slid to her feet. “Oh alright. I’ll be back.” She scooted past Taylor. The dark haired girl tried to get a peek at the pad, but a glare from Amy saw her holding up her hands in surrender and glancing over at far too amused Neil. The older man crossed his arms.

“So. You got your license?” Taylor paused, blinking and glancing at the man, shaking her head.

“No, Uh. I’m only sixteen. I’ve not even had a chance to sit down and do the written test. The last few months were pretty hectic, and before that I… wasn’t in a great place.” Taylor paused as the man’s face darkened and she glanced to the side, figure that he understood why. “The PRT has assigned me a bodyguard though. He drove me here; I guess he’s supposed to take me around to keep me from being kidnapped or something.” When the man nodded like that made sense, Taylor rolled her eyes. The older man moved to study her, almost opening his mouth to speak but the sound of shoes clattering down the stairs was suddenly audible.

Taylor slid out into the main foyer, glancing over and chuckling at the sight of Mousy in fitted jeans and a jumper. The girl headed over, grasping her arm and dragging her away from her uncle with an unusual amount of haste.

“Goodbye Taylor! Great meeting and talking with you!” The playful mocking in his tone caused Taylor to chuckle, though Amy merely grumbled. As she opened the door, she shouted out.

“Going out with Taylor, Aunt Sarah, Uncle Neil said it was fine!” Taylor glanced back in time to see
the man mime out a look of mock betrayal, putting both hands over his heart as Mousy threw him to
the wolves. Taylor snorted and glanced at Amy as they paused on the stoop.

Amy paused on the stoop and stared nervously over at Taylor. It took her a moment to realize that
she was still holding the other girl’s arm and she released it stepping back. She glanced around
before sighing and shoving her hands into her jeans pockets.

“So uh. Where did you want to go?” She blinked as Taylor laughed and just walked toward the jeep
parked at the end of the path. She blinked when the girl strode up and opened the back door,
gesturing her in. When she climbed in, she hesitated seeing an older man glancing at her through a
rear view mirror, raising his eyebrow in amusement. When Taylor scooted in next to her and buckled
in the man spoke.

“For backup if we’re going to have both of the city’s best healers
wandering around together.” The comment was almost playful, and Amy chuckled when Taylor
flipped the man the bird.

“Ralph, this is Amy, also known as Panacea. Mousy, this is Ralph.” She gave the man a look as he
raised an eyebrow. Amy felt her cheeks heating up at the nickname but didn’t say anything as the
man wisely kept his own counsel on it as well. “We’re gonna go be teenagers I think. Let’s head
downtown; See if we can find something fun?” The man nodded and turned the jeep on and as it
rumbled away he and Taylor briefly begin chatting, the girl leaning up and over one of the seats as
far as her seat belt would allow as she discussed what was interesting downtown.

Taking the opportunity to study Taylor, Amy boggled at the changes in the girl. It had been a little
over two weeks since she’d met Taylor, and part of her doubted that if they put this Taylor down
next to the girl who’d smacked her in the face in the bank if they’d match up. The girl that had
accidentally hit Amy had felt small despite her height. Between the over-sized exercise clothes she
wore and the way that she hunching down her shoulders, wild hair hiding much of her face, she had
ended up seeming almost tiny despite the impressive powers that she’d wielded.

Today she was in an outfit that while it wasn’t expensive made her look comfortable. The dark blue
button-down shirt tailored for her athletic frame, with its sleeves rolled up, along with the slacks and
the comfortable shoes. The girl’s hair pulled back to show off her face and the new slimmer glasses
she wore that showed off her dark eyes. The girl seemed… not happier, the girl had seemed
relatively cheerful in that bathroom, despite the guilt. It was that a weight had been lifted off her and
she seemed content to sit for a while.

“So.” Amy was drawn from her thoughts when Taylor called the trooper a boring old man and had
flopped back down next to her, grinning. “I figure we’ll drive around downtown and see what seems
like fun? I’d normally suggest a walk up the boardwalk, but considering the number of explosives
that went off near there, it’s probably not terribly safe.” Amy shrugged and glanced out the window,
shifting awkwardly in place as Taylor settled back. They’d drifted in an uncomfortable silence for a
few minutes before Taylor let out an excited sound.
“Oh! Ralph. Left up here. We’re heading toward Hudson. Swing a left there, and then head up to Lexington.” Ralph seemed to get the comment and nodded, and they were soon heading into the sky-scrappers, dodging the worst of the traffic. Amy tried to discover their destination but she’d never been one for wandering the city, and when they stopped on a street in shadow from a massive stone building she stared at it in confusion. She glanced over at Taylor and blinked when the girl stared at her expectantly. A moment of this ensued before Taylor pointed.

“Curbs on your side, Mousy.” She grinned, and Amy huffed before opening the door and hopping out. She stepped back when Taylor bounded out next to her. She headed over and ducked in the window to talk to Ralph.

“Yes, I’m sure it’s fine. No, you don’t need to follow us around.” She listened and snorted. “It’s a museum Ralph; they’ve got security. Just uh. Find a place to get some lunch for yourself. I’ve got your number; I’ll text you if something happens. I promise.” She paused and sighed. “Yes, I know that if I get hurt, you’ll get fired and killed by my dad, I’ll be careful.” A beat. “Promise.” Taylor reached into the window seemed to pat the trooper before hopping back and grinning at Amy. “C’mon Mousy, I’m proud of this one.” She turned and headed off.

Amy glanced at Ralph who shrugged at her before pulling away, and then she turned and followed in Taylor’s wake. They ended up heading to the next block and turning left to reveal that the massive stone building that dominated the entire block was, in fact, a museum as Taylor said. The Brockton Bay Museum of Art and Natural History. She perked up as she trailed after Taylor. The girl led them up the stairs and held the door for her, eventually heading over and purchasing two student tickets. She handed one to Amy and pinned her own to her jacket.

Amy glanced at the bored looking tour guide that had so far managed to collect an oriental family and a trio of bored looking college girls. When Taylor bypassed the man entirely and headed toward a kiosk, Amy trailed after her.

“Are we not taking the tour?” Amy’s voice was curious, and Taylor scoffed.

“Why take a tour with that guy. I’ve got my very own artist to show me around, Mousy.” Taylor had begun to rifle through the books on the kiosk and Amy snorted.

“Just because I doodle doesn’t mean that I understand anything about art, never mind its history or design aspects.” Amy paused when Taylor let out a tiny ‘Aha.’ and then spun around, glancing at the thick book in her hands.

“It’s fine. I found a guide book.” She handed it over to Amy, and Amy stared at it and blinked at Taylor. “C’mon Mousy. Let’s do this!” She grinned at Amy and Amy snorted finding the enthusiasm rather infectious. She opened the book, blinked and rotated it before inspecting the map. Taking a moment to orient herself, she flipped through the book finding the relevant section. Glancing over at Taylor, and using a finger to keep her page, she quickly lead Taylor into the wing. Opening the book once they were in the gallery, she glanced at one of the paintings, quickly checking it against the guide.

“Seems like this wing is dedicated to the Realism school of art.” Amy rolled her eyes when Taylor nodded eagerly and followed her toward the first painting. She stared at the image that had been done in shades reds, blacks and whites. Amy stared at it quietly and studied the technique, glancing over to see Taylor peering at it too with a small smile. The girl checked the book and read out the description. “This is called Harvester’s resting; it’s a painting by Jean-Francois Millet, one of many named similarly. It’s from 1853. It’s an example of the Realism school of painting.” Taylor grinned
“So. What’s that mean?” She smirked when Amy looked confused. “What’s Realism, what’s it all about? Why this Jean guy paint a bunch of peasants taking a bath?” Amy frowned and considered the question, studying the guide book to see if it had any answers.

“The uh. The book doesn’t say.” When Taylor merely offered a raised eyebrow, she moved to tuck the book under one arm, pulling out her phone and jumping onto the internet. Using her thumbs to type the relevant term into the search box, she quickly found an article about the art movement. Reading swiftly, she hummed in thought and found herself getting distracted by the words. It’d take her nearly ten minutes to finish reading the first section only then glancing up to see Taylor conspicuously inspecting the painting once more. Blushing and glancing at her phone she coughed, and Taylor glanced at her with a grin.

“Right, so Realism. It’s a French school of painting, sprang up after the French Revolution in 1848. It was apparently a response to the school of Romanticism that had been popular up to that point. It lampshaded the exotic subject matter and the exaggerated emotions of the Romanticism and simply focused on painting real people in real places. Kind of like candid photographs but with a lot more work put into it. Most of the paintings in this section are about Realism. This one over here is a Corot.” Amy gestured to an image of a young woman reading a book. She glanced over and saw the girl watching her with interest and Amy started discussing the painting’s origin and then moving on.

Amy curled up comfortably in the wicker chair, tugging her sweater more tightly around herself to protect her from the later spring chill. She glanced around as people casually wandered up and down the streets. There was a nervous tension to the crowds, but it hadn’t boiled over yet, and people seemed to be focusing on their shopping. The cafe was mostly empty, and Taylor moved to speak with the barista trying to purchase some snacks. As she watched the girl speaking curiously with the server, she let her mind wander back.

The tour had been amusing. Between her phone and the guide book, Amy had had an entertaining time leading Taylor around the various wings of the museum, teaching them both about the bits of art on display. Sometimes they’d discuss the works and what they reminded them of. Taylor kept playfully adjusting the list of paintings she’d steal if she became a villain, and Amy couldn’t help but laugh that one of Gustave Courbet’s more racy paintings had stayed at the top of the list. The other girl had claimed that it’d make an excellent conversation piece if she ever had an office.

When the art had been seen they’d returned to acting like teenagers running around the Natural History wings and staring at the panorama’s amusing themselves taking pictures with the various Dinosaurs and woolly animals. They’d have still been there if Amy’s stomach hadn’t betrayed her by growling ominously loudly in the empty wing they’d been standing and staring at stuffed cheetahs in. Taylor had laughed then mentioned that she knew a cafe nearby and they’d headed out to get a snack. Taylor had called Ralph and Amy could see his car lurking nearby, though he seemed content to keep his distance.

“So. I was thinking Tython.” The words startled Amy, drawing her attention over to Taylor, the girl
had apparently snuck up on her and had set out two large mugs that wafted steam over their whipped cream toppings. Amy grabbed the closest one and took a sniff, smiling at the heady scent of chocolate. When Taylor set a plate with a chocolate-dipped croissant on it before her, she tilted her head and glanced at her. “Closest thing they had to food.” She nodded and ripped off a piece, nibbling it and sighing as the chocolate hit her stomach, quieting it. “So. I said Tython. What do you think?”

“Hrm?” Amy glanced up, blinking. She shook her head before finally catching on and responding. “Tython? What for? And what does it mean, I’ve never heard it before.”

“I was thinking of using it as my Cape name. We still need one on New Wave, and I figure that could work for me. Your Aunt seemed fine with me using white and brown as my colour scheme, but she said I’d need a name and a crest.” She took a muffin in hand, ripping a piece off and nibbling on it, pausing as she ate. “It means…” She blinked, glancing off to the side. “Home, basically.” Nodding, Amy shrugged and mulled the word over in her head a few times. It was distinct.

“It’s unique, and it’s short and easy to say. It could work. What do you think of your crest?” She blinked at Taylor quietly when the girl drew out a napkin and a pen and started to sketch something. She slid the paper over after a moment, and Amy glanced down, staring at the drawing. It looked like a sword with a star over it that had a pair of wings coming off the hilt. She considered it before sliding it back to Taylor. “It’s interesting; what’s it from?”

“I saw it in a dream once. Kind of stuck with me.” Amy nodded at Taylor’s words and opened her mouth to respond, blinking when she felt the sensation of being watched. She glanced up and around, pausing when she saw an older girl a short distance away. Mocha coloured skin with dark eyes, the girl was dressed fashionably, and her dark hair was cut interestingly. The girl was staring rather seriously at them both. Amy shifted a bit and frowned. Not at them both, at Taylor. She glanced at Taylor and then back and watched as Taylor spun in her seat, staring over her shoulder. Seemingly caught, the girl shifted from foot to foot before stepping closer. Amy moved back when the girl’s eyes came to rest on her, glancing her up and down appraisingly before she slid closer and leaned down, speaking softly to Taylor. Amy was surprised when Taylor gently brushed the girl’s hand off her shoulder and glanced at her.

“Just a minute Mousy, I’ve got to speak with Sabah.” She paused, gesturing between them. “Sabah, this is Amy, Mousy, Sabah.” She slid to her feet and moved to walk a short distance away. Mocha coloured skin with dark eyes, the girl was dressed fashionably, and her dark hair was cut interestingly. The girl was staring rather seriously at them both. Amy shifted a bit and frowned. Not at them both, at Taylor. She glanced at Taylor and then back and watched as Taylor spun in her seat, staring over her shoulder. The pair seemed to be arguing at one point, and Amy nervously shifted in place when Sabah looked at her and pointed causing Taylor to make a dismissive motion with her hand. This seemed to irritate Sabah who started to actually raise her voice until Taylor cut her off with a severe look and then said something apparently harsh enough that Sabah backed off and glanced around. Evidently finding a path of escape, she started to head off. Taylor watched her go with an angry set to her shoulders before she deflated a bit and headed back toward Amy, gingerly slipping back into her chair.

“Sorry about that.” Amy watched with concern as Taylor scooped up her drink and took a sizable pull, glancing away when she felt Taylor’s eyes meeting her own. “Can we not talk about it. It’s… complicated, and I’d rather just deal with it later.” Amy nodded and glanced in the direction the angry girl had gone. She wondered what the girl had done to upset the typically somewhat patient and serene Taylor. The awkward silence dragged out for a few minutes until Taylor’s phone buzzed.
Amy glanced back and watched for a few minutes as the girl stared at it, reading the texts before sighing. She quickly punched something in with her thumbs before laying it face down on the table and returning to her coffee.

“I might have to take you on home soon. It's getting late, and I’ve got to make a stop before going home apparently.” Amy frowned a bit and glanced up noting how low in the sky the sun was and felt surprise whisper through her. She hadn’t realized they’d been at the museum that long. She glanced at Taylor offering an easy smile.

“It’s alright, it is getting late, and I should be getting home for dinner anyway. Did you wanna take these to go, or?” She chuckled when Taylor shook her head and settled in. “I’m not in any rush, and I’d rather enjoy the afternoon breeze as I sip my hot chocolate. Anyway. Before we left the museum, you were telling me a story about how Victoria’s shield didn’t use to cover her uniform?”

Chapter End Notes

[[ …=D You’ll get to see the actual argument from Taylor’s perspective tomorrow, but for now! CONFUSING IMPRESSIONS FOR EVERYONE. Also, the secondary plot of this chapter was hidden in this one. =] Free points to whoever can guess what it is.

P.S.: What’d you think of Tython as Taylor's cape name? And her crest!~]]
Chapter Summary

[[ Shorter chapter this time. But there's Drama, and conflict, and fighting and reconciliation. I enjoy the interactions between Sabah and Taylor; at times it feels like they're speaking two different languages that don't quite match up. Fun times all around.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 2nd, 2011
Downtown Coast, Brockton Bay

Taylor watched Amy disappearing into the house, staring quietly after the girl, frowning as she glanced over at Ralph. The man returned her look for a moment before turning the car on, pulling away from the house, and driving down the cul de sac. Taylor had expected an argument when she'd asked to stop by Sabah’s shop on the way home, but her escort had merely nodded agreeably. Rather than trying to converse with the older man, Taylor found her attention drifting to the streetlights blinking on as they drove down the much quieter streets. The sun hadn’t set just yet, but with the skyscrapers this close to downtown, the lights would soon be needed.

As the car slid into traffic and began weaving its way toward the border between Downtown and the Southern portion of the docks, Taylor let her mind drift back to the ‘conversation’ that she’d had with Sabah earlier in the afternoon. She should have realized that the cafe might be a place that other girl had frequented since she’d brought Taylor there from her apartment, but Taylor had been somewhat distracted by the fun time she’d been having. Truthfully, speaking with Amy was one of the few times that her issues with Sabah drifted out of the fore of the mind, and it’d showed when Sabah had arrived.

Taylor had been distracted with her drawing, rather proud of the rendition she’d done of the classic Jedi crest, though she’d found Amy’s lack of reaction to her idea of a Cape name to be disappointing. She decided to put that one back on the drawing board, perhaps consulting with her father and Jolee about it. While considering what other names might work, Taylor noticed that Amy had gone silent and she glanced up seeing the girl staring over her shoulder. Taylor blinked at the odd look on the other girl’s face, glancing over her shoulder. When she saw those familiar brown eyes, Taylor felt her heart begin to race and she swallowed nervously as the familiar mocha-skinned girl began to pad toward her.

When Sabah had leaned down and tersely asked to speak with her Taylor had delayed them a moment in a fit of pique, introducing Amy and Sabah to each other, a small part of her enjoying the way the older girl’s eyebrows raised at the nickname. Eventually though, the niceties were exhausted and she’d been forced to stand and follow Sabah a short distance away. As they walked, Taylor had found herself watching the older girl’s
tense back and shaking hands, trying to decipher the emotions that she’d seen in the older girl’s eyes.

“Taylor, I… I’m.” The girl paused and sighed deeply, her hunched form straightening as she turned to look fully at Taylor, speaking quicker with a slight under-current of anger in her tone. “Taylor, what’re you doing here? Did you miss the homicidal giant in the sky last night? He’s planning on burning the city to the ground. The ABB has been all over downtown for the last two nights and it’s very dangerous for you to be out and about.” Taylor frowned when the older girl rounded on her and she felt the woman’s dark eyes staring down at her. Rather than letting herself be intimidated, Taylor squared her shoulders and took a step forward, her chin lifting minutely as she stared at Sabah.

“What am I doing here? I’m spending an afternoon with my friend, Sabah.” Taylor watched the other girl flinch and a tiny part of her felt glad about that. “I decided to take a break from wandering that stupid library alone wondering if you might actually show up. I’m a cape if you forgot I can take care of myself, I certainly took care of you, in case you’ve forgotten.” Taylor watched as Sabah’s face darkened and she stepped back when the girl spoke a bit more harshly in response.

“You were fucking stabbed in the side Taylor, I had to bind your god-damned wounds and drag your delirious ass back to my fucking apartment. You’re still barely more than a god-damned child, you shouldn’t be getting into fights like that at all. You should be going to fucking school and making normal mistakes. Dating stupid boys, and getting into trouble with your friends. Just because you have powers doesn’t mean that you’ve got to use them, Taylor. You have no fucking idea what you’re getting yourself into.” Taylor stared at Sabah, watched the girl’s irritated and guilty look and she snorted out a bitter laugh crossing her arms. When Sabah looked like she might continue the girl raised a hand to cut her off.

“My name is Taylor Hebert.” Taylor stared at Sabah and when the girl didn’t react, Taylor rubbed at her face. “About three months ago I was shoved into a locker filled with soiled tampons and garbage by the three girls that had spent over two years slowly destroying every aspect of my social and personal life. One of them had been my oldest and best friend.” Taylor watched the recognition washing over Sabah’s features and that little voice in her head laughed cruelly as the color drained from the girl’s the face.

“Yeah, that Taylor Hebert. I triggered publicly. And I’ve got more power then a bit of telekinesis, Sabah. I faced off against Oni Lee and Lung two nights ago. I spent six hours last night up to my elbows in blood as I tried and failed to save a half dozen PRT troopers in the wake of that explosion that blew out the side of the Protectorate HQ. As you can imagine, being a normal kid isn’t really an option.” She stared at Sabah, her expression fierce daring the girl to call her out on it. She wasn’t disappointed as Sabah raised her voice and responded coldly.

“So, what you think you’re strong enough to be running around with your girlfriend in public? The ABB is probably-” Taylor growled and waved a hand to silence the girl, the expression on her face must be impressive because Sabah immediately cut off and Taylor nodded her head in Amy’s direction.

“That’s Amy Dallon, she’s part of New Wave. Her aunt just offered me a place in the team and considering that I’m probably going to take it, we’re getting to know each other a bit better. And even if I was out here hanging out with my friends, I don’t really
see what say you’ve got in it Sabah. You’ve made your position patently clear.”
Taylor’s voice was almost subzero and she glared at the other cape. She watched as
Sabah stepped back and stumbled with her words for a moment before turning and
slipping off with an angry look. Taylor frowned, watching her go, waiting until Sabah
had vanished into the milling crowd to allow her shoulders to slump.

Taylor had done her best to keep the argument from making the rest of their afternoon awkward, and
Amy played along, but Taylor knew that the girl had all sorts of questions that Taylor wasn’t even
sure she could answer. The conversation had been a bit strained after the argument, and the ride back
to the Pelhams had been even worse. Taylor wasn’t sure what had been on the other healer’s mind,
but something had undoubtedly been occupying Amy’s thoughts if the searching looks had been
anything to go by.

As the Jeep started to travel down familiar streets, Taylor pulled out her phone. With a few deft flicks
of her thumbs, she moved to reread the message that Sabah had sent after making her escape.

{Taylor. I’m sorry about what happened. I’d really like to talk about things.}
{I’ll be at my shop, you’re welcome to swing past whenever you’re done with your friend, just uh.
Please give me a chance to explain?}

{Fine. I’ll be there in an hour or two.} Taylor’s reply had been brief, and Sabah hadn’t actually
responded, but Taylor hoped that she had at least waited for her. Considering the number of shops
that seemed to be closing early, she supposed that it was possible that she’d get to the Tailor’s shop
and find that it had been shut down and locked up like the rest. When Ralph pulled down a side
street and parked in front of a fancy looking clothing shop, he glanced over at Taylor when the shop
looked like it’d been shut down, the lights on the main floor out.

Taylor considered the building for a moment, letting out a weary sigh. She briefly entertained the
thought of just leaving and going home, curling up with a good book and forgetting that she’d
even seen Sabah today. Instead, Taylor found herself unbuckling her seat-belt, waving Ralph back
into his seat and exiting the car. Checking the traffic, she quickly ducked across the quiet street and
made her way up to the dark shop. Taylor glanced around hoping for a doorbell and finding none
she raised a hand rapping firmly on the heavy wooden door. As she waited, she wondered how she’d
ended up feeling both overdressed and underdressed at different points today.

She stood in silence on the doorstep for thirty seconds contemplating knocking again or leaving
when a light flicked on in the depths of the shop, and a few moments later the sound of the door
unlocking was audible. The doorway creaked in, and Taylor found herself confronted by a pale
mask with golden blonde hair, though Sabah’s dark eyes peeked out of it. Taylor stared at the doll
face for a moment until the other girl backed up and widened the doorway to admit Taylor. Deciding
to play along, Taylor slid into the shop and let Sabah lock the door in her wake, glancing around.

She had been inspecting the man-sized Lion Plushie that was sat by the counter when she heard
Sabah slipping up behind her and coughing. Taylor turned and blinked at the sight of the other girl
with her mask slid off. She frowned quietly at the conflicted look on the older girl’s face and let out a
tired sigh.

“So.” She dipped her hands into her pockets, scuffing one of her shoes on the wooden floor. Digging
into her mind and finding a lack of any anger to play off of she offered the other girl a weary smile,
looking around the shop. “It’s a neat shop. It seems like the kind of place that you’d like. Very
you.” She grinned a bit, though the expression faltered when the smaller girl merely stared silently at
her. Taylor shifted gears, speaking a bit softer. “You uh...look good?” She smiled nervously and let out a startled gasp when the other girl lunged toward her.

The Force washed up at her mind but stilled when she felt the tiny dark-skinned girl crash into her chest, small arms wrapping her and letting Taylor feel how Sabah was shaking. Gently releasing her grasp on the force, Taylor sighed, carefully wrapping an arm around the Sabah's back, the hand gently patting up and down the other girl's back. When the girl started to shake harder, Taylor tightened her hold and began to mutter soothingly under her breath. Fairly certain that the other girl was crying, Taylor continued the gently murmuring as she held onto the smaller girl, doing her best to ignore the warm dampness soaking through the collar of her shirt. When the shaking slowed, Taylor spoke gently into her friend's hair.

“Sabah,” Taylor spoke gently and moved to try and pull the girl back. When the other girl’s arms tightened around her, Taylor let out a soft chuckle. “Sabah. C’mon. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.” This time when she attempted to guide Sabah back, she moved, and Taylor felt a bit of guilt washing through her as Sabah lifted one of her costumed hands and wiped at her face. “I was pretty upset. I—” Taylor paused, frowning. “It’s been over a week and you like cut me off with no explanation.”

“You nearly died Taylor.” The words were soft and Taylor sighed when she tried to cut in Sabah gave her a look. “You’re the first friend that I’ve made since I became a cape, and the first time I get into trouble you nearly get killed trying to put yourself between it and me. How do you think that felt Taylor? And I know that you healed it off, but it terrified me. You nearly died and then you came out and told me that you were what, fifteen?” The girls comment startled her and Taylor snorted softly shaking her head.

“Sixteen. Seventeen in two months.” Sabah waved a hand and sighed before continuing.

“You’re a still kid Taylor. When I was your age, I was teaching myself English and trying to get good enough grades to get into college. You’re running wild and training as if you want to be a soldier. You shouldn’t—” Taylor gently raised a hand and though Sabah frowned she paused. “If we’re going to keep on being friends, you need to stop making assumptions Sabah. I am in school. Sort of.” She shifted in place, leaning back against the counter. “My power means that I retain information nearly perfectly, and I read significantly faster then most. A traditional high school syllabus would kill me. I’m currently about six months ahead of where I should be in an online course and I’m attempting to get placed into AP Classes at the university, so you might be seeing more of me come the summer semester.” Taylor studied Sabah’s reaction and snorted at the woman as she rolled her eyes.

“Alright, but everything else Taylor. You’re still a kid you know? I just.” Sabah seemed to pause, carefully considering her words. “You were the first person to be nice to me here in the city you know? People were polite but. Well, I guess you know all about how people can be cruel to each other. And yet you sort of just. Casually adopted me into your circle and it was nice. You’re the first person that wasn’t my family that I felt at ease around despite my triggering and it was nice having a little bit of normality in my life despite all of this.” The woman waved around the shop and Taylor sighed as she shifted back.

“Sabah, we can still be friends, even if we’re not ‘Normal’. I have no intention of allowing this to dominate my life.” She shifted in place gesturing around as she said ‘this’ as if she could gesture to the various bits of the cape life looming over them. Taylor took a moment for her mind to mull the words bouncing around her skull, trying to fix them into coherent thoughts before letting them slip
“You were my token normal friend too, my only friend at one point and finding out that you’re not quote-unquote normal doesn’t mean that you being my friend meant anything less.” She glanced over at the other girl, offering a smile. “But, you’re only four years older than me Sabah, and we’ve established that I’m probably smarter than you.” She grinned at the offended squawk from Sabah, smirking teasingly. “I can make my own decisions about what I want to do with my life. I respect that you care about me Sabah, but I don’t need another parent, my Dad coddles me just fine, and he’s come to accept that this is something that I have to do. I have all this power and I can help people and part of that means that I’ve got to use my gifts.” Taylor stared earnestly at Sabah, watching the conflicted look on her face. Eventually, Taylor watched Sabah let out a defeated sigh before nodding tiredly.

“Good.” Taylor smiled at the other girl and nudged her gently. “It is a neat shop you know. I love this guy.” Taylor pointed at the lion with her thumb and grinned when Sabah perked up and moved to point out what the critter was made out of. Sabah had begun to describe the complicated process of stitching a rotating limb into a man-sized Lion when there was a sharp business-like knock at the door. The girl paused and glanced at Taylor before peering over to see Ralph standing at the door. Taylor frowned and cut in when she saw the man’s concerned expression.

“That’s Ralph, he’s part of my security detail. He looks upset” At the girl’s incredulous look Taylor shrugged. “What? The ABB are waging a ground war down here, do you think the PRT is going to let the only healer besides Panacea walk around without a guard? Put on your mask, I’m gonna see what he wants” She moved to the door, pausing to check Sabah was obscured before opening the door and letting Ralph in. She blinked when he pushed her back and shut and locked the door.

“Ralph?!”

“Taylor, quiet. There’s Empire Eighty-Eight coming up the street. From both directions. It looks like they’re going to meet outside this place.” Frowning, Taylor glanced at Parian, though the mask concealed any reaction that the girl might have. She looked at Ralph as he pulled out his phone and began to rapidly dial. Taylor turned to study Sabah quietly. She spoke softly and reached out with the force extinguishing the lights in the shop in case that helped.

“S-Parian. Have you had any issues with the Empire since I stepped between you and Crusader?” She stepped closer and studied Sabah curious, frowning when the girl shrugged up a shoulder.

“Some? They don’t harass me but I’ve noticed gang members lurking outside the shop occasionally, and they’ve been on my path home some nights, though I’ve started changing that up and that seemed to stop them. They weren’t here last night, but I guess that was because of everything else going on. I have no idea why they’d be here now.” The girl paused and seemed to shrink into herself. Taylor had been about to speak when a brick came through a nearby window drawing a shriek from Sabah. Taylor rubbed her face as a loud voice shouted for Parian to come out.

Taylor turned toward the door and ignored the calls from Ralph and Sabah both. The tiny angry voice from earlier was back and she moved to flick the door open with the force, striding coolly out into the night, staring at the assembled gang members. The three figures in front gave her pause, two men and a woman. All three wore masks, both men were topless and Taylor wracked her brain trying to remember what she’d found about the Empire from Victoria and her father.

“Little Girl.” The taller man with the greasy hair and metal wolf mask, Hookwolf probably, spoke casually as he stepped closer to the shop and her. “You’re in the wrong place at the wrong time. Considering the game that the Chinks are playing though, you’re in luck. We’re supposed to avoid
any civilian casualties, so if you turn and leave right now, we’ll let you live.” The words seemed sincere, but the dark chuckles from the other man didn’t engender a lot of trust in Taylor. Studying his tiger mask, Taylor guessed this was Stormtiger. When she didn’t immediately respond Hookwolf called out. “Little Girl! I said~”

“I heard you. You picked a poor night for this, Hookwolf. My control is very tentative, and I’m going to give you all a chance to surrender. If you don’t, I can’t promise that I won’t hurt you.” She spoke slowly and clearly, noting as Ralph stepped out of the shop his weapon drawn to stand at her side.

“It’s the fucking PRT, Kill the fucking bit~” Taylor didn’t wait for him to finish, her tenuous grasp on the angry little voice in her mind slipped a touch and her hands opened, releasing the force out in a wave. When the gangsters started raising their weapons Taylor brought the entire wave of force down on the group smashing every gangster and cape face down into the asphalt. The sound of bones snapping and the screaming accompanying the action drew a little smirk of pride to her lips, though the expression smoothed out at the faint hint of reproach washing through her mind.

Flicking her eyes to Ralph saw the man’s face pale as he stared at the dozen gangsters and capes pinned casually to the ground. Taylor turned to watch the capes struggling far more desperately then the gangsters. Wind whirled chaotically around Stormtiger, and the woman, Cricket, Taylor assumed, was kicking out haphazardly with her legs, trying to gain purchase on the floor. Hookwolf was snarling and blades had started sprouting from his form as he let out a string of racial slurs and epithets. Taylor felt the anger in her mind bubbling up and she shifted a hand, curling one of her splayed hands into a fist.

The Force wrapped around Hookwolf and squeezed, forcing every last blade that had emerged from his skin savagely back into him. When the cape began screaming hysterically in pain every other figure in the street went deathly silent. Taylor stared at the cape until he collapsed panting as the last of the blades stopped trying to grow, the hand on her shoulder instantly quelling the rage. She glanced over, staring at Parian and somehow feeling the frown in her eyes. She sighed and turned back to the group.

“The PRT and the police are on the way. We’re all going to stay quietly where we are, and I won’t have to make an example of anyone like Hookwolf, agreed?” No one spoke but the struggling had stilled and Taylor stepped back, keeping a firm grasp of her power and staring at the group, and doing her best to ignore the concerned looks that Ralph and Sabah were shooting at her back.

Sabah leaned against the wall of her shop, quietly watching as Taylor gently released the gangsters one at a time, the small group of police checking each one over and handcuffing them. The ones that weren’t hurt were placed into cars but at least one in three was instead loaded into the back of an ambulance to be treated for the broken bones that Taylor’s power had caused.

A group of PRT Troopers stood off to one side quietly conferring on how they planned to transfer the capes. Hookwolf would apparently prove troublesome since they needed to keep him from transforming in the van and destroying it. Getting bored of listening in on the troopers debating
between having Taylor hoist them up so they could foam them into cape-sicles for ease of transport or sedating them while they were held down, Sabah moved to head back over toward Taylor. She studied the younger girl seeing the tell-tale signs of the strain that using her powers this long and in this way was putting on her.

“You okay?” Sabah spoke gently, her tone laced with concern. Taylor nodded faintly and kept her eye on the group. “Taylor-”

“I’m fine Parian, we’re almost done, and if I let them go now people could be hurt, it shouldn’t be much longer.” Sabah sighed softly as she crossed her arms and stood quietly at Taylor’s side watching as the last group of gangsters were released and handcuffed, all three of these getting loaded into the back of a police truck, apparently healthy enough to face the jails.

“So. Mousy?” She asked finally, her tone laced with wry amusement, and she watched Taylor tense, her cheeks and ears darkening.

“That’s Amy to you. Or Panacea if she’s in costume, it’s a nickname I gave her, during that bank heist that I mentioned.” She coughed faintly as the troopers moved to inspect the capes, Taylor shifting and studying them carefully. As if sensing her raised eyebrow, Taylor continued. “She gets a lot of pressure put on her by most people, and the nickname makes her smile, even if it confuses her. I get the feeling that she could do with a bit more playful confusion and smiles in her life.” Sabah let out a gentle chuckle and dipped her hands into the pockets of her dress, staring at the troopers as they indicated that Taylor should hoist up Stormtiger. While Taylor acquiesced, Sabah spoke.

“I get the feeling that being your friend is plenty confusing enough for most people, Taylor.” Sabah’s voice was low and wistful and Taylor let out a bitter laugh that made Sabah think that she hadn’t quite gotten the underlying joke of the comment. The troopers hosed down Stormtiger in foam, the white substance expanding and hardening and turning the Cape into a white cigar with a tiger mask on one end. The troopers turned to each other, conferred and gave a thumbs up to Taylor. Sabah assumed that Taylor took that to mean that she should heft the other two up, since that’s what the other cape did.

As the troopers were hosing down Hookwolf and Cricket, Parian watched the older man that had called in the rest slipping up toward Taylor’s other side.

“I let your father know what happened. He’s a bit concerned, but he calmed down when I explained that you hadn’t charged headfirst into this one, merely got stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The man’s voice was laced with reproach and Taylor sighed.

“What did you expect me to do, Ralph? Let you and Sabah get attacked as I sat back? I put them all down in thirty seconds. No one was hurt, and that’s fifteen Nazi’s off the street.” She spoke tiredly and glanced at Ralph as she released the capes, startling the troopers who barely caught Cricket and Stormtiger. Sabah winced as Hookwolf just teetered over and landed on his mask with a meaty crunch.

“What happens when they come back next time, Taylor, with capes that aren’t two-bit thugs like these. Fenja and Menja could step on this shop Taylor, and there’s nothing Parian could do to stop her. You can’t be here all the time to protect her and you doing this paints a target on her. If you’d stayed, we could have stalled them until the PRT showed up.” He sighed faintly and glanced at the troopers as they moved to pack up the capes. Parian winced quietly as she considered the older Troopers words.
When she glanced up and saw Taylor’s concerned eyes, she tried her best to smile before realizing that her mask made the expression pointless. Instead, she spoke softly. “It’s fine Taylor. They’ve been after me for a bit, I can look after myself. I’m working on something that’ll help me protect the shop. I’m nearly there.” Taylor stared at her dubiously and Parian did her best to seem confident until Taylor looked away. Sabah stood quietly and watched with Taylor and Ralph as they PRT and Troopers finished the clean-up.

Between the clean-up and the interviews, it was nearly midnight before Sabah made it home to her apartment. As she stripped out of her costume, she found herself drawn to the sketch-pad on her desk. She quietly flipped it open looking at the sketches of the various large stuffed creatures that she’d created. If what the trooper had said was right, it was about to get a lot more dangerous down near her shop. Making a mental list as she headed toward the Shower, Sabah quietly began to figure out what she’d need to make the first of her guards.

Chapter End Notes

[[I've been experimenting with Flashbacks, they're harder to use than I expected, but I think I did okay this time! I was tempted to go a different way with this fight, have the ABB show up and stomp down the E88 and then leave as part of Lung's plan, but that got messy afterwards, and I think I've been looking forward to letting Taylor flex her muscles a bit, to show that despite her efforts her control isn't perfect. As always, I'm always excited for your feedback, guys.]]
May 4th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

The sound of Jolee’s laughter in her head wasn’t helping Taylor’s focus at all. The girl felt her cheeks burning despite the lack of any actual physical presence to warrant the feeling of embarrassment. As she stood and stared at the various articles of clothing that she’d laid over the bed, she was forced to admit that she may have been a little bit over-zealous in avoiding anything that could have appeared robelike. With the success of her outfit from the other night, Taylor had dipped into the restitution that she’d garnered from the school, focusing on improving her outdated wardrobe.

As she stood and quietly fingered the sleeve of one of the fitted button-down shirts on the edge of the bed her thoughts lingered on the money. She’d felt somewhat guilty using the money on herself. She had been almost tempted to donate the money to some worthy cause or to try and force her father to accept it. He’d supported her through the entire trial process and everything else that was going on during it, even though she knew that she’d been straining the family savings quite a bit with all of her training and the various things she’d needed over the last few weeks. It had taken her pointing out that she’d soon have a better paying job than him to get him to accept her replacing the savings they’d burned through. She had also managed to convince him to come shopping with her, funding the replacement of a few of his things as well. Though, when she’d spread her purchases out to sort them and put them away, she’d thought for a moment that she’d swapped bags with her dad.

Dress pants, Slacks, and jeans covered the lower half of the bed, t-shirts, dress shirts and vests covered the upper half, each having been carefully selected following the measurements that Sabah had talked her through taking the night before. Taylor briefly considered hiding everything in her closet, sneaking out and replacing the outfits with a few blouses but the resounding laughter of Jolee caused her to set her shoulders and grab several things. She moved over to the mirror, pulling her hair back into a messy ponytail. She discarded the scruffy outfit that she’d gone shopping in, the track pants and t-shirt ending up in the hamper.

Taylor was surprised how comfortable the garments felt. The shirts were cut very close to her frame, but not enough to accentuate her lack of noticeable curves, just loose enough to leave most of her form to the imagination. The shirt was tucked into the dress pants that wrapped comfortably around her hips. A shiny black belt was looped into the pants and Taylor peered down at her black socks peeking out of the bottoms of the pants, the faint silvery pin-strips visible when the light hit the pants just right. Tugging a vest on, Taylor stared at her reflection in the mirror, carefully adjusting her new
glasses and frowning at the image of herself. Something didn’t seem quite right yet.

‘Your shirt. Unbutton the top button.’ Bastila’s voice drifted through Taylor’s mind, and the girl did as the woman asked and chuckled as the collar of the shirt parted and left the outfit looking suitably rakish. She considered herself in the mirror, spinning in place and glancing over her shoulder at herself. Sighing as she contemplated the look, she had to admit that with her frame, the garments looked good on her. With a grumble, Taylor moved to slip her shoes on, quickly racing down the steps, heading toward the kitchen. If she hurried, she could grab a snack before returning her library books, and get back in time to catch a classic movie with her father.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Taylor skidded to a stop, glancing into the kitchen. Seeing her dad sitting at the table, reading the newspaper as he drank coffee, Taylor padded over toward him. Things with the Dockworkers seemed to have been calming down, and he’d been able to join her for training again for the last two days. Adding in the fact that he had a day off finally, despite it being the middle of the week, and Taylor figured that things were looking up. Slipping up behind her dad, she peered over his shoulder at the article he'd been reading. After she read the first few paragraphs, she stepped away, letting out a snort.

“If they think that the ABB is better for the city than the PRT then they're insane,” Taylor commented as she headed toward the fridge, rooting around within for a bottle of water. The PR Nightmare was steadily getting worse and worse for the PRT as time went on. The ABB had been continuing their campaign against the other gangs, and their restraint hadn’t been a fluke. Even their promised explosions were all targeted at known Empire or Merchant holdings, and the bombs had been designed to limit the collateral damage. One Townhouse that’d served as a storehouse for the Merchants had just vanished in the middle of the night leaving two smooth brick walls on either side of the empty lot where it’d once stood.

The problem with the PRT, Taylor thought as she removed the cap from her water bottle and took a sip, was that they had managed to seem ineffective by the ABB’s surprising efficiency and dedication. This impression was made even worse when they’d ended up looking flat-out inept when the previous evening their attempts to crack down on the ABB assaults had resulted in increased civilian casualties. The gangsters hadn’t turned their guns on the bystanders, or anything so obvious, but as soon as capes showed up, the number of ‘accidents’ increased, and videos were quickly uploaded to various bits of social media that had been cut just right to make the capes look bad. According to Victoria’s texts, even PHO was starting to turn on the PRT despite the moderators’ draconian enforcement. And judging by the looks that Ralph was getting in his uniform on their morning run, even off the internet opinions on the PRT and Protectorate were beginning to sour.

A strangled chuckle drew Taylor from her thoughts, and she turned, glancing at her dad, glaring when she saw him trying to stifle a laugh. Taylor narrowed her eyes, hoping that her dark look would smother whatever ‘hilarious’ thought was trying to escape his tiny brain. She found herself sadly disappointed when he opened his mouth and allowed it to escape.

“Taylor, when I said that you were a chip off the old block, I didn’t mean to imply that you should also absorb my fashion sense.” The black haired girl glowered at her father, grumbling as she stuck out her tongue at him. He snorted as he moved past her, moving to slice a bagel before dropping it in the toaster. “So, is there a special occasion? Or are you just trying to improve the general aesthetic around here?”

Rather than dignify that with a response, Taylor groaned at the teasing and moved to storm off with sufficient poise as to show him who was boss. The sound of the doorbell ringing robbed her dramatic exit of much of its gravitas, and Taylor found herself grumbling as she headed for the door.
Unlocking the heavy wooden door when she reached it, Taylor quickly swung it open. She paused, staring in horror at the person on the opposite side of the door. The silence dragged out between them for a minute, then two before the girl opposite Taylor burst into raucous laughter. Taylor felt her cheeks heating up as she stared at Crystal Pelham standing on her stoop in skinny jeans and a soft blue top. Tapping her foot, Taylor continued to grumble as the other girl got her laughter under control.

“My…” The girl commented, stifling a giggle before continuing. “My, don’t we look dapper today, Taylor.” Rubbing her face, Taylor let out a groan and stared at the other girl with an unimpressed expression. When the girl glanced over her shoulder and perked up, offering a wave, Taylor leaned to the side and glanced back to see her Dad standing in the hallway, half a bagel in his mouth as he waved confusedly in response to Crystal before heading toward the living room.

“Crystal...why are you on my doorstep?” She spoke blandly and rolled her eyes when the other girl seemed to realize where she was and perked up.

“Oh! Right. Dad is going to be training us, and I figured that I’d come and grab you. Victoria’s finally going to be joining us again, and I figured that it’d be good for someone that can break her out of her funks to be around.” Crystal flashed her a broad grin that didn’t fool Taylor for a second. The Jedi in training narrowed her eyes at Crystal and considered her a moment before speaking slowly.

“I mean, I’ve already done most of my training for today and to be honest, I was kind of planning on spending the afternoon with my dad.” Taylor shifted back and moved to glance back toward where her father, the coward, had escaped to. When Crystal reached out and poked at her, Taylor turned back toward the blonde girl nervously.

“Oh! Did I frame that as a question? I meant to say that Dad’s training us and you should definitely come since you’ll be joining the team soon. It’s a great team building exercise.” She reached out and tugged on Taylor’s arm. Taylor whined faintly and tried to pull back, torn between trying to avoid whatever trap the other girl had in mind and wanting to see what the others could do with their powers. When Crystal managed to yank her past the doorframe, Taylor let out a half-hearted complaint.

“But. My Dad.” Rather than let her finish her thought, Crystal leaned into the house and shouted.

“Mister Hebert! This is Crystal Pelham speaking, Carol’s niece. I’m kidnapping your daughter!” Taylor paused, listening to see if her Dad might save her, but she rolled her eyes at his response came echoing up the halls.

“Alright. Make sure you bring her back for holidays and birthdays. Careful she bites.” Taylor glanced over when Crystal looked at her nervously and clicked her teeth playfully causing the other girl to snort out loud. With a sigh, Taylor tossed her arms up and sighed.

“Alright. Let’s go then.”

The trip over had been awkward, since the only comfortable way of someone of Crystal’s height and
build to carry someone of Taylor’s was bridal style. Twice during the trip when the other cape had made a crack about Taylor’s clothing choice being at odds with her pose, Taylor had demanded to be let down so she could run and jump the rest of the way, but Crystal had apologized and left Taylor to grump. The blonde just seemed to find this even funnier, and Taylor found herself watching the scenery drifting past instead of the other girl’s smug features.

It had soon become apparent that they weren’t heading for Crystal's house, the directions were all wrong. Instead, they flew in a direction that was much further south than where the Pelhams lived. Eventually, they approached a rather affluent neighbourhood, heading toward one of the houses on the outside of it. Unlike the ranch house she'd visited a few days ago, this one was more of a Tudor style house, with its mixed materials, solid masonry, and elaborate design. It took Taylor a few moments to figure out that this was probably where Victoria and Carol lived, considering the much larger plot of land that the house sat on, Taylor imagined that this was where most of the training happened.

When they neared the ground, Taylor shifted, slipping neatly out of Crystal’s arms and rolling herself in the air. She used the force to slow her descent, and she landed neatly on the gravel path that served as a driveway to the large house, glancing up when she heard Crystal scoff and mutter something about a show-off. Taylor trailed after the other cape, following Crystal when she landed on the front porch and opened the door and letting herself in. As she entered the house, she heard the sound of quiet conversation coming from further in the house, and she headed toward it with Crystal.

“So what’d you think of the New Wave Cave?” Crystal’s voice was laced with humour and Taylor facepalmed as she ignored the older girl, heading past her into a warmly decorated sitting room. The room held two-thirds of new wave scattered across a pair of couches and several comfortable chairs. Carol and Neil were sat off to one side in matching chairs, murmuring to each other. When they entered Eric glanced up with relief at Crystal and Taylor. Victoria perked up as well and looked over, but her expression seemed to fall when she saw who’d arrived. Taylor glanced from Crystal to Eric and took in their awkward expressions and rubbed at her nose. Of course.

When Crystal quickly abandoned her and headed over to speak conspiratorially with her brother, Taylor let out a soft grunt, moving over and around the back of the couch. She hopped up and perched on the back of the couch before falling over to land on her back, staring up at Victoria as her legs hung over the back of the couch. Taylor lay still, staring up at Victoria’s sullen expression for a few moments before offering her a tired smile. She watched as Victoria cracked a tiny smile before sighing and leaning back into the couch.

“She’s not coming, huh?” The blonde’s words were rather small, and Taylor sighed as she glanced at everyone else who was conspicuously not paying attention to them.

“She told me this morning that she’d be over at the hospital with your Aunt. They’re doing some healing I guess, there’s a waiting list or something, and she doesn’t want to give up the healing entirely.” Taylor offered the other girl a consoling smile and sighed when Victoria rubbed quietly at one of her eyes. Taylor shifted and pulled her knees in, rolling over to land on her feet standing up in front of the couch. She reached out and tapped her knuckles atop Victoria’s hung head. She waited for Victoria to react before speaking, smirking when Victoria hit her with a glare while rubbing at her head despite the fact that there was no way that rap could have hurt her.

“C’mon. You’ve been doing the routine I showed you right?” When the girl nodded, Taylor smirked. “Show me. Let’s head out back.” She gestured and smiled when Victoria sighed before slipping to her feet and leading her out back. Taylor spun and quickly followed the girl. Victoria led Taylor out a sliding door onto a small raised patio. Taylor paused on the patio, leaning on its stained
wooden fence and watching the other girl descend and step out onto the grass.

She tilted her head when Victoria kicked off her sandals and moved to step into her first pose. She shifted into the next and Taylor sighed. It was very messy. She quickly slid down the steps, walking over toward the other cape.


“Okay, now focus on the first form, picture it in your head, where your arms would go, where your feet would go, focus.” She spoke softly watching Victoria grinning quietly. “Keep breathing,” she added, and Victoria continued the slow breathing exercise. “Alright, now without opening your eyes, move into pose one. Okay, now picture pose two.” She watched as Victoria slowly slid into the pose. Taylor checked it, adjusting Victoria’s stance a bit before humming and watching as she kept the breathing up.

“Alright move into two now. Picture three.” She smiled as she adjusted the girl’s pose again. She continued moving Victoria gently through each pose, watching the tension melting out of her. Once Victoria had her poses right Taylor shifted into place next to her, and they both quietly slid through several repetitions of the 14 pose kata. Taylor watched Victoria out of the corner of her eye, though she held her comments until they’d finished the last full run-through. When Victoria dropped her arms to her side, Taylor backed off and crossed her arms behind her back.

“Feeling better?” She spoke quietly and smiled when Victoria nodded uncertainly.

“Matukai isn’t just a form of Martial Arts. It's a blend of hand to hand combat and moving meditation. It helps to clear one’s mind. It’s the main reason that I learned it; it helps with my powers since they are tied into my emotions.” Taylor chuckled when Victoria looked surprised and seemed to get lost in her thoughts as she thought about that. Rather than letting the other cape dwell Taylor smirked quietly. Taking a moment to carefully roll up the sleeves of her shirt, as she moved back a short distance. When Victoria glanced up, Taylor spoke quickly.

“Shall we see how much you’ve picked up? Quick spar?” Taylor couldn’t hold back the soft laugh that bubbled up at the rather eager look on the other girl’s face. Instead, she moved over and took up a position opposite Victoria, waiting for the girl to get comfortable and toss the first punch. As with before Taylor lifted her hands, using Force Deflection to catch the first punch. Victoria’s technique was getting better, and she was becoming more varied, throwing kicks and moving around Taylor instead of standing still and attempting to pummel her into the ground. It took more effort and both hands and even occasionally her legs to deflect all the other girl’s kicks and punches, and Taylor found herself enjoying the challenge.

“So. You wanna tell me what that was all about back there?” Taylor’s voice was conversational as she used both hands to block the inventive jumping spin kick that Victoria had launched at her head.
She shifted her hands, grasping Victoria’s shin and using the grip to spin and plant the girl into the dirt, finding it rather unfair that her shield protected her outfit from grass stains. When Victoria didn’t respond immediately after rolling over and getting her feet back under her, Taylor lashed out with a pair of rapid jabs aimed at the girl’s midsection. She was impressed when Victoria used her hands to brush the attacks aside instead of tanking them. “Amy again, I guess?” Taylor hazarded a guess, the tension in Victoria’s shoulder showing that she’d scored a hit.

“She’s responding to my texts now, but.” The girl lashed out with a haymaker and then lunged after Taylor when she faded to one side to dodge. Without warning, Victoria snapped out a kick with one of her legs and attempting to use it to sweep out Taylor’s legs. Rather than toppling, Taylor merely hopped over the strike and tilted her head at Victoria, inviting her to continue. Taylor casually brushed aside the half a dozen punches that came flying at her, frowning at Victoria’s tone when she finally spoke. “It’s different. She’s very...terse at times, and everyone refuses to tell me what’s going on. Amy still doesn’t want to see me in person. She keeps insisting that I haven’t ‘done’ anything, but…” She sighed softly and shifted into a defensive pose, ducking and weaving around Taylor’s return volley of strikes.

“I mean.” Taylor ducked under a cross strike from Victoria, snorting when the other girl lunged in with an elbow drop. Taylor tucked and rolled to one side, weaving around Victoria and playfully tapping the back of the other girl’s knee. “I’m not exactly an expert with things like this. You’re currently in third place for my longest lasting friendship.” She paused and kicked back dodging the girl’s return lunge, using her hands to deflect the quick, precise strikes from the other girl.

When Victoria made a sudden jab and overextended, Taylor grabbed her arm, pulling her close and shifting into her block, using a hip to toss the girl into the grass again, grinning faintly. “It might be worth trying to find something to distract you from stuff until Amy is ready to see you again? A hobby or something? Amy’s taken up drawing, and I imagine you’d enjoy being able to show her your own hidden talents?” Victoria didn’t respond, but Taylor could see the gears turning in the girl’s head.

“What about you? What’s been new with you? I heard Aunt Sarah offered you a place on the team. I guess she and your dad are still ironing out the details, right?” The change of subject was expected and Taylor went with it, nodding as she watched Victoria warily.

“Yeah. Dad has an old friend who’s a lawyer that’s going over the contract, since your Mom can’t do it really. Beyond that, It’s mostly been Dad subtly trying to figure out what he wants to get me for my birthday.” Taylor blinked when Victoria kicked off and rocketed at her under the power of her flight. Crouching and leaping up she did a twist in mid-leap to land neatly on her feet watching Vicky quickly recovering in mid-air. “That’s cheating!” She called out before turning and hopping away, using the force to bounce out of range of Victoria’s lunges, dodging adroitly around the less precise girl’s quicker lunges.

This continued for several minutes but Taylor with the force was too spry for Victoria to actually catch her and when Taylor ended up perched on a branch as Victoria ate dirt below her, the pair ended up dissolving into giggles. When Victoria righted herself and floated up to sit next to her, Taylor relaxed into the trunk of the tree, swinging her legs. Taylor glanced over and watched Victoria staring sadly at a mess of buildings in the distance. Taylor followed the gaze, seeing the hospital peeking out past several tenements.

“It’s pretty close, you know. I bet you could get there before anyone could stop you.” Taylor’s voice was lazy and she watched as Victoria seemed to shift as if considering it. Eventually, she let out a tired sigh before glancing over at Taylor. She didn’t comment on it, turning her focus back to what
Taylor mentioned earlier. “Your birthday’s coming up? When? Going to do anything fun for it?” Smiling to herself, Taylor hummed and shrugged up a shoulder.

“It’s in…” Taylor trailed off, quietly doing the math in her head. “Shit, a little under six weeks, June 11th. And I mean. Usually, I just have dinner with my dad.” Taylor didn’t tack on the fact that her social life mostly ensured that that’s all she could do. Instead, she swung her legs glancing at Victoria.

“Just hanging with your dad? That seems like a waste.” Taylor rolled her eyes, glancing at Victoria when the girl snorted and continued. “What? I mean, I used to like, dream of when I would be old enough to go out and do stuff on my birthday. And you’re wasting it.” Taylor blinked and stared at Victoria curiously. She stared at the girl, tilting her head.

“What’d you mean? Wasting what?” Taylor stared curiously at Victoria, watching the wistful look in her eye as she responded.

“Well, like. Being free to do what you want. I bet that once I’m out of high school and stuff, I'll have more fun with birthdays. College Parties and dancing and things like that.” Taylor sat silently for a moment before quietly rubbing at her face. When Victoria looked back, Taylor wiped at her face and sighed, carefully looking at her friend.

“Victoria... I’m only sixteen.” She sighed when what had become a very familiar shocked look came over Victoria’s face. “Why does everyone keep looking at me like that when I say that?” She pointed at Victoria’s face and groaned when the other girl started to giggle. Taylor reached out and pushed Victoria out of the tree, relishing in the indignant squawk that came up to her when Victoria recovered on the dirt below.

“Get down here. I need to show you something.” Taylor sighed and hopped down, moving to hurry after the blonde who’d already disappeared up toward the house. Ten minutes later saw the black haired girl in the upstairs bathroom staring at herself in the mirror. She looked mostly the same as she had this morning, her outfit a bit more rumpled, her hair a bit messier as a few wisps of black hair escaped the pony-tail from the various exertions she'd been indulging in.

“I don’t see what I’m supposed to be seeing Victoria.” The girl spoke faintly as she adjusted her glasses, and did her best to smooth out the soft material of her shirt. Rather than answer Victoria walked into the bathroom and stood next to Taylor, smiling cutely at the mirror. Taylor frowned as she was struck by the differences. She hadn’t realized that she was so much taller than Victoria, having nearly four inches on the other girl. More than that she looked more imposing, her form carrying a hint of muscle, her bare forearms showing the subtle shift of muscle when she moved, her clothing accenting the improved physique her physical regimen had earned her.

It wasn’t just the physical appearance either, she carried herself different than Victoria. She considered her stance when next to Victoria, she looked at ease, confident in who she was in a way that the older girl couldn’t quite fake. She glanced over at Victoria and frowned as the girl studied her own reflection nervously. Taylor chuckled and nudged Victoria, grinning when the other girl perked up a bit. Before Taylor could comment on the point that Victoria was trying to make though, a blue-haired teen peeked into the room.

“Hey! You’re both beautiful. Stop primping. Vicky, your mom is heading out, Dad’s getting ready for the group exercises. He wants you to wait outside with us. Taylor, he wants to speak with you in the sitting room quickly."
Victoria took a few moments to change into her New Wave Uniform, smoothing out the white and gold outfit and checking herself over carefully. Adjusting her tiara, she frowned as she considered her appearance in the mirror. With a subtle glance at the way the golden crown sat on her head she sighed and removed it, setting it on her dresser and heading out with the rest of her uniform intact. When she got outside, she headed toward the figures clad in white and blue and white and red.

When she’d gotten close enough, Victoria noticed the looks from her cousins when she exited the house. She watched as they stared at her like she was a live grenade that might go off. Part of her wanted to bristle at the looks but after a moment she sighed and flashed a comfortable grin at the pair that saw them relaxing. She had been a touch...sensitive lately, and she couldn’t really fault them for being cautious around her. She moved over and stood near them.

“So any idea what he’s doing in there with Taylor?” Her voice was curious and she watched as Eric shrugged nervously and Crystal huffed and backed up a step. Neil’s training exercises were often random, varied, and invariably much more fun for him than for them. The other adult members of new wave tended to be rather straightforward. Her father often worked individually with them on what they were having trouble with, dealing with specific issues with each younger member. Victoria’s mother often handled Power Control issues, while her Aunt Sarah dealt more with working in tandem with their powers.

When the door opened to emit her Uncle in full Manpower Regalia, Victoria swallowed nervously. When an entire rack of bouncy red dodgeballs followed him, floating of its own accord with Taylor standing behind it grinning impishly, Victoria took a full step back. She glanced at Crystal and Eric and found them equally concerned. It was the soft clatter of the ball cage dropping to the patio that drew everyone’s attention back to the pair by the house.

“So.” Manpower spoke softly, his powerful arms crossing over his chest. “Taylor’s seen Glory Girl fighting several times, and she had some interesting perspective.” Victoria stared at Taylor in betrayal, flushing at the amused sparkle in the girl’s eye as she moved to lean against the front of the ball cage. “She seemed to think that Glory Girls fine control of her flight wasn’t what it could be, and I agree, all of you are fliers and you could all do with a more subtle control of your flight.” When they started to speak as one, he held up a hand. “Argue all you want, but the bank that you ripped up is point enough on this one.” huffing Victoria shifted back and grumbled a bit but didn’t argue.

“So. I had a wonderful idea.” Victoria watched Crystal’s face paling and glanced with her cousin at Manpower. “Remember when all of you kids were super into those Harry Potter books when you were younger. It was adorable. What were your favourite parts again?” When no one responded, Taylor let out an amused chuckle and strode forward, the lid of the cage flying open behind her.

“Well, me? When I read the books. I always loved Quidditch.” Taylor smirked and suddenly two dozen balls erupted from the cage and begun to float ominously behind her. Victoria didn’t wait for any other comments, leaping into the air.

“No leaving the property!” Manpower shouted and then the balls rocketed past him and Taylor, diving toward the three movers. All three scattered and flew in different directions the red rubber balls splitting into groups of eight to chase them.
‘Quidditch’ was a lot more stressful than it seemed. The balls were significantly faster than any of the teens could fly, and the fact that they were trapped on the lot meant that they couldn’t outrun Taylor. It’d taken the teens nearly ten minutes of getting smacked around by rubber balls before they figured out that if they worked together, they stood a better chance. Though it did take Laserdream and Shielder layering their shields together to keep the two dozen balls from battering them long enough for them to discuss strategy.

Manpower hadn’t actually given them an objective for this game, but hopefully, it was about more than just dodging balls constantly for several hours. Victoria did note that her uncle hadn’t said anything about them hunkering down behind the Laserdream and Shielder’s fields to discuss strategy, though Taylor’s weapons were raining constant loud, twangy thwacks against the shields to keep them from getting too complacent.

“We have to get to Taylor. She’s the master, the balls are her minions.” Victoria spoke and cut off the nervous arguing of the other two. When they glanced at her Victoria chuckled. “If we want to stop this, we need to focus on Taylor. Currently, she has all the balls focusing on us, right, but if you two start tossing lasers at her, she’ll have to bring them back in to defend herself.” Victoria frowned and shifted from foot to foot thinking.

“That’ll keep her from focusing on us all. If we split up, and weave around the house, when we come back, you two can go hard for her. She’ll use the balls to defend herself and then I can sneak up on her.” At the incredulous looks, she frowned. “She’s been training me in hand to hand, and she can take my hits. Just... it’s either this or we practice taking hits and dodging till your dad get’s bored.” The other conferred silently for a moment before they nodded grimly at her.

Victoria grinned at them and was happy to see matching smiles on their faces. “So. On three. You guys expand your shields as far as they’ll go, knock the balls back and then we all kick off. Stay low to the ground and go straight for the corner of the garage and duck out of sight. When we’re on the other side, I’ll fall back. You two split up to come back from different sides and focus your attacks on Taylor.” The other two nodded and Victoria got ready. Once everyone looked ready, she softly counted. On three the field around them exploded outwards, blasting the balls away and all three kicked off and shot away from Taylor and Manpower.

When they reached the relative safety of the front of the house, Victoria slowed and watched as Shielder cut back the way they came, Laserdream continuing around the other side of the house. She floated up and over, staying out of sight till she saw the flashes of light. She darted over the house, low to the roof, landing behind Taylor and her shield and she slid toward Taylor intent on tapping her in the back.

She barely managed to lunge to the side when Manpower landed where she’d been standing, grinning as he stretched up to his massive seven-foot height. He’d grin as he cracked his knuckles.

“If you want to get to the mage, you’ve got to go through the Fighter.” He’d grin at his joke and Victoria rolled her eyes. She stared at him a moment before neatly landing on the ground. This seemed to surprise him and she lunged forward with a jab, grinning as his eyes widened and he leaped back. He was fast, but Taylor was faster and Victoria pressed the assault, launching tight and precise punches and kicks, trying to corner her uncle.
Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Taylor as she used the balls as a shield, blocking the continuous assault of Laserdream and Shielder. Taylor had clustered most of her weapons in front of her as a shield, though she occasionally blasted one ball out to send Laserdream and Shielder spinning if they tried to charge up more powerful blasts. Turning her attention back to Manpower, Victoria nearly shrieked at the fist coming for her, but she brought a hand up and smacked the attack aside, surprising both herself and her uncle.

Capitalizing on her uncle’s surprise, Victoria lunged in and crashed into him with her shoulder, pushing him back and off balance, following up with a pair of quick jabs to his chest. Her super strength matched up with his enhanced endurance and he grunted at the attacks that would typically send small cars rolling and then Victoria quickly spun in place, lashing out with a butterfly kick, frowning when her uncle’s hands came up and caught the attack the pair skidding back nearly a foot from the force.

“Hold! Hold!” He grinned holding up his hands and Victoria danced back holding up her hands warily. “Hold, you got me. Jesus. When she said that she’d been helping you refine your technique I didn’t think she meant like this. You’re faster then I expected, and I wasn’t sure how to deal with you on the ground.” He glanced over at Taylor and then back to Victoria. “She’s as good as you?” He asked softly, and Victoria snorted.

“Most of the time I get the feeling that she’s just playing with me.” She commented faintly. “I get the feeling that half the fun in sparring with me is how fast she can push me on. She’s not as strong as us, but she’s way faster.” She glanced over watching the amused smirk on Taylor’s face as she kept the shield in place. When she feigned a yawn, Victoria rolled her eyes and quickly darted over. She darted in behind Taylor, reaching out and covering the girl’s eyes with her hands causing Taylor to squawk indignantly.

Apparently, without a direct line of sight, Taylor’s control became less fine and the balls started jittering around in place, barely maintaining cohesion as a barrier. The combined firepower of Laserdream and Shielder disposed of the much looser shield, sending the balls scattering across the backyard and allowing both of the other teens to land opposite Taylor. Victoria released Taylor and quickly headed over to Laserdream and Shielder, grinning faintly as the three rounded on Taylor and Manpower.

Sadly, before the trio could rejoice in their victory, they’d all fall silent at a sudden shimmer of brilliant orange light followed a mere moment later by a thunderous roar, warm wind washing past them. Victoria felt her heart drop as she turned and stared in horror in the direction that she and Taylor had been looking, finding a rising plume of inky black smoke where the clustered tenements and the hospital had been.

Someone was calling her name but she couldn’t hear the words past the rushing in her ears. She took one step, and when a hand came down on her arm, she shook it off, turning and running toward the edge of the lot, suddenly leaping into the air and flying toward the cloud as fast as she could.

‘No. This can’t be. Amy… Amy can’t be…’ The words run around her head over and over as she flew faster and faster toward the expanding cloud. The wind whipped past her and she ignored it. She hit the thick cloud of smoke and ash doing nearly 60 miles per hour. She wasn’t sure whether it was the smoke or the unshed tears she was holding back that was causing the burning that she felt in her eyes and throat.

Her breakneck approach was cut off when she crashed bodily into something solid her form literally
bouncing off a shimmering glow in the air. Smashing her fists into the energy did nothing but make it pulse, despite Victoria using her full strength. Glory Girl snarled as she struck the shield several times but it held and she backed off. Finally taking a moment to look the rush of relief that she felt was palpable, and she stared through the barrier at the fully intact hospital, numerous people clustered on the ground and the roof staring back at the barrier.

Victoria took a moment to seek out that familiar messy head of brown hair and the red and white robes but she found herself distracted by a sudden whooshing sound and she blinked as the cloud around her began to roil, the inky black cloud whipping away from the barrier suddenly and heading northwards in a single stream of pitch darkness. Victoria watched it, floating higher and noticing four more black clouds heading toward downtown from different portions of the city. Victoria took a moment to figure out the geography in her head, frowning. It was only her constant chauffeuring of Amy that let her put the pieces together.

‘They’re other hospitals, each cloud is leaving a hospital.’ Each cloud had left a glowing blue shield behind covering a hospital. Victoria watched as the clouds coalesced into a ball high above the center of the city, the black cloud expanding outwards and upwards to form a familiar bare-chested fand masked figure, though this time the sun wasn’t bloted out. Victoria sat there, staring at the five bubbles scattered over the city, 5 perfectly round patches of scorched barren land surrounding them. Lung stared back across the city at her. No words were spoken by the image this time, but the threat was clear. The image remained still for a moment before swirling up and forming into a flaming dragon that let out a thunderous roar before diving downwards into the middle of downtown. There was a flash of light among the buildings and nearly a minute later the faint sound of an explosion reached Victoria’s ears.

Victoria floated there watching the bubbles as they blinked out one by one across the city. When the one below her flickered out, Victoria turned, staring down at the hospital. Seeing Taylor picking her way across the scorched ring around the hospital, she flew down landing near the other girl and checking her over. The faint specks of white approaching from the south hinted that they’d have more company soon. She approached Taylor, frowning when the girl’s eyes widened as she stared past her. Before she could ask Taylor what was bothering the girl, a soft voice spoke from behind her.

“Victoria? What’re you doing here?” The words weren’t concerned though, they were harsh, almost accusatory and Victoria felt her shoulders tensing as she glanced back to see the angry brown eyes of her sister.

Chapter End Notes

[[Lung wasn’t actually looking at Victoria, He was looking at the City as a whole. =] The giant lung illusion uses a holographic perspective trick to make it always look like it’s facing you no matter what angle you view it from.]]
Amy stood by the reception desk, watching her aunt with wide eyes as the woman verbally dismantled an older doctor. They’d been at the hospital for less than ten minutes, and one of the more cantankerous doctors had made a disparaging remark about Amy’s ‘vacation’ being over to one of the nurses. The doctor clearly hadn’t expected her aunt to hear it, and Amy had watched with shock as Lady Photon strode over to the man and proceeded to have a very hushed and very terrifying chat with the poor man.

When the man came over and offered her a hurried apology, she forced a smile on her face and politely shook his hand, though she’d sighed in relief when he’d quickly made his escape after. The doctor had been the one responsible for arranging the patients that Amy would be seeing, so she and Aunt Sarah were left waiting by the reception desk until he returned to let them know that they were ready for them.

Rather than staring at the wall any longer, she drew out her phone and quickly checked her messages. Clicking through the menus to find her chat with Taylor, she skimmed past their earlier texts about what they’d be doing with their day, toward the texts from this afternoon. She’d been having an entertaining time watching Taylor melt-down about her wardrobe, but her cheeky responses had merely made Taylor huffy enough that she’d sent off a message about finding someone worthy of her grandiose presence before she’d stopped responding. Amy assumed she’d gotten wrapped up in something with her father, and switched the conversation over to the texts she’d been exchanging with Victoria.

\{Mom said that we’re doing some training here at the house after school tomorrow, are you coming?\} Victoria had asked the question last night, and Amy hadn’t had it in her to respond. She didn’t want to have another subtle argument with her sister about why she was avoiding her. She studied the message for a few moments, tapping her thumbs quietly on the keyboard and frowning. The voice speaking near her nearly caused her to shriek and toss her phone away.

“If you don’t want to be here we could reschedule. Or if we’re quick, we could get back there in time to join the training.” The words were spoken softly, and Amy glanced up to watch her aunt quietly, frowning softly before shaking her head. She shut her phone off, and slipped it into her pocket, straightening out her red and white robe carefully.
“Maybe next time.” The girl muttered faintly before turning and approaching the doctor as he came back. She had people to help. There’d be plenty of time to agonize about her dissolving relationship with her sister later.

---

The healing had been going surprisingly quickly. Amy thought to herself as she sat in the small employee cafeteria, picking at a plate of something tangentially related to food. There was much less standing around and waiting as people agonized over if they wanted to be healed. There was less time listening to doctors tell people their options as they subtly tried to get them to stop being idiots and accept the aid. Apparently, her aunt and Mother had been dealing with the doctors and every room she’d entered this evening had had a sick person in it that smiled upon seeing her.

She’d healed them all and then paused when each offered her a heartfelt thanks. There were no detours for the doctors to try and convince her to cure individual cases, or nurses quietly suggesting that she check on certain people. The schedule had been set before she arrived and everyone followed it to a T under the strict observation of Lady Photon. Enforced breaks had even been included, as Amy’s lack-lustre dinner could attest too. The girl took her fork, carefully using it to lift the ‘Salisbury Steak,’ watching as it made a squelching suction noise as it lifted off the lukewarm gravy that kept it stuck to the plate it sat on.

Rather than try and choke down the food, Amy pulled out her phone, moving to check the missed notifications as she sipped at the bottle of water in front of her. She was surprised to see that Taylor and Victoria had both been silent this long. She’d expected Taylor to moan about something her father had done, or to whine about traffic in the city being insane, or to chime in with some little anecdote about her day. Amy appreciated the fact that Taylor saw her so clearly and made an effort to keep her engaged, to keep her talking. Even in text form the girl’s friendly tone and patent interest were often enough to help her open up enough to actually vent.

Turning her thoughts back from Taylor, the healer opened the only actual messages that she’d received, pulling up Crystal’s contact and reading the messages curiously. A large batch of compressed images was included with a half dozen texts beneath them. Before she began to read, Amy quickly set the file to download.

{We’re about to do Dad’s improvised training, but I missed you, so I figured you would enjoy these. I went on an adventure today, and kidnapped us a Taylor to train with! I can see why you’re so eager to keep her around. She’s pretty entertaining.} The tone was playful, and Amy found herself opening up the images, and checking them out before continuing to read. The file contained a gallery that documented her cousin’s efforts to locate and kidnap her new friend. When the first image snapped open Amy sucked in a breath as Taylor’s ‘Wardrobe trouble’ came to light. The first image was a candid of Taylor perched against the frame of what Amy assumed was her doorway, one of the girl’s hands rubbing at her forehead.

Flipping to the next, Amy laughed as she saw an oddly tolerant look on Taylor’s face, the typically serious girl doing her best to feign a smile as Crystal hung off her side, one arm held out to hold the camera in a classic selfie pose. Amy considered the image, and shook her head, moving to skip to the next, frowning at the sight of her sister. Part of her still felt wrong when the thunderous beating of her heart didn’t start up each time she saw Vicky’s face. Pushing the thought away, she found herself studying the image carefully.
Taylor was laying over a couch in a unique pose; her back laid over the cushion, her legs up and over the back of the sofa, letting her lower legs hang off the back. Taylor was glancing up with a tired smile at Victoria who was staring back with a tiny smile of her own, though the slump of her form was visible. Amy felt a small twinge of guilt washing through her at what had almost certainly been upsetting Victoria. Rather than dwell any longer on it, she skipped to the next image, seeing a photograph of her Mother and Uncle Neil chatting, and one of Eric’s blue-haired features glancing up in surprise at the camera as his sister kissed his cheek. Smiling at the image, Amy paused, her expression shifting to a frown as the next picture came up.

Her Sister and Taylor were standing on the ground, squared off at each other both in ready poses. Taylor’s face was cracked with a broad grin, and Victoria had an expression of fierce focus and enjoyment on her face. Amy flicked through the next few images, seeing several shots from the same vantage point of Taylor and Victoria sparring, both of them clearly enjoying the exercise. A minor undercurrent of irritation washed through her as the images continued, some showing Taylor performing feats of incredible acrobatics, others focusing on the power behind Vicky’s movements. The camera work was astounding, and one image even showed a shower of sparks emerging from one of Taylor’s hands as she caught one of Vicky’s more potent punches.

The irritation grew stronger when she saw the spar dissolving into a game of Aerial tag, with a final image showing Taylor and Victoria perched in a tree, evidently deep in conversation. Victoria’s form resting against Taylor’s side, their legs swinging beneath them. The pair seemed to be staring off toward the late afternoon sun and the clouds that dotted the western horizon. Amy stared at the image and frowned softly. She was suddenly struck with a wave of regret that she’d missed the training, considering the amount of fun that seemed to be going on. Holding her phone, studying that last image quietly, Amy tried to figure out what bothered her most about it. Giving up on it, she flipped out of the gallery, humming faintly and moving to read the rest of the messages.

{Vicky was pretty bummed that you didn’t show up. It was kind of awkward, but Taylor helped.}  
{She can face off with Vicky, and she has her meditating? Dad saw them when he was getting water, and they were doing this Tai-chi like meditation. By the time I got out there, they were sparring though. Taylor can take her punches; I saw her actually catch one with her palm and Victoria just laughed.}  
{She’s fast though. I thought she was quick when I saw them sparring, but when Vicky started flying after her, it was like she was made of water. She kept leaping out of the way of Vicky’s grabs, and dodging around her, shouting about cheating. It was pretty entertaining. I’m also super secretly impressed that she managed to keep that outfit of hers from getting stained up despite everything that Victoria tried.}

Amy read the messages carefully and frowned as she tapped slowly on the phone, considering if she should respond to her cousin. The latent flicker of irritation in her made her want to say something biting. Instead, she quickly typed out a comment about it looking like they were doing okay on their own, and that she hoped she could join them sometime. Putting her phone away, Amy slid to her feet and glanced over toward the table her Aunt had claimed, moving up to peer at the papers she was reading.

It seemed to be a contract of some kind. Before she could get through much of the first paragraph though, the floor shook slightly, a low rumble going through the building. Amy glanced around nervously, starting when the lights flickered twice before every light cut out with a tinkling of glass. Feeling the ground starting to vibrate under her feet, Amy moved carefully over to the window with her aunt at her shoulder.
Amy was able to glance out the window for nearly thirty seconds before a flash of light almost blinded her. As the building shook ominously, an explosive roar deafened her. Feeling the gauntlet of her aunt’s uniform slamming on her shoulder and dragging her back, Amy curled into the woman and tensed, waiting for the bone breaking shockwave to come. When it didn’t, she blinked the stars from her eyes, glancing up to see Lady Photon’s shocked expression. Turning to follow her view Amy stared in horror at the wall of fire that was being held back by a glowing shield.

For a moment she wondered if her Aunt had saved them, but the field’s colour was wrong, and it was far too big for Aunt Sarah to have done alone. She moved away from the older woman, watching as the flames slowly died down, a thick black cloud remaining to obscure the view beyond the glowing barrier. Glancing back at the other cape, Amy shivered when the woman merely shrugged at her in confusion. The sound of a heavy bass ‘thwump’ drew her eyes back to the Barrier seeing a smudge of white through the dark smoke, watching as something struck the field again, producing that same sound and a noticeable ripple.

The smoke swirling up and around the field and vanishing toward the north was a surprise, but Amy found her eyes fixated on the hovering figure in white that lifted above the barrier and stared out over the city. She stared for a few moments, that same flicker of irritation washing up inside her. As it coiled inside her, Amy turned, making her way across the cafeteria. She ignored her Aunt’s comments as she headed toward the stairs and descended them. Moving down the stairs was a challenge with so many other people doing it as well, but her modest height and slim build meant she could weave around most, and the white and red robes kept anyone from trying to stop her.

When she made it out the doors of the emergency room, she saw the barrier flickering and fading away. She moved out onto the grass, her eyes alighting on the snowy figure of her sister descending toward the scorched ring around the hospital. Amy followed the girl’s trajectory, seeing Taylor coming to a stop amid the devastation. Moving with as much haste as she could, she headed toward them.

She saw when Taylor noticed her approach, watching the girl’s eyes widen in concern, and she pushed down the voice in the back of her head that reminded her of Taylor, the voice that told her should stop, take a breath and think. Instead, she called out toward Victoria who had remained, floating and staring at Taylor.

“Victoria?” The word came out as a question, and Amy hesitated at the angry tone lacing her words. When the girl turned and glanced at her, those expressive blue eyes laced with concern, Amy felt her chest burning, and she sputtered. Part of her was waiting for that familiar wash of happiness to hit her, holding her wound tight as she waited to fight it off. “What’re you doing here?” The girl seemed to shift nervously in the air, floating back nearly half a foot before her feet touched down on the ash coated ground.

“There was an explosion, and I knew you were here. I thought you were...” The words were spoken softly, nervously and Amy felt a cruel little thrill in her gut at the tone. She glanced over at Taylor, seeing the girl bite her lip as she realized that Victoria probably could have only heard about that one way.

“And what? You were going to come over here and punch the explosion?” The words were cold, and Victoria seemed to flinch back at the comment. Amy watched Victoria closely; her entire body unwinding as she realized that the aura wasn’t smacking into her. No Fear, no awe. Nothing but a bitter fire in her gut as she glared at the repentant looking blonde.
“I…” Victoria seemed lost for words, and Amy glanced at Taylor who was staring at her with concern. The expression washed ice over her form and she felt that bitter heat was flickering. She turned her eyes back to Victoria, clinging to that angry sensation. “Ames.” The word slipped out soft, and her sister’s voice was worried. Amy stepped back as it tugged at something inside her. “Why are you so mad? Is it about the PRT finding out about the accidents? I didn’t me-”

“The PRT? You think this is about the PRT?” Amy laughed bitterly. When a purple hand landed on her shoulder, Amy didn’t even look back, quickly shaking her shoulder to dislodge it and charging forward. “Do you think I’d go through all of this because of the fucking PRT and their reactions over you ‘little accidents’. You terrify me Victoria.” Amy glared, and part of her exulted in Victoria stepping back nervously.

“What…” She shifted in place, her form seemingly shrinking. “Amy, what’d I do?” The words were spoken in a tiny, horrified voice and Amy found herself chuckling darkly.

“What’d you do?” She glanced over as the rest of New Wave arrived, Manpower held between Laserdream and Shielder. Everyone was looking at her with concerned eyes and Amy stared at them all before turning to look at Victoria. “You wanna know why I didn’t come home? Why I’ve been staying with Aunt Sarah?” She growled when Sarah tried to speak to her left. “Taylor’s powers fucked mine up, let them work on me. I saw my brain. I saw what your aura had done to me.” She watched as Victoria stepped back and shook her head.


“How would they know? How would you know?” The words struck Vicky like a slap and Amy rushed on. “I thought I was in love with you Vicky. You were the only good part of my fucking life, and I hated everything else. I hated healing people, I hated school and your friends, I hated Dean, and how he treated you, I hated our parents and how they clearly loved you more than, and over it all? I hated myself. I thought that I was sick, for feeling like that. But it was fake; I thought that I was desperately in love with you because the only times that I was happy were when you were there.” The words had lost their anger after the first question, merely spilling free laced with the horror and despair that Amy had felt.

Amy ignored the eyes on her, staring quietly at her sister. She saw Victoria’s face paling in horror as she backed away. She watched as her sister turned and looked at every other member of the family present, seeing the lack of shock or confusion on their faces. She watched as her sister turned and sprinted away, dodging around Taylor, and launching herself into the air and rocketing away at a speed that none of the others present would be able to catch her.

As Victoria’s form vanished into the distance, the anger and terror in her body quite suddenly winked out, her entire body instantly going numb. Staring after the vanishing figure, the healer dropped to her knees like a puppet with her strings cut. She slowly sank lower, resting her bottom on her legs, staring in horror as her entire form began to shake. The rest of New Wave crowded around her, unasked questions filling their eyes. The healer peered between them at Taylor and flinched at the grave and deep concern that limned the other girl’s face.
Taylor quietly watched the PRT trooper as the lights of the street lamps washed over his face as they headed through the streets. Ralph had already been on his way to the hospital when she’d called, the older man having figured that that’s where she’d end up when he’d been informed of the detonations. Taylor could see the lines on his face, and her powers told her that he was conflicted. Knowing what she knew of the man, and who he worked for, she quietly shifted her gaze to the street as she tucked her legs up.

“Amy went into shock. She’ll be fine.” She spoke quickly, ignoring the quiet sigh of relief from the man next to her. “No one’s sure what happened but something about Victoria, probably her aura, interacted badly with Amy. No one’s actually certain what’s going on, but if I had to guess, I’d put money on some of Amy’s ‘repairs’ made it through my healing and the aura has an effect on her that’s inverse to it’s intended one. She got into it with Victoria, said some uh...unfriendly things, and then Victoria skipped out.” Taylor kept the explanation brief and vague enough that the Director would hopefully let New Wave handle it on their own.

Ralph didn’t respond, and Taylor savoured the silence, her thoughts drifting back to the shell-shocked expressions that the rest of the team had been sporting. Everyone looked at a loss over what had happened. No one had even thought to try and call Victoria until Carol had shown up. The rest of the team had split up after Amy had been admitted, Neil remaining with Amy, and the rest of the group splitting up to search for her. Carol had headed home, and the fliers had scattered to try and find where Victoria might have gone.

Taylor had stayed with Amy long enough to ensure that she didn't need any healing, but the sort of issues that the girl was suffering under were not the sort of things that her meagre healing could handle. Rather than bothering New Wave or her dad, she’d ended up calling Ralph, and the Trooper had swung past and brought her home. As Taylor watched the more familiar streets starting to slip past, she let out a tired sigh, quietly taking out her phone. Taylor found herself staring at the unanswered texts she’d sent off to Victoria, rubbing tiredly at her face as she considered the mess that she was currently in the midst of.

When the jeep rumbled to a stop outside her house, Taylor thanked Ralph before climbing out and heading up to the house. She’d been halfway across the porch with her keys in hand when she’d felt the familiar buzzing at the edges of her perception. Letting out a relieved sigh she unlocked the door, slipping into the house and glancing around. Walking past the living room saw her dad passed out on the couch, some old horror movie playing on the tv. Moving toward the kitchen, she spied a wrapped up plate on the table, and she skirted around it, grabbing something from one of the cupboards before heading back out.

Checking the door to the basement saw it dark, and pausing upstairs verified that the house was empty. She carefully removed her vest, grabbing a bag from her desk and glancing up the sound of something skittering over the roof. She headed out of her room and down the stairs, moving to walk out the backdoor of the house. Standing in her tiny postage stamp of a backyard, Taylor glanced up to see a splotch of white on the tip of the roof. Taking a moment to make sure no one was watching from the other houses around her, Taylor crouched before leaping up, landing on the edge of the roof. She slipped up the roof to find the familiar figure in white perched on the crest, legs up to her chest and arms wrapped around them. She moved toward Victoria with a sigh, pausing when the girl spoke.

“Did you know?” The words were low and hurt, and Taylor paused, frowning as she lingered a short distance away. She studied Victoria for a moment before moving up toward her and taking a seat near her on the crest.
“Know? Not really. I suspected that it was something to do with you though.” She paused at the hurt look from Victoria and reached up, pulling her hair tie free and letting her hair explode outwards. “I can’t read minds or emotions, but I suspected. The things Amy would mention discussing with her therapist, paired with what I’d observed painted a picture. I was waiting for someone to say something to me before making any comments though, didn’t seem fair to guess about people’s mental health.” Taylor frowned at the distant look Victoria got her eyes at the response, frowning as the girl shrank into herself.

“How could I do that to my sister?” She spoke softly, staring at the road ahead of her. “What kind of monster would I have to be to do that to her? I thought she was immune like the rest of my family.” The girl’s chin pressed between her knees, and she shuddered before speaking quietly. “I don’t even know why I came here. I should have just...found some ABB and helped deal with this stupid war.” Taylor frowned at the detached way that Victoria spoke, resting her hands on the roof and following her gaze toward the distant ocean that sat dark and flat beyond the inky silhouettes of the abandoned ruins of the docks.

“Do you think that would make you feel better?” Taylor spoke curiously and frowned when the girl looked at her with surprise. She watched those blue eyes studying her measuringly before Victoria turned back to the Horizon, her brow furrowing in the hazy glow of the streetlights as she seemed to consider the question seriously.

“No.” The word was soft and laced with regret. “It wouldn’t make me feel better, but it’d be useful. I’d be doing some fucking good for once instead of screwing everything up around me.” She tightened her arms and Taylor heard the cracking in her voice. “but I’m sure that I would fuck that up too. I’d fuck it up, and everything would be even worse, so when I ran, I just... I just came here.” Taylor blinked as she glanced at the blonde girl, observing her.

“And why did you come here?” Taylor watched as Victoria shrank as if terrified that she’d make her leave. She didn’t move to comfort her just yet, wanting to see where Victoria’s thoughts were going. “You had other friends that would have taken you in; you could have gone to Dean or one of your friends from school. You came here and sat on my roof though, why?”

“You’re different. You...” She frowned. “You don’t treat me like most people do. When we first met you just... smashed me into stuff. And when I attacked you, you nearly attacked me again; you were going to, I think, until I nearly started to cry. You saw how sad I was and then you just... helped me.” She gazed off to the side watching a car driving quietly down the street. “We’re friends I think, but it was harder, harder then most friendships I’ve made are, and...” The girl trailed off as she stared at the road silently, her thoughts failing her. Taylor sighed faintly and leaned back on her hands. ‘And it feels more real.’ Taylor thought to herself.

“Okay, so first off? You don’t ruin people’s lives you know?” When Victoria spun on her, she glared and watched the girl lean back. “What happened with Amy was a tragedy, but it’s not your fault. Near as I can tell that aura of yours never goes off.” She stared at Victoria when the girl looked as if she were about to cut in. “I can sense it. Even as high as you had it at the hospital it doesn’t affect me, the feedback from my powers makes it rather difficult for effects like that to overcome me. But I’ve always sensed it, Victoria, even when you were asleep, so it’s not your fault.” She watched Victoria, waiting for the words to sink in before the girl’s shoulders drooped. “I can’t promise anything, but we’ll see if we can figure out how to control that better? Meditation might help.” Taylor didn’t sound convinced, even to herself but Victoria nodded anyway.

“As for Amy, I don’t think that was all on you either. She was in a pretty terrible place, and everything just came to a head. She’s seeing a therapist about a lot more then what happened
between you two." Taylor spoke quietly and shifted closer, gently studying Victoria. The girl continued to shrink down at the words and Taylor rubbed tiredly at her face. Taylor sighed faintly. “We talk a lot, you know? Me and Amy?” She spoke faintly and watched as Victoria peered at her. “She still thinks of you as her best friend. She’s just scared, and she has to deal with that. I think seeing you, brought everything up again, and I think you might even understand where she’s coming from now.” Taylor spoke faintly, watching the slightly haunted look in the other girl’s eyes as she nodded. “Don’t think that you weren’t on her mind, though.”

Taylor took out her phone, skimming through her messages from Amy, pulling up one of the images that the girl had sent. Taking a moment to open it before nudging Victoria, she held it out, allowing the girl to see the detailed sketch of her own face on the screen. When Victoria grasped the phone and pulled it over, Taylor released it, watching as Vicky stared at the phone.

“Amy drew this?” She asked softly, tone laced with wonder. “I didn’t know that she could draw. I never really saw her doing anything but... “ She trailed off, and Taylor filled in the blanks.

“Her therapist suggested that Amy should find something like a hobby, something that wasn’t related to you, or healing, or her powers at all. We ended up talking about it, and she mentioned that she’d always wanted to learn to draw.” Taylor hummed as she considered the other girl, watching as Victoria peered at the glowing screen, the phone framed by her long blonde hair. “What about you, Victoria, do you have any hobbies? Anything you enjoy that isn’t being a hero?” Taylor spoke faintly and frowned when Victoria shook her head.

“What about the sports?” Taylor asked softly, blinking at the dry chuckle Vicky gave.

“I was always popular you know? The daughter of two known capes. Everyone expected great things from me, and I constantly pushed myself to live up to the image. I basked in the attention. I dressed well, I talked well, I played sports, and I was that popular girl. I dated good looking boys, and everything was this carefully constructed act where everyone, including myself, waited with bated breath for me to trigger.” Victoria’s voice was low and tired as she picked at the threads of her uniform.

“The longer it went on and didn’t happen, the more people began to talk, the more I began to worry. I got into more sports, and I did well because I used to do more and more dangerous things, hoping. Eventually, there was an accident when I did something stupid in a basketball game, jumped in front of someone to make a shot and got hit. Instead of breaking a leg I floated away, and that’s how history was made.” The girl’s voice was laced with subtle distaste, and Taylor let out a slow sigh.

“I read books,” Taylor spoke, startling Victoria, watching the girl glancing at her. “High Fantasy and Science Fiction mostly. My mom was an English professor, you know, and she taught me that books can be a great escape. Adventures you get to have from the safety of a comfy chair. The stories help me order my thoughts, and it’s nice. But, music has always been my happy place.” Taylor spoke quietly and blinked when Victoria shifted closer and studied her. Taylor chuckled. “Mom and Dad used to both love music. Mom was the better player, she had this flute…” Taylor trailed off, frowning at the roof beneath her. “She used to play. Dad had a guitar and he’d try but he was never very good. For a long time, I’d keep that flute around. I couldn’t play at all, but just holding it? It made me feel better.”

Taylor took a moment, drawing herself up out of the well of dark emotions that thinking about that always brought up. She took a breath before moving to draw out the bag she’d brought up with her. “Sadly I don’t have the flute anymore, but I do have this.” Opening the satchel up, she pulled out a pair of antique clamshell headphones and a large clunky walkman. “Should help.” She fiddled with
the device for a moment before placing the clamshells on the confused Victoria’s head. Adjusting the cups carefully she fiddled with the walkman, smiling with the soft sounds classic Pat Benatar was audible even outside the headphones.

When Victoria didn’t pull off the headphones immediately and claim the exercise was stupid, Taylor set the walkman in her lap. She watched as Victoria closed her eyes, a smile slipping over her face as the tension started to melt out of the other girl’s form. Taylor sat quietly, listening to the faint strains of the familiar mixtape, supporting Victoria when the other girl leaned into her side and rested her head on her shoulder. As the music played, the pair just sat and watched the cars driving past, feeling that, for the moment at least, the world was small enough to handle.

The ringing of her phone startled Taylor out of her light doze. She started, reaching for the phone and nearly losing it as she fumbled. Doing her best not to dislodge the lightly dozing superhero using her as a pillow she flipped the phone over, wincing at the familiar number on the face. She gently nudged Victoria who awoke with a start. Showing the other girl the phone, she sighed at the nervous wince on her face.

Making a decision, Taylor flicked the screen, accepting the call and holding the device up to her ear.

“Taylor, It’s Carol calling. Have you heard from Victoria at all? We haven’t been able to find her.” Sighing at the woman’s harried tone, she glanced at Victoria and she spoke softly in response, holding the phone closer to her ear.

“Yeah, She’s here. She’s uh. Pretty shook up about everything.” Taylor blinked when Victoria held out a hand and she coughed a bit. “She uh, wants to talk to you.” She reached out with the phone, offering it over. Taylor saw the conflicted look on the girl’s face and she quietly slid to her feet.

“I’ll let you two talk privately. You’re uh.” Taylor paused, glancing at Vicky. “You’re welcome to stick around long as necessary. I’ll let Dad know.” She spoke quickly and smiled at Victoria’s relieved look. She headed toward the rear of the house, dropping into the backyard. Moving to slip in the door, she peeked in the kitchen seeing her plate had disappeared during her absence. She moved over, peering into the living room to see her Dad watching the TV.

“You’re getting in late.” His voice was laced with sleep and she grinned.

“I’ve been home for almost two hours. Victoria was having a mental break down on the roof, so I was up there with her. She uh.” Taylor coughed. “She might need a place to stay for a few days, is that alright? There was a pretty big blow up with her family.” Taylor watched as her dad glanced over, giving her a strange look. He seemed as if he might say something but whatever it was, he ended up keeping it to himself.

Taylor moved over and dropped down on the couch next to him, curling into his side and watching the movie. It was nearly twenty minutes later that Victoria slipped into the living room and studied them. She still held the phone in her hand, glancing at Taylor’s father.

“My mom wants to speak to you.” She offered it out and Taylor watched as her dad stood and headed for Victoria. He took the phone and moved toward the kitchen. Taylor shifted when Victoria
joined her on the couch, handing her the bag that she’d brought to the roof. Taylor peeked in seeing the old walkman and headphones within. When Victoria snorted, Taylor glanced up.

“What is it with your family and black and white horror movies?” Taylor glanced up, watching Victoria staring over toward the screen that showed Boris Karloff accepting a flower from a small child, and then joining her to ‘play’ beside a river. She grinned when Victoria frowned at the monster chucking the small child into the river.

“We appreciate the classics.” Taylor’s voice was soft and she hummed faintly. Taylor watched the movie as it continued, she’d barely gotten to the point where the mob had started to gather when Victoria grew tired of fidgeting and spoke up.

“I’m gonna stick around a bit. They all knew about it, you know? And I just. I can’t even stand the idea of talking to them right now. I was going crazy and they just…” Victoria frowned and trailed off and Taylor understood.

“It wasn’t their secret to tell, Victoria. But I get it. A chance to cool off can’t hurt anyone.” Taylor hopped to her feet. “Let’s get you settled. Unlike some people, you have school in the morning.”

Taylor ignored the half-hearted glare as she headed toward the stairs, nodding at her dad who was sitting in the kitchen, quietly talking with Carol on the phone.

Chapter End Notes

[[ HEY GUYS. I THINK AMY’S MADE IT TO STAGE 2 OF THE KUBLER-ROSS MODEL. More seriously though. That’s the end of Arc 3. I’d initially intended to end it on a cliff hanger, with Amy telling Vicky about the love thing, and Vicky flying off. Which would have meant that the first half of the first chapter of Arc 4 would have been the second half of this, but I ended up changing Chapter 7 to not have a cliffhanger since letting you maniacs think Lung blew a hospital would have led to a mutiny in the comments.

So, as this Arc is over, we’ll be moving into Arc 4 next, which will be interesting. Taylor will be officially inducted into New Wave and we’ll start seeing more of the Wards, Mysterious Lightning Cape will be coming in more and the War with the ABB will start heating up. The interpersonal drama will become more intense as well as everyone starts getting into horrible misunderstandings!

For the Interludes, I’ve got several planned. First Interlude will be up on Wednesday of this week, with another following each day as I tighten up the chapters. First Interlude will be a Victoria Interlude as she deals with the whole mess that happened here, Second Interlude will be a Ralph Perspective where we get to see his perspective on this entire like, week, the Third Interlude is an Amy/Resonance one, and the Fourth Interlude will be a PHO Piece.

I’m thinking 3 threads for PHO, though I might need help with this. I’m incredibly unsure how they’d handle Taylor being a Cape with no Cape Name as of Yet. Like, if she’s running in Cape Circles would they allow conversation on her using her civilian name if they were on topic. Like people mentioning that Taylor captured three E88 goons and a dozen gangsters?
Other than that, Always loving the feedback, your comments sustain my muse, and that keeps me writing!}
Interlude 6

Chapter Summary

[Alright, I lied. This chapter wrote itself fairly quickly, and I think it’s a good way to introduce the cape name Poll. So! I’ll be opening a poll for Seven days giving you all a chance to vote on my four favourite cape names from what’s listed in this chapter. I’ll probably use the most selected one.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 6th, 2011
Hebert Residence, Brockton Bay

“What about... Zen? Or Shaolin, maybe?” Victoria spoke lazily as she removed one her headphones from her ear, glancing up from her phone to peer over toward Taylor. The other girl was reclined on her bed, her back supported by a pile of pillows, a massive book sitting in her lap that the girl was paging through casually. The painted image on the cover of the text showed Eidolon, Legend and Alexandria battling Behemoth, though the big bold words reading; 'Parahuman Psychology' seemed much less interesting than the image itself. Taylor had been re-reading a few books as she tried to puzzle out how Victoria might gain more direct control of her Aura.

“That seems culturally insensitive. I’m not exactly a monk or a Buddhist.” The words were drifted out absent-mindedly as Taylor flicked over to a new page. Victoria adjusted her pose, a duplicate of Taylor’s reclining position but reversed and, thanks to her flight, hovering in mid-air a short distance from Taylor’s bed. “I still don’t see why Tython is so disliked.” The girl muttered petulantly, and Victoria snorted, pulling her phone close and clearing her throat.

“Well, half the posters don’t even know what it means, and the other half keep talking about Greek mythology?” She glanced up, seeing Taylor glance her way and roll her eyes. “I mean, the PRT has assigned you a place-holder name. Reach? It’s not bad?” Victoria skinned down the page, studying the other suggestions. Someone had started the thread when the temporary name had been assigned, and everyone took it as an open invitation to offer up cape names they felt would suit the new superhero. “Let’s see here; we’ve also got like... Serenity? Or uhm. Sentinel? Vigil isn't half bad either, and hm.” The girl skinned down ignoring the obviously trollish names.

“Equilibrium is a bit of a mouthful, and uh. Revanche? Isn’t that French for Revenge? That doesn’t give off any dark vibes at all.” Victoria snorted to herself, shifting her gaze to Taylor who looked amused for some reason. “Scholar is okay, but I doubt that’d fit with our luck. There’s like three pages with people playing off Laserdream’s naming convention and mashing words together. Lightwave, Lightbreach, Wavestunt.” She hummed faintly as she read out a few of the more interesting ones, glancing over when Taylor spoke.

“Vigil is interesting. Reach is okay too. Your cousin is already insufferable; I shudder to think what she’d do if I took my naming convention from hers.” Taylor’s voice was laced with wry amusement,
and Victoria found herself grinning quietly.

“She only bugs you cause you take it so personally. She enjoys the reactions, and the rest of us have
learned to tune her out. Besides, when you were talking with Uncle Neil, she mentioned that she
actually thought your style suited you.” Victoria had to admit that Crystal was right as she considered
the casual refinement of Taylor’s wardrobe. Victoria wasn’t the only one that noticed either. With the
burseoning control of her aura, Victoria found herself in the unique position of not being the center
of attention. During their morning runs, Taylor tended to garner much more attention then she did
with her statuesque build and carriage, and Victoria found herself oddly comforted being in the
shadow of someone else for once.

The non-committal grunt from Taylor amused her, though the gurgling of her stomach kept her from
commenting on it. The blonde shifted, gently setting her feet on the ground. Taylor glanced up when
she stood but didn’t say anything, returning to her book. Victoria had had the run of the house since
she’d arrived, Taylor and her father seemingly unconcerned about her getting into things that she
shouldn’t. Victoria slipped out of the room and took a moment to check herself in the bathroom,
fixing her hair before heading down-stairs toward the kitchen.

As she descended the stairs, she considered the last few days she’d spent with the Heberts. It was
like a balm to her frayed emotions. Oddly she’d found herself enjoying the early mornings more then
she thought she would. Taylor had woken her each morning before the sun came up, and then she’d
tiredly puttered around the house with the half-asleep Hebert clan. The morning runs and exercises
ensuring that the hearty breakfast that they all worked on was quickly consumed. After eating, there
was a bit of a fray around the bathroom with the three of them jockeying for their showers before
starting their days. Generally, though, she and Danny were done in time for him to get to work, and
her to fly to school. As was becoming common now, time spent at the school was somewhat
stressful, but at least she’d stopped looking around constantly for her sister.

Afternoons spent with Taylor were usually more interesting. Sometimes they lounged around the
house like they had this afternoon, but yesterday they’d gone out and discovered several mutual
acquaintances. Sabah wasn’t someone that Victoria had ever spoken with, the girl wasn’t actually in
her Parahuman Studies course at the university, but they’d passed each other in the halls a few times,
the girl’s impressive fashion sense and skin tone making her stand out in Victoria’s memories. The
girl had been a bit shy at first, but turning the conversation to fashion had opened her up. That this
had left poor Taylor floundering at the entire discussion was merely a happy coincidence, especially
when Sabah turned her critical eye on Taylor’s fashion choices and came out concluding that she’d
accidentally stumbled into an aesthetically pleasing style.

The other mutual acquaintance had been less pleasant. They’d been at the mall with Sabah when
Emma Barnes and Madison Clements had stumbled across them. They’d looked like they might say
something to Taylor and Sabah, but when Victoria had returned with their food, the girls had seen
her, recognized her and then turned up their noses and made their escape. Taylor had called it a stay
of execution before she’d asked how Victoria knew the other two. Describing her experience with
the girls on the set of a modelling shoot, Victoria was surprised when Taylor had merely let out a
disappointed frown at Emma’s actions. It was only then that she’d put the connection together in her
mind with what she’d read of Taylor. Sabah’s concerned look mirrored her own, and they’d changed
the subject in an effort to distract Taylor, though the quiet weight had lingered around her shoulders
over the remainder of the day.

Shaking herself out of her thoughts, Victoria wandered around the kitchen looking for something to
tide her over to dinner, her eyes casually peering through the cupboards. Seeing a box of crackers in
the closet, she snagged them, moving to grab the half a block of cheese in the fridge. Figuring that
this would be enough for her and Taylor, Vicky set to work preparing the snack using a cutting board and one of the large knives that her father typically had her avoid. Not because she might hurt herself, but because of the risk of her destroying one if she accidentally hit her finger with it. Remembering how Danny had guided her in holding the knife and curling her fingers on the opposite hand, Victoria carefully began slicing the cheese into small cubes.

Danny and Taylor seemed to trade off in cooking meals, and Victoria had found herself surprisingly roped into helping both of them. Each of the HEBERTS seemingly enjoying the process of educating her in the workings of the various cooking apparatuses around the house. Taylor had a better fine skill with cooking, something she’d apparently learned from her Mother. She also knew more exciting recipes, but Danny was a better teacher, gentle and observant in a way that Taylor tended to fall short on. Victoria hummed as she set the crackers and cheese on a platter, and quickly cleaned up the cutting board and the knife before heading back toward the stairs.

As she passed the living room, she paused, slipping into the room instead of heading upstairs. She put the platter down on one of the tables and found herself staring casually at the guitar that had been hung on the wall. It was a fascinating decoration, a gift from Taylor’s mother to her father that he’d kept for sentimental reasons despite having little actual skill with it. As Taylor’s words about music drifted through her mind, part of Victoria ached to reach out and take it off the wall, to play with the strings. Instead, she quietly stood a short distance away and studied it carefully.

She was startled from her thoughts a few moments later when a large hand knocked it’s knuckles atop her head gently. “Aura.” The gruff voice of Taylor’s father startled her and Victoria flushed. As she brought her power back under control, searching out that familiar feeling in her mind and pushing it back down. This was a new addition as well. She’d begun joining Taylor and Danny in their meditations in the morning, and Taylor’s father had proven able to detect her Aura as Taylor could. As Victoria wrestled her power back under control, she watched Danny slipping up next to her and moving to inspect the guitar as well.

“You like it?” He asked quietly, glancing at her and Victoria blushed quietly and moved to sputter out a denial.

“I wasn’t. I just. It’s interesting. Taylor mentioned that you and your wife used to play. Said that listening to her mother play would calm her.” She flushed at Danny’s wry smile, so similar to Taylor’s own, despite the different shape of their lips. He reached out, gently removing the instrument from the wall. He took a moment to dust it off, before handing it over to Victoria with a grin. “Annette would hate that it wasn’t being used.” Victoria gently accepted the instrument, holding it as if she might shatter it to kindling with barely a touch, which she admitted was a possibility. She watched in numb shock as Danny walked over to one of the bookcases in the room, carefully picking through the books on a lower shelf and coming back with a big yellow book.

Victoria read the cover when he handed it to her, staring at the ‘Getting started with Guitar for Dummies.’

Victoria stood silently in shock as Danny glanced at her, and then turned, snapping some crackers and cheese from her tray and wandering off muttering to himself about the garage. She stared after him for a moment before slowly making her way upstairs. When she entered the room carrying the guitar and the book, Taylor gave her a raised eyebrow, but merely rolled her eyes before returning to her book. Setting the snack on the bed near Taylor, Victoria stared at the instrument. Still terrified about breaking it, she reached into her mind. She’d been using the exercises to control her aura, and she moved out, gently feeling for that warm tingle of her shield, gently grasping it like she did the Aura and pushing it down as well.
It felt odd, her powers fighting her as she tried to lower her defences, it felt like she didn’t really want to give up the protection they offered her. With focus though, she managed to push it away and her body suddenly felt a bit heavier as the shield disengaged. She staggered a bit, feeling the weight in her limbs that she always felt when her shield was broken. She glanced up, finding Taylor staring at her strangely. She was about to ask the other girl what was up when she spoke curiously.

“Your aura, it just fully shut off.” Taylor’s voice was laced with curiousity. Shellshocked, Victoria felt a tremor run through her as she glanced down at herself considering the implications.

Chapter End Notes

[[So we get to see what Victoria's been up to since she started hiding out with Taylor. Despite advancing this one, I'll still be releasing Interlude 7 on Thursday. But as always, I'll be active in the comments as I proofread things.]]

EDIT: NINJA FIXED STUFF. JESUS. ]]


Interlude 7

Chapter Summary

[[I got bored, and I’m done Interlude 8 and slogging through 9, and I’d rather have something to read as I curl up with my book, so another Interlude early. =] Here we get to see stuff through Sabah’s eyes.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 6th, 2011
City Square Park, Brockton Bay

Sabah was surprised at what she saw when she arrived at the park to meet up with Taylor on Friday afternoon. Taylor hadn’t told her to expect anyone else, but when she’d found a blonde girl standing with Taylor when she walked into the park. The pair stood murmuring by the bench she usually sat on during Taylor’s meditations. Sabah initially considered backing off and arranging a different time to hang out, but Taylor’s unique outfit choice lured her closer. She certainly didn’t look like she was attired for exercise.

As Sabah got closer to the two girls, the blonde caught sight of her, perking up and nudging Taylor. Sabah found herself studying the odd girl, a frown finding its way to her face at the familiarity of blonde. She looked too young to be attending her University, but there was something about the girl’s features that struck a familiar chord in her. When Taylor turned and flashed her a smile, Sabah sucked in a breath at the fascinating cut of the girl’s clothing. Taylor must have paid quite a bit of attention to her measurements to get garments that clung that well to her frame.

“Sabah! Hey, I was wondering if you were going to show up.” The self-conscious smile on her face made Sabah grin as she stopped before them, crossing her hands in front of her. She studied the outfit that Taylor wore, enjoying the way the younger girl fidgeted. Taylor was eventually saved by a cough from her friend, which started Taylor out of her self-conscious fidgeting. “Oh! Right. Sabah. This is Victoria Dallon.” She gestured to the girl and the name hinted at why she recognized the girl. Victoria Dallon was Glory Girl, a member of New Wave, and one of Taylor’s soon to be teammates. She’d looked them up after Taylor’s revelation on the night that the Empire attacked her.

“I’ve seen you around.” The girl's words were soft, and the shy smile she offered put Sabah at ease. When she slid forward and offered out a hand, Sabah studied her nervous tension. After a moment of studying her, she smiled politely and reached out, shaking the girl’s hand quickly. The confusion must have shone true on her face because the blonde ran a hand over her neck nervously before speaking. “I’m in a Parahuman Studies class at the University, and I’ve seen you in the halls. You’ve got a distinct fashion style.” She gestured toward her and Sabah peered down at the outfit she was wearing. A blush graced her cheeks at the compliment, but she nodded her head.

“I’m a Fashion Major, so thank you for the compliment. I’m rather proud of this shirt.” She fidgeted with the garment before turning her attention back to Taylor. She gave the girl an obvious glance.
over before peering over at Victoria, and a playful impulse washed through her. “I wish I could take
credit for this, but I think Taylor’s just lucky.” She gestured Taylor up and down, offering a smirk to
the blonde that saw her cracking her own shy smile and Taylor letting out an indignant squawk.

“Victoria’s been crashing at mine for a few days, when I mentioned that I was going to be hanging
out with you today, she ended up tagging along. I figured we could do a pass on research and just
uh. Wander around?” Taylor floundered quietly, and Sabah chuckled as she wondered if Taylor had
actually ever just hung out like a teenage girl. After a moment she remembered what she read about
the girl on PHO and she shuddered. Probably not. Instead of commenting, the dark-skinned girl
turned her gaze on Victoria and smiled.

“So, Mall then? I could use a break from studying, and some window shopping could be fun.” The
blonde girl’s grin and Taylor's subtle groan were both reward enough for the suggestion and Sabah
found herself sidling up to Victoria as the girl headed off with purpose toward what Sabah assumed
was the nearest mall.

As she considered the food on her plate, Sabah was forced to admit that the window-shopping had
been more fun than she’d expected. Victoria was rather charming when she relaxed, and she had
chatted endlessly with Sabah on the subject of clothing and fashion design. She didn’t seem to have
an actual interest in design, but she was curious about the process, and she seemed to enjoy hearing
about things that Sabah enjoyed. Taylor had trailed after them, listening with half a smile on her face,
chiming in one of the others addressed her, but she seemed content to merely enjoy the pleasant
chatter.

They didn’t buy anything, merely pacing from shop to shop and briefly considering the wares on
display. Sabah had allowed Victoria to rope her into teasing Taylor, the pair of them constantly
holding different dresses and girly things up to the girl, commenting to each other on what suited the
girl more. Taylor had appeared scandalized, and offended, playing up her irritation at them to the
laughter of all. The teasing had only come to a stop when she and Victoria had found Taylor quietly
studying a very subtle dress, fingering the fabric while she stared at it yearningly.

Victoria had breached the quiet and Taylor had muttered something about knowing someone who’d
had a dress just like that they’d loved. The teasing hadn’t seemed as fun after that, and the trio had
found themselves at the food-court.

Currently, Taylor was sitting opposite her, watching as Victoria chatted with a few young girls while
waiting for her and Taylor’s order at the Italian food stall. Sabah had decided on the much less busy
Shwarma stand, and she already had her food in front of her. After studying the wrap for a moment,
she glanced up, watching Taylor studying Victoria curiously.

“She seems different,” Sabah commented faintly, and it struck her how much the charismatic blonde
that was chatting with the young girls was a stark contrast to the thoughtful mischievous girl she’d
been interacting with. The girl's wide expressive gestures and confidence were fascinating to watch.

“Part of the cape stuff, she has an ‘Image’ to maintain. Or at least that’s what she tells herself.”
Taylor hummed, watching as well, and then paused, glancing over at Sabah. “Thanks for being so cool about her tagging along. Dad’s at work today, and I didn’t really want to leave her home alone.” Sabah glanced at Taylor, curiously tilting her head. “She’s been having issues with her family. I shouldn’t get into it more than that, but seeing her unwind around other people is good.” Taylor spoke quietly, and Sabah nodded.

“Oh my god, is that-” The voice was subtle and feminine. Sabah felt her shoulders tensing at the familiar tone and the hushed giggle, though the voice itself was unfamiliar. She glanced over her shoulder frowning at the unfamiliar faces. “Is she on a date.” The words were muttered, and Sabah narrowed her eyes at the pair. The brunette was the one speaking, her cutesy tone carrying despite the faux whisper she was doing. The girl looked scandalized, and Sabah wanted to glare back. Something else caught her eye though, and she found her attention drawn to the other girl by the brunette. She was shorter than Taylor, probably near the same age, with long red hair and ‘classic good looks’ that were ruined by the look of loathing she was giving Taylor.

Sabah glanced between the two before looking at Taylor who was glaring stonily at the table and refusing to acknowledge that she’d heard them. The faint slapping of shoes on tile became louder as the girls approached. Sabah turned her eyes back toward the girls, watching them stalking up to the table. The redhead’s friend was staring at her curiously, but the look of loathing remained fixed in place as she approached. When the girl came to a stop a short distance away and just stared at Taylor, Sabah felt awkward, especially since Taylor continued to stonily ignore her presence which seemed to irritate the girl more.

“Seriously, Taylor?” She spoke, her voice laced with disbelief and resentment, her eyes drilling holes into Taylor’s back. “After-” The words were cut off when the redhead glanced up, staring at something. Following her gaze, Sabah found Victoria weaving past the tables toward them. The look of concern on her face was stark, and she was holding a tray laden down with the food she and Taylor had purchased. Sabah watched Redhead back up, glancing nervously at her friend before looking back at Victoria. Rather than continue, she grabbed the brunette and dragged her off.

“What a hypocrite, after what she did-” The words faded into silence as the brunette was dragged off, and Sabah found herself staring after the girls before glancing back at Victoria. The blonde shrugged at her before glancing curiously. Sabah followed her eyes, watching as Taylor continued to glare stonily at the table top. The girl seemed to feel her eyes on them and hunched up her shoulders quietly, shrinking into herself. She didn’t react when Victoria laid the food before her, staring uncomprehendingly at it and almost bracing herself.

“Was that Emma Barnes?” The words were laced with gentle curiosity, and Victoria shifted when Taylor’s gaze snapped up to meet hers. Victoria coughed and shifted under Taylor’s intense stare. “I met her and that brunette, Madison something, and a black girl at a modelling job I had.” She shifted nervously under Taylor’s focused stare and coughed. “We didn’t get along. Emma, she was kinda.” She trailed off and muttered softly. “She was kind of mean to this disabled girl that was there.” Victoria shifted when Taylor let out a weary disappointed sigh and rubbed at her face in disappointment.

“She used to be my best friend.” The words slipped from Taylor’s mouth reluctantly, drawing the container of pasta she’d ordered over and prodding it with her fork. Sabah watched quietly as Victoria pressed on carefully, speaking to Taylor.

“What happened? She seemed like she really didn’t like you.” The words caused Taylor to let out a worn out sigh.
“Honestly? I wish I knew. We were super close until right before high school. But something happened, certainly. I came back from summer camp at the beginning of Freshman year and she uh... She didn’t like me anymore. She had these new friends, and she started making my life difficult.” Taylor muttered softly quietly dragging the fork in her hand through the red pasta, her expression distant and thoughtful. Sabah was tempted to push, she could tell that the girls had done more than make her life difficult, but it was clear that Taylor would rather not speak of it.

Victoria quietly swooped in, like the hero she was, and changed the subject, bringing up some aspect of their joint training. Sabah watched as Taylor seemed to shift, closing her eyes and breathing. She watched in concern as the tension melted visibly off Taylor’s form. Taylor's expression became more serene as she breathed easier. After a moment she sat up and offered a gentle smile to Victoria, quietly launching into an explanation on the technique Victoria had asked about. Sabah watched curiously, tapping her fingers on the table in concern as she nibbled at her food.

The conversation moved on, but none of them ended up finishing their meals. Something about the interaction had soured their appetites.

Sabah hadn’t expected to see Victoria again so quickly, but three days after the outing to the Mall, the tailor emerged from her classroom to find the blonde teen leaning against the wall outside the door. Victoria had leaned against the wall, headphones connecting her ears to her phone, and she was staring at something on the screen. Sabah paused and glanced around, looking for Taylor and finding no sign of her she slipped up, gently tapping Victoria on the shoulder.

The girl jumped and whirled, nearly dropping into a familiar ready stance before stepping back and pulling out her ear-buds. “Jesus. Don’t sneak up on someone like that.” She flushed a bit, glancing around to see if anyone had noticed and when she found that they were alone in the hall she shifted nervously.

“Sorry, you startled me. Uh. Is that cool? I got out of class, and I kind of didn’t want to go home. And since I’ve bothered Taylor enough lately, I figured you might be up for a chat?” She chuckled hopefully, and when Sabah tilted her head, Victoria rubbed at her neck. “She’d never say anything, but I get the feeling that having me around constantly is probably a bit of a pain.” The girl’s tone was shy again, and Sabah shrugged, waving for Victoria to follow her. She headed toward the exit of the building.

“It’s fine. I know a nice place for coffee; I could use a chance to unwind..” She smiled gently as she tucked her handbag under her arm, holding it in place and digging through her pockets for her bus pass as they exited the doors of the building. “How’d you find me anyway? You’re not in any Creative Arts courses; I don’t think?” Sabah glanced over and chuckled when Victoria glanced off to the side.

“I got out of my class and asked my teacher where the Art design courses were, and then asked around there if anyone knew you.Luckily I met someone who did, who pointed out that I was on the entirely wrong side of campus, and they sent me in the right direction. And then I just sorta peeked into each room till I saw you.” The girl’s voice was low, and Sabah laughed faintly.

“I’m flattered.” She smirked, ignoring the girl’s rolled eyes, as she made her way across the grounds,
stopping near a bus stop. She grinned as Victoria perked up at the stop and fished through her pockets, presumably for change. “So why did you go to all that trouble instead of going home?” The words were curious, and Victoria paused in her change counting to let out a soft sigh.

“Things are...awkward.” She muttered faintly. Sabah glanced up at the girl’s conflicted face, and she did her best to emulate that look Taylor made that made you want to continue talking. It either worked, or Victoria was desperate to talk to someone.

“So you know that I’m a cape right?” She spoke softly. When Sabah nodded, the girl shifted and drop onto the bench behind her carefully taking a breath before the words spilled forth. “Recently, I’ve been…”

Sabah felt her head reeling as she considered the words that the girl had said. The retelling took the entire wait for the bus, the bus ride itself, and halfway through a cup of coffee at the outdoor cafe. Taking a sip from her coffee, she glanced up to see Vicky’s nervous expression, and she shook her head before speaking casually.

“Well, that’s all kinds of fucked up. I can see why you might not want to go home.” The girl nodded faintly and rested her elbows on the table, leaning up to slurp awkwardly at her drink in the most inefficient way possible. Sabah found herself chuckling at the image. When Victoria looked at her in challenge Sabah smirked and spoke.

“I just imagined you in your uniform with that Tiara doing that with the coffee.” She smirked, ignoring the rude gesture that Victoria shot her. “I must admit, that I was always curious about the Tiara. It’s uh. A unique design choice.” She snickered as Victoria dropped her head to the table and groaned covering her head.

“I was fourteen when I designed that outfit. I was basically a super-powered princess.” She grumbled faintly before sitting up so she could drink her hot chocolate. “What about you, Miss expert seamstress. What would you make as a uniform for me?” She huffed, and Sabah paused to consider for a few moments.

“With your hair colour and skin tone, I’d have probably gone with Red and Blue; they’d bring out your eyes better. And no skirt or cape, a fitted body-suit that’s mostly blue with red gauntlets, boots and red accents on the suit. Perhaps with gold highlights, and a gold crest.” She hummed faintly as she quickly sketched out a design on a napkin, and flipped it over to show Victoria. The blonde stared at it and groaned as she flopped down again. She lay there face down on the table for a few moments as Sabah sipped her coffee, only perking up when her phone dinged.

She quickly drew it out and checked it. Sabah watched her read the message, watching her frown before tucking the phone away. When the girl caught her curious look, she shifted back and shift carefully on her seat.

“Was just my mom. Anyway. What’d you make the costume out of? Leather? Or something lighter?” Sabah watched the girl for a moment before quietly leaning in and speaking lazily. “Leather is stronger than cloth, but it restricts movement. I’d probably do the gloves and boots in leather or
something more durable, keep the rest flexible. Perhaps with a ballistic weave of some sort for defence…”

She’d briefly entertained the thought of bringing Victoria back to the shop to continue discussing costume options, the girl had seemed almost terrified about going home, but she didn’t entirely trust the girl like that yet. She’d kept her company for a couple of hours though, before watching the girl fly off toward the south.

When she’d made it to her shop, Sabah checked the log of commissions that she should have been working on but found herself drawn to the curtained-off section of the shop that she’d dedicated to housing her more impressive creations. Already a pair of Lions and a Pegasus stood in the space, entirely inert for the moment.

The pride and joy though was the creature that she’d stitched together from a description of the most terrifying creature that Taylor could describe to her. She’d asked the girl to invent something suitably dangerous. The animal she had dreamed up had been suitably impressive to Sabah, and this would be Sabah’s most massive defender for now.

Over Six feet tall, his plush nature robbed him of some of the intimidation factors, but his massive barrel-chest, powerful arms tipped in three fingers each with a claw, and the large spikes that arched back from its head and spine made it impressive looking. Tiny Eyes and a giant stitched on mouth covered in sharp teeth. Its cheeks held equally plush tusks that gave the creature the appearance of a delightfully wicked smile. Sabah reached out, setting a hand over its chest and reaching out with her power, filling ‘Terentatek’ with her ability, bringing the guardian to life.

Chapter End Notes

[[Sabah and Victoria interact, we get to see Taylor without the force constantly moderating her emotions, and we get to meet Sabah’s guardians. =] As always love the reviews, lemme know what you think. Also, Sabah basically drew out the Carol Danvers Captain Marvel Costume, cause it's neat and not very cute or overly sexualized. I doubt that Victoria would use it, but it's just what Sabah would have designed for a Flying Brick like Victoria.]]

[[EDIT: JESUS, I loaded the wrong fucking file. xD. I fixed all the tensing. Whoops! Also uh. I've discovered that there's a TvTropes for this fic. I tossed in a link back on the first page. =] In the chapter links, cause why not.]]
Interlude 8

Chapter Summary

[[So, it occurs to me that with the time-skip in the second half of the last interlude, that this interlude actually happens before the end of the last one, but after the beginning? Iunno. Just uh. Don’t get too headache about how this all fits in with everything else.]]

May 7th, 2011
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Melanie glanced up from her computer to take in Amy, studying how the girl sat and fidgetted silently, looking anywhere but toward her. They’d made a ritual of this in their first few sessions. Amy would arrive with Nick, and then she’d sit quietly until she was ready to talk. Up to now, Mel hadn’t had to broach the conversation with the young girl. But she’d already finished her paperwork and had gone through a whole game of Solitaire while waiting for the girl to speak, and Amy remained stubbornly silent. Shifting her position to rest her elbows on the table, Mel glanced at Amy, waiting till the girl’s eyes nervously flicked in her direction.

“So. Amy.” She spoke gently, watching the tension building up on the girl’s form. “You seem a bit more uncomfortable than usual. Perhaps we can discuss it?” She watched as Amy’s tense form as the girl curled into herself. Mel let out a soft breath, waiting till Amy peered out to continue. “You know that your Mother has told me about what happened with Victoria. If you don’t wish to discuss it, then we won’t, but something is bothering you.” The woman’s voice was patient, and she watched as Amy fidgeted before sighing and shifting closer. Amy sat in silence for nearly a minute, and Mel worried that she’d have to prompt the girl again, but she started to speak slowly.

“I attacked her. I said such hurtful things.” She spoke so softly that Mel barely heard it, and she leaned closer, listening as the words grew in speed and volume. “She came to save me from that explosion, and I was so angry. I charged down there and just started…” Amy trailed off, and Mel took a moment to consider the girl’s words.

“Why do you think you were angry?” Her voice was gentle, and she blinked when Amy looked at her with confusion. “Why do you think were you angry with her? What had she done to upset you?” Amy quietly rubbed her arm.

“I-” She trailed off and frowned at the ground. “I don’t know. I saw her floating there, and everything rushed back. She’d been pushing me about going to speak with her in person. She’d asked me if I was going to go to the training, and I hadn’t responded, and then suddenly she was in front of me.” Her voice was hesitant, and Mel hummed faintly in thought, watching as Amy mulled over her feelings carefully. “I felt guilty all day about avoiding her, but the first chance she had-” Rather than letting Amy dip off on a Tangent, Mel gently cut in.
“So it sounds like you were feeling resentment rather than outright anger.” She spoke and watched as Amy glanced at her quietly. “Resentment is usually characterized as a mixture of anger, disappointment, and fear.” She shifted up, moving to stand. When she had her feet under her, she gestured for Amy to follow and she took a seat on one of the couches, indicating that Amy should sit opposite. Getting comfortable she studied the girl.

“Let’s explore this line of thought for a moment. You’ve explained the anger. You were angry that Victoria had come to you even though you’d said you weren’t ready. Her intentions were secondary, you didn’t want her there, and she was. What about the other two emotions?” The woman’s voice was subtle, and she watched as Amy carefully mulled it over, gently picking apart her thoughts. She knew where this would go, but Amy needed to reach that point herself.

“I think. I was afraid of her, and I was disappointed in myself. I felt... guilty. I had been avoiding her; I’d been doing my best keep her away without having to outright tell her that I was afraid to be in the same room with her.” At this point, instead of interjecting, Mel merely indicated that Amy should continue, quietly watching the girl’s reactions. “She terrifies me.” She spoke slowly and curled her hands into fists. “Part of me is utterly terrified that I’ll look at her, and she’s flash me that familiar smile, and everything I’ve built will dissolve, and I’ll be in love with her again,” Amy muttered slowly, staring down at her linked hands. “Part of me wonders if that’d even be such a bad thing. I saw her, and all of that started roaring in the back of my mind, and I-” Amy paused and swallowed, her eyes focusing on the middle distance as she remembered.

“So you were afraid when you saw her. Why did you go down there? Why didn’t you let your Aunt tell her to leave?” Mel’s voice was laced with curiosity, and she studied the brunette as she thought.

“It was easier to be mad I think. To be scared and angry. I just stared at her, and I knew that this would be my life. She kept pushing and pushing, and I just wanted her to leave. I stormed down there to tell her to leave, and then I saw her, and I braced for that feeling, and instead of love or happiness I just felt bitter anger and rage washing through me.” Amy muttered with horror and Mel adjusted her glasses, coughing.

“Yes, well. On that subject, we’ve got some good news and some bad news. The results of your MRI and your PET scans came in. It’s difficult to tell with the resolutions we’ve had to work with, but near as we can tell while you were able to access your brain, you rewired several things. Taylor said that while she rebuilt much of you, she didn’t mess with your brain. You hadn’t developed growths there, and she merely rewrote the DNA markers to stop you messing with things. Our best guess is that you altered your perception of your sister’s aura to cause it to have the reverse effect that it should.” At Amy’s confused look Mel sighed.

“Basically, your brain inverses the feelings it’s supposed to get from Victoria’s aura. She had it ramped it up because she was in battle, apparently, and it caused a surge of suspicion. and condescension, the opposite feelings to awe and trust.” Mel watched as Amy let out a weary sigh and seemed to melt into the couch. “I doubt you’re in any risk of falling in love with her again with that constantly affecting you, though I shudder to think what it might do to your familial relationship,” Mel spoke softly.

“I’ve spoken with your mother about getting your sister help with her powers. There are several different psychologists with experience in dealing with parahumans, though considering the issue is with the expression of her powers, it might be a challenge. Until she learns to control it, you’ll probably find yourself forced to moderate your reactions to her.” Mel spoke gently, watching as Amy nodded at her. “You should probably let her know ahead of time what’s going on.” She blinked at the girl’s expression as it fell. “Is something wrong?”
“She’s not been answering my texts. She’s not really been answering anyone’s texts.” She muttered as she shifted a bit in place. “Mom let slip that she’s not been home in a few days either.” Mel watched as Amy shifted into herself and stared bitterly at her feet. Mel studied the girl quietly before speaking gently.

“Why does that bother you?” She spoke curiously, studying the way that Amy’s entire form tensed up. It took the girl a few moments before she responded.

“I’m pretty sure that she’s been staying with Taylor.” Her voice was clipped, and Mel tilted her head, her expression kept carefully neutral.

“Your healer friend with the... strong bedside manner? The one with the fascination with Parahuman Psychology? She’s sent me a few fascinating texts since you gave her my number. And you think that Victoria’s been staying with her? Why’s that?” She blinked when Amy produced a smartphone, flicked through it for a few moments and handed it over. She curiously checked the first image, chuckling at the girl on the screen. What a fascinating outfit Taylor was wearing. She flipped through the pictures and tilted her head. Studying the girl’s body language, Mel hummed as she considered the images quietly. Honestly, she agreed with Amy on her sister’s likely location from these. She carefully turned off the phone setting it on the table.

“It seems like she and Victoria are becoming fast friends. Why does that bother you?” She studied Amy, watching the girl’s incredulous look. A part of her wanted to laugh at that look, the way it implied that it was obvious and why it was tragic was also completely obvious, but as Amy’s therapist that wouldn’t be appropriate, so instead she stared back until the girl finally responded.

“Taylor is my… friend and it was nice having something that was just mine, separate from Victoria.” Mel chewed her lip as she considered Amy. Deciding to play along with Amy’s assertion instead of confronting her she rested her hand on her knee and studied the girl.

“And you’re worried that Victoria might grow to dominate this relationship like every other friendship you’ve had?” She hazarded a guess and chuckled at Amy’s shocked look. “Has Taylor been texting you any less?” When Amy didn’t shake her head, Mel shifted forward. “Part of this friendship is on you, Amy. If you keep it up and Taylor’s invested in you as a friend, then I doubt that Victoria can come between you. As for Victoria staying with her, from what you’ve said, Taylor is immune to her aura yes?” When Amy nodded, Mel shrugged. “It must be a nice place to hide out after hearing what that aura had been doing to her whole family hrm?”

“I never thought about it like that.” Amy’s comment was accompanied by a guilty look that had Mel shaking her head. Teenage drama. She watched as Amy mulled the words over quietly.

“Your time is nearly up, and your dinner awaits. So I’ll give you your assignment, and we can see where my wayward husband has gotten off to so that he could see you home.” Mel moved over and collected a few scraps of paper off her desk, handing them over. “Nothing too difficult this time. I want you to draw me two images of memories that made you happy before your powers Manifested. We can discuss them in our next session.” She hummed as she glanced at Amy, considering a moment.

“If you’ll accept a bit of advice about your situation with Taylor and Victoria, I will say that if you’re this concerned about them spending so much time together, perhaps you should make your own efforts to spend time with her as well.” She smirked at the embarrassment-filled look that Amy gave her before she headed off to find Nick, leaving Amy to recover on her own in her wake.
Curled up in her favourite nook in the sitting room, Amy considered her writing pad. Dinner had been an awkward affair. The family didn’t blame her for what happened, powers interacting poorly was a fact of life, but the kind of damage that she’d done was a bit above and beyond the time that Eric and Crystal had tried to combine their shields and had blown out every window on the second floor of their house. Fixing their relationship with Victoria would take a lot more time then replacing all those windows.

It was an odd feeling being part of the awkward feeling instead of having it happen around her or because of her, but she was sort of in the middle of this mess with everyone. She might have been the one to discover what Victoria’s aura was doing but everyone else had agreed to keep the secret, and it had grown into a huge mess. As her thoughts drifted, Amy glanced up to find herself quietly sketching another drawing of Victoria’s face, pausing as she’d been etching that betrayed expression into those eyes. She sighed faintly as she continued the image, fleshing out the memory. This wouldn’t do for the assignment, but the drawing soothed her.

Before she’d even really considered it, she’d begun to gently draw in an image of Taylor standing at Victoria’s side, reaching out to stop her inevitable flight. As she pencilled in that concerned look on the girl’s face, Amy found herself frowning and wondering who it’d been intended for, her or Victoria. Studying the girl’s face, Amy found herself frowning and contemplating her new friend. Things had grown so confusing around the mess that was her relationship with Victoria, and Taylor had been something simple and pleasant that was separate to all of it. Now that she was getting more and more drawn into everything in Amy’s life that was complicated made Amy nervous.

With a sigh, she set the mostly finished drawing down before scooping up her phone. Standing, she made her way to the couch as she quickly pulled up the internet. Logging into PHO she searched for Taylor or any accounts linked to her cape identity, and nothing popped out. Moving through Facebook and Myspace didn’t turn up any accounts either. Other things came up, and Amy settled on the couch as she began to read, her eyebrows furrowing as she considered the words on the pages.

Chapter End Notes

[[Don't google your friends guys, it never ends well.]]
4.1

[[Music will occasionally come up in this fic, and so as to avoid actually dealing with timelines and stuff in terms of when shit was released, I’ve decided to imply that when I wrote this chapter the parts where Taylor and Vicky are musicing they’re listening to stuff like; this, this, and this (This last one is flat out what I was imagining Taylor and Victoria listening to as they sat on the bench in this first part.) But they’re not actually listening to that directly cause it doesn’t exist. Merely...similar stuff.]]

May 8th, 2011
Brockton University, Brockton Bay

Glancing up at the clock, Taylor considered the amount of time she had left and then turned her attention back to the surface of the desk she sat behind. Opening the answer booklet once more she drew the test close and moved to recheck all of her answers. The test itself hadn’t been terribly difficult, she’d known most of the solutions at a glance, and Jolee had known the few that she’d gotten wrong. Bastila had disapproved of the cheating, claiming that the placement tests were to test Taylor’s aptitude, and that using the Noetikon to cheat merely cheapened her learning experience. Jolee had casually rebuffed Bastila by claiming that using the Noetikon wasn’t exactly against the rules.

As she quickly dragged her finger down the answer booklet, she quickly read each question, double checking each answer and ensuring that all the scantron bubbles were entirely filled in. Only when she was sure that she’d done well would she close the booklet and glance toward the front. The room itself was nearly fully occupied, almost three dozen teenagers her age or older had been crammed into the room to take these tests in hopes of advancing into college classes to get a head start on their careers.

When she glanced toward the Proctor, the woman caught her eye, and she waved her down. Taylor grasped her booklets and her bag, descending toward the woman. The lady smiled at her and then glanced at the pamphlet.

“All done then? You can leave it here and head on out if you’re finished. We’ve got nearly an hour left, and you’ll probably be bored lurking around.” Taylor deposited the books on the table and nodded, pausing when the woman coughed. “We’ll do the scoring shortly, and you’ll receive the email about your scores within the next two to three weeks.”

Nodding at the woman before turning and slipping to the door. Careful not to make any noise, Taylor exited the room and took a moment to get her bearings. She headed toward the building’s exit, opening the door and striding out into windy spring morning. Taylor stood still for a moment, taking in the sunlight on her face and the pleasantly cool wind as it tousled her hair. When she opened her eyes, the sight of someone waving drew her attention. Blinking, Taylor took in the view of a familiar blonde head of hair being tossed around in the wind.

Confusion wafted through Taylor as she descended the steps. She watched the blonde hair dancing wildly around Victoria’s face. As she approached, she took in the girl’s form, inspecting the simple, comfortable outfit that Victoria wore. A hoodie wrapped around her shoulders, with the hood down, ear-buds peeking out of the neck. Beneath the loose sweater, aged jeans peeked out and ended atop
simple sneakers. She blended in like this, merely another lazy college kid lounging around the quad. Everyone that walked passed ignored her and Taylor watched the fascinated look on Victoria’s face as she watched them all.

“So,” Taylor spoke when she got close, flashing smile down at Victoria as she took in the girl’s friendly grin. “I was convinced that they’d send Crystal to get me again.” She considered the abashed look on Victoria’s face and offered up snort. “Volunteered did you?” Taking a seat on the bench, Taylor peered over at Victoria. “Still avoiding going home?” The playful tone faded out of Taylor’s voice, and she watched the other girl’s face in profile. Victoria didn’t respond, merely glanced off to the side quietly.

Rather than push, Taylor pulled up her sleeve and considered her dated watch. They had time. She shuffled closer and held out a hand. Victoria moved with practiced ease to pluck the bud from her ear, handing it to Taylor who popped it into her own ear. She leaned against Victoria and quietly hummed along with the tune, watching people wander past with Victoria. The words were surprising, but to be honest, they weren’t all that surprising either. Taylor merely enjoyed the tune as she wasted time with her friend.

They’d sat on the bench for nearly an hour, and then Taylor had dragged the girl to the bus, and they’d done much the same on the three connected bus routes it took to get from the University back to the Dallon’s neighbourhood. The music had only ended when they’d dismounted the bus at the base of the hill upon which the Dallon home sat.

Taylor watched as Victoria wrapped the headphones around her mp3 player and carefully tucked it away into the front pocket of her hoodie. Taylor’s hands found their way to her pants pockets, and she carefully watched the girl staring with trepidation up the hill. Taylor studied the blonde quietly before leaning over and nudging her. When Victoria glanced at her Taylor flashed a smile and held out her hand, snorting when Victoria took it. She shot a grin to the blonde before heading off up the hill, dragging the blonde along.

The hike wasn’t hard, the gentle slope of the hill made it seem like there wasn’t an incline at all and before long they’d be marching up the long gravel strewn drive-way, Taylor still humming one of the catchier songs that Victoria had been listening to. When they cleared the tree-line and started walking across the lawn, Taylor saw Eric leaning against a pillar staring skyward. She glanced at Victoria who looked back, and they both began to move as stealthily as the could, getting up close to the porch and both turning to stare up at the sky.

“So. What’re we waiting for?” Taylor’s voice was lazy, and she offered up a grin when Eric -barely-managed to restrain a girlish scream, merely letting out a high pitched yelp, turning to stare at them. Taylor blinked at the man’s strange look. She initially wondered if the idea of Victoria walking anywhere was that unbelievable before she realized why he’d been staring as she felt Victoria’s hand tightening in her own. She glanced at Eric lofting an eyebrow before she moved toward the stairs, once again having to drag Victoria toward the house physically.

Eric let them past, and Taylor frowned when he moved to follow closely in their wake. Taylor walked into the house, walking through entrance-hall and heading toward the voices she heard. As Taylor slipped into the small sitting room, she found every eye on her, and by extension, quite
literally, Victoria. She blinked when Victoria shifted closer to her side. Not actually hiding, but merely standing closer.

All of New Wave was present, and her father stood to one side. He’d evidently been speaking with Carol, though even he was glancing in her direction with a furrowed brow. Taylor briefly considered disentangling herself from Victoria, but the death-grip that the girl had on her hand hinted that her hand was probably the only thing that kept Victoria from fleeing. Taylor stood near the door with Victoria, watching as the rest of the room stared at them. When all the eyes shifted to one side, Taylor glanced over to see Amy standing there.

Almost like the spectators at a tennis match, the gazes swept from sister to sister, most of the group looking confused when nothing happened. Even Amy looked mildly shocked as she stared at them. Victoria took a breath and let out a sigh, moving to finally release Taylor before walking over to sit with Crystal. Eric followed them a moment later, and Taylor made her way over to her dad and Carol, smiling sheepishly at the pair.

“You took your sweet time; we almost started without you.” Taylor huffed at her dad’s teasing and rolled her eyes.

“We ended up riding the bus up; Victoria didn’t feel up to flying. Dad, I didn’t see your car outside, who carried you here, hrm?” She glanced at her father, smirking as he blushed. When he didn't answer, she glanced over at Carol, grinning at the woman’s amused expression.

“Crystal brought him, and it was rather entertaining seeing them land. Sarah’s been waiting for you though; you should probably go hunt her down. She’s got some things to talk with you about, and I think your uniform is here.” Carol nodded toward the kitchen and Taylor glanced through the door, looking at Carol for a moment before turning and slipping off.

As she crossed the rooms she felt eyes on her, and Taylor looked over, catching Amy’s focused expression. Pausing her trip, she tried flashing the girl a smile, that Amy didn’t entirely return. Rather than poke that bear right now, Taylor disappeared into the kitchen and found herself facing Lady Photon in full gear. She curiously inspected the woman, as she puttered around, fiddling with snacks.

“Lady Photon?” Taylor’s voice was soft and curious, and she’d do what she could to hold back a smirk when the poor woman jumped at the sudden sound. The woman turned on her and Taylor cracked a smile at the exasperated look she earned from Sarah.

“We really need to put a bell on you.” Taylor rolled her eyes, and Sarah shook her head before moving to stand taller. “So. Taylor, your father and I have agreed to a contract, and he’s already signed it, as have I. So that leaves your signature, and it’s official.” Taylor blinked and moved over, staring at the two documents on the table. "There are two different contracts that you’ll need to sign. One is a private copy with your civilian name, and the second will be signed in your cape name, and that’ll be a matter of public record.” Taylor nodded and stepped over, carefully inspecting the contracts, skimming over the legalese. The private contract had her father’s signature, and the public one merely had an ‘X’ in the slot for ‘Guardian.’

Taylor studied it for a moment before penning her name onto one and then inscribing her chosen hero name on the other. When she handed them over, She frowned when Lady Photon read the second one. Taylor blinked at the confused expression on the woman’s face. “…What?”

“Your name, I hadn’t realized that you had changed it.” The woman hummed faintly, considering something before shrugging and setting the contracts aside. “It’s unimportant, and the name certainly
suits you. We’ve stashed your uniform up in Victoria’s room. We took your crest design and your preferences for colour and ran with them. I hope you enjoy the uniform.” Taylor blinked and nodded. She slipped out of the kitchen, leaving the other woman to continue her efforts at the stove.

Taylor paused at the doorway when everyone looked at her. Shuffling nervously in place, she coughed. “I think it’s mostly official?” She offered faintly. “I’ve got a uniform to try on.” She blinked as the others all slipped to their feet. Glancing at them curiously, Taylor moved over and looked up at Victoria.

“We’ll be doing pictures for the press release, so we should all change. It’ll be a colourful barbecue.” Taylor chuckled at the wry comment, moving to trail after the other girl toward the stairs.

"They said my kit was stashed in your room,” Taylor commented before it got odd about her trailing the other girl, and Victoria merely nodded before continuing up the steps. Taylor paused at the door and leaned against the wall when Victoria went in first. She hummed in thought as she studied the wall, glancing down the hall to see Crystal emerge from Amy’s room in her uniform, Amy following a minute later in a robe. After a few minutes Neil, Mark and Eric passed her as well heading downstairs.

When the door opened, Taylor blinked, staring in shock at Victoria, tilting her head quietly. She stepped back and took in the girl’s appearance quietly.

“It’s uh. Definitely you.” She commented quietly, her eyes drifting over the modified uniform. The Crest on the chest was unique, but the colour scheme matched well. She carefully paced around the girl, reaching out and tugging on the sash with an amused grin. “So where did this come from? Sabah mentioned a coffee date, but I didn’t think she’d make you a uniform.”

“I didn’t think so either, but when I was at my class today, someone swung past and said that she had made this for me. There was a note in it that said that people that fly, really shouldn’t wear skirts.” Listening to Victoria, Taylor moved past the girl, opening the box on the bed, and staring at the armour, reaching out and tracing the material. It felt like leather, but it wasn’t quite right. Taylor glanced over, watching as Victoria stared at herself in the mirror. “Do you think I should go down in it? I uh. I’m unsure how well it’ll go over.” Taylor tore her eyes from her uniform, moving over and standing next to Victoria, staring at the figure in the mirror.

“The question is if you do?” She inspected the uniform quietly. It was close to the New Wave base while still being unique, but it seemed more mature more professional than her old outfit. “Would you rather wear this from now on? And why?” She studied Victoria quietly for a few moments watching the indecision war on her face.

“I… I want to be better.” She spoke quietly. “I don’t want to feel like a kid playing at being a superhero anymore.” She gestured to the other outfit hanging by the mirror. “That was the outfit of a kid playing cops and robbers. I never really thought about what I was doing. Do you know that it occurred to me that if I’d landed on the ground during that fight with Tattletale, that she wouldn’t have been fast enough to dodge me? But I kept flying around like an idiot.” She carefully adjusted her sash and the medallion affixed to it quietly, tracing the new crest. “I’m… I’m gonna wear it.” She nodded faintly before glancing back at Taylor. Taylor smirked and raised an eyebrow, and after a moment Victoria caught on and quickly scurried.

Taylor followed to the door, locking it before heading to the kit. As she stood before it, she moved to undo her vest, loosening and removing her tie. It didn’t take long for her to slip on the white and brown bodysuit, the gloves and boots slipping on easily afterward. She ran a hand through her hair
before approaching the mirror and staring at herself in the reflective surface. One hand moved over the crest on her chest, tracing the spread wings and the sword, humming in thought. As she considered the image she felt the warmth of approval washing down her link from Bastila and Jolee. Apparently, they approved of the design.

Once she was sure that her hair was cooperating, she gathered up her scattered clothes, folding them and tucking them into the box, before heading over and opening the door. She stood there, offering a nervous smile to Victoria. When the other girl flashed her a thumbs up, Taylor felt her smile growing more genuine.

“Alright. Let’s go knock their socks off?” Taylor smirked as she slipped past Victoria and descended the stairs.

Victoria had drifted off as she headed through the house, ducking out of sight before her Aunt could catch sight of her. Taylor was left to Lady Photon’s mercies, and she found herself chuckling as the woman checked the fit out of the outfit, and made sure everything was correctly secured, living up to her title as Photon Mom. She endured the fussing and then she glanced at the woman when she nodded.

“Alright. Good to go. Ready for this?” She nodded easily, and Sarah grinned, moving to lead the way out the door. Taylor quickly fell in step behind the older cape, following her out onto the patio at the rear of the house. The rest of New wave, with the obvious exception of Victoria, was scattered across the backyard, her father tucked into a bench with Neil and Mark a short distance away, Amy, Crystal and Eric standing near to Carol who was glancing around. Sarah merely stepped up to the platform and spoke playfully. “New Wave, can I get your attention, please? It’s my great honour to introduce our newest member, Vigil.”

Taylor found herself blushing as the gather capes clapped eagerly, and her father let out a wolf whistle. Rolling her eyes she glanced around, watching as Sarah hopped down and headed toward the other adults. Taylor stared at the gathered capes, feeling their eyes on her and briefly, she considered attempting to say something inspiring. The thought lasted a moment, and after snorting to herself at it, she instead chose to clear her throat and speak casually.

“Thank you all for having me. Though, as I’ve got the stage and there’s no one here to stop me, I’d like to take this opportunity to introduce an old face with a new look. And Glory Girl? Allow me to be the first to say that I find the new look quite eye-catching.” Taylor stepped to the side, and glanced back, watching as Victoria in her new fitted outfit stepped out the door and walked up to the railing of the patio, her sash whipping in the spring wind. Taylor watched Victoria glance around before smiling nervously.

When most of New Wave stood there gob-smacked, Taylor felt like wincing, but it was her father, bless his soul, that let out an equally enthusiastic wolf whistle that cracked up the two men on either side of him. The ice now broken, both men quickly chimed in their own approval. Taylor flashed her dad a thankful grin and then stepped back as Eric and Crystal descended on Victoria, eagerly discussing the new and improved outfit. Taylor hopped over the railing rather than try and squeeze past, heading toward the lit barbecue that Sarah and Carol were looming near with the uncooked food.
Taylor was surprised when Carol glanced at her and spoke. “Was that your idea?” She asked quickly, and Taylor shook her head.

“No, I was just as surprised. I introduced Victoria to her tailor, but I had no idea they’d do anything like that. I think she just wanted a change. It suits her though.” She glanced over, smiling when both of the older women nodded and glanced over as well.

---

It seemed like half of New Wave liked to cook, and they all rotated through, Taylor and her father even had a chance to do some grilling. As the sun set a bonfire was lit, and the group had spread out around it, small knots of people forming and spreading out. Taylor had somehow ended up sitting with Mark and her dad as they discussed art, and she’d been arguing with them about the artistic merits of Gustave Courbet’s Le Sommeil when she idly wondered why Amy wasn’t around backing her up.

Taylor let her gaze drift around the groups. Carol and Sarah were curled up in loungers by the fire, chatting faintly to each other. Neil, Victoria, Eric and Crystal were all clustered up around a log as they toyed with the guitar that Victoria had earned. To Taylor’s ears, it sounded like Victoria was painstakingly plucking out the chords to twinkle twinkle little star, but it could be any beginner song really. Finding no sign of Amy, Taylor slipped to her feet and excused herself, leaving her dad and Mark to discuss Monet in peace. She headed toward the house, collecting a few empty soda and water bottles on the way.

She ducked into the kitchen, disposing of the trash before carefully picking around the place, seeking out Amy. She found the girl curled up on a bay window in the den, staring out towards the fire with a sketchpad in her lap. Moving as quietly as she could she peered over the girl’s shoulder to see an image on the pad of Neil holding a guitar as Eric, Victoria, and Crystal stared on in awe. Only when she was this close did she notice that Amy had dozed off.

Briefly, she considered letting the girl sleep but instead, she reached out and nudged the brunette. When Amy started and glanced up before relaxing, Taylor cracked a smile. As Amy rubbed at her eyes, Taylor spoke softly.

“Mousy, half the fun in a party, is talking to people. Watcha doing lurking out here by yourself?” She took a seat on the edge of the bay window, studying the other girl. She watched as Amy stared back at her, feeling the girl’s eyes raking through her before Amy cut in with a question, not responding to Taylor’s at all.

“What’s going on with you and my sister.” Taylor blinked at the question and frowned softly, tilting her head to the side.

“You and Victoria are far more alike then either of you would care to admit,” Taylor responded with a tired sigh, shifting back.
“You and Victoria are far more alike then either of you would care to admit,” The words startled
her, and Amy found herself frowning at Taylor. She opened her mouth to ask just what that meant,
but Taylor speaking cut her off. “I’ll tell you what I told her. Victoria’s my friend. What makes you
think that I’d done anything to her at all?”

“She’s…” Amy trailed off frowning. “She’s ignoring my calls, and not returning my text messages.”
She spoke softly, and when Taylor smirked at her, Amy rolled her eyes. “Which is exactly what she
said when she asked you about this before Lung’s big fight.” Amy rubbed at her face quietly.

“I’ll tell you what I told her, Mousy. She’s upset. She found out something horrible about herself,
and she needs time to deal with it. More than that, she needs space to heal. Give her those things, and
she’ll come back to you. You’re really important to her, just like she’s important to you.” Taylor
stared at Amy quietly. “And I know that’s it hard. Few things worth doing are easy though, you
know?” When Taylor stared at her, Amy felt herself nodding carefully. Taylor shifted back and
crossed her legs.

“As for Victoria and me. We’re friends. It was somewhat rocky at first, but I enjoy her company.
When she’s not playing up that image of ‘Teen Hero Extraordinaire, she’s kinda fun. As for what
I’ve been doing with her, I’ve been listening to her vent mostly. I was the only person there that
hadn’t been keeping a secret from her. And she needed someone to vent to. So, dad and I gave her a
safe place to process and recover. She seems a lot calmer now, so perhaps it did her some good.”
Amy watched Taylor glancing out the window, and she followed her gaze. She watched Taylor’s
father moving over to join Vicky, Neil and her cousins. Amy felt herself smiling as he took the
instrument and crouched down near Vicky, showing her something with it. She was tempted to ask
about that, but something else poked at her mind.

“There’s something else,” Amy spoke softly, glancing at Taylor. When the girl glanced over Amy
shifted nervously and spoke softly. “I got curious about you and ended up looking you up on
Facebook, myspace and so on.” She spoke and watched as Taylor’s expression turned guarded,
frowning quietly.

“You probably didn’t find me. I don’t really do social internet. I’ve had… bad experiences in the
past.” Taylor’s voice was quiet as she turned her eyes back toward the window.

“Yeah. I uh. I didn’t find anything by you, but I did find a facebook group.” Her voice was tentative,
and she watched Taylor’s shoulders bunch up. “Is it…” She asked quietly, and she saw Taylor’s
expression close down becoming stony as she stared at the fire.

“I had hoped they’d grown bored and allowed that to die finally.” Taylor’s tone was filled with
resigned disappointment, and she shifted in place quietly. “You’ve known me for a bit now Amy. I
think you could decide for yourself how much you believe what they said about me. Especially
considering what we know about each other.” Taylor glanced over at Amy her expression guarded,
her voice tense. Amy studied her quietly and considered the girl for a moment before sighing.

“It was confusing is all. I had wondered if you turned over a new leaf when you triggered but
considering everything. I’m not sure I could see you doing the things that they claimed you did.”
Amy spoke softly and watched Taylor’s shoulders uncoiling a look of shock and worry on Taylor’s
face. “No one’s ever believed you before… have they?” Taylor glanced at her for a moment before
turning and staring at the fire.

“I think they enjoyed that part the best, Emma and the rest. They’d keep the rumours down when
new people came to the school. They’d wait until they met me, got to know me, even started to enjoy
talking to me. They’d let me gain a little hope that I might have a friend, finally. and then the links
would find their way to the new friends and it would be the same thing over again.” Taylor’s voice
was worn out and tired, and Amy watched her quietly as she stared at the fire. “Part of me wishes
that I’d kept playing that game. Falling for the trick because when I gave up on people and stopped
trying to make friends. That’s when they escalated things.” Taylor’s voice was sotto and Amy,
reached out, gently grasping the girl’s arm.

When Taylor glanced over and flashed her a thankful smile, Amy felt her heart racing. She shifted in
place, moving to part her lips even though she was unsure what she’d say. Before she could work up
the courage to do anything, the door at the back of the study banged open to reveal Eric. Her blue-
haired cousin had a massive smile on his face.

“C’mon you nerds. We’re doing marshmallows.” Saying his part, he spun and stormed off, and
Taylor would shift, her expression smoothing out and that friendly smile creasing her face once
more.

“Come along, Mousy. Let’s go have some disgustingly sweet charred snacks with our loving
families.” She hopped to her feet, offering Amy her hand. Amy grabbed it and allowed herself to be
dragged to her feet, leaving her pad behind and following Taylor out into the dark night.

Amy sat on the large wooden log, sleepily eyeing the fire. She had ended up sandwiched between
her father and Neil, and she was currently using the gorilla-sized man as a makeshift pillow as she
half dozed. She could hear Neil and her father talking about something, but the words were washed
out, the low rumble of Neil’s words reverberating through his body making everything delightfully
hazy as she hovered on the boundary between Morpheus and the waking world.

As she dozed pleasantly, Amy’s eyes drifted over her family, at some point they’d all changed out of
their costumes, and everyone was dressed casually as they spread out around the fire. Amy found
herself watching Sarah sitting with Eric and Crystal on a log, the trio poking at the waning flames
while chatting softly. After watching them for a moment, her eyes drifted over to Danny and her
mother sitting on the lounge chairs that her Aunt and Mother had been using earlier in the evening,
the pair no doubt chatting in quiet tones about their wayward children. Thoughts of Taylor and
Victoria had Amy glancing around, and she found the pair tucked in the shade of a large tree, talking
softly to each other, dozens of fireflies flickering in the air above them.

Amy watched as the flickering firelight washed over both, taking in the earnest expression on her
sister’s face as she articulated something while waving her hands, the guitar strewn haphazardly over
her lap. As her eyes gazed over to the amused expression on Taylor’s face the formal clothing she
wore ruffled and loosened from a long day spent fussing at it, Amy wished that she had her pad in
front of her and the motivation to draw. Part of her wanted to be jealous at the natural bond between
the two, but at the moment she was just happy that Victoria had lost some of that pressing weight that
had dragged her down for so long.

For once in her life, her sister didn’t look like she was continually searching for the first opportunity
she could find to lift off and fly as fast and as far as she could. The natural, comfortable smile on her
face lulled Amy into a restful sleep as she curled more fully into her uncle’s warm frame, letting the
rumbles drifting through it soothe her like a lullaby.

[[So, That's a thing. Victoria ended up using the new costume since you folks super loved it, credit to nofacej for the recolor. I've created an art imgur to keep it all together, though currently, all it has are the recolors by him and... The wip from the character art I commissioned, displayed with permission from the person doing it. ETA is a bit off, but the preliminary sketches look neat~ Links for that is; here. ]]}
Chapter Summary

[[This chapter has been bouncing around my head for a bit. Ever since Taylor and Vicky spoke in the park. It’s neat working with the Wards, though I’ve yet to actually use most anyone besides Gallant. That’ll change as time goes on. =] ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 10th, 2011
Docks, Brockton Bay

Staring out the window of the PRT issue jeep, Taylor found herself tugging at the collar of her uniform. The fit was just as perfect as when she’d gotten it, but part of her felt nervous being seen out and about in the white and brown uniform. The lack of glasses on her face and her hair drawn back made Taylor nervous. The intention, Sarah had informed her, was to make her look more confident and focused, but the changes merely left her feeling more exposed. Watching the buildings slipping past as the PRT Trooper to her left drove them through a ruined section of the docks, Taylor turned to watch the Boardwalk taking shape beyond them.

From what Taylor could see, the Boardwalk was already in the grip of festival-like air. The ‘Re-opening’ was a joint PR stunt by the Brockton Bay Chamber of Commerce and the PRT. There would be a Press conference that would announce the new working relationship of the PRT and New Wave, during which Sarah had confided that they’d be announcing her place on the team, and then the Wards, along with the younger part of New Wave, would spend the evening Patrolling the Boardwalk and the docks while the Protectorate and the older members of New Wave patrolled the rest of the city.

“Do you know what this is about?” Taylor asked, once again wishing that Ralph hadn’t had a day off. He would have explained why it was so important that she come in even earlier than the rest of New Wave. The trooper remained silent, shaking his head and continuing to drive around the worst of the crowd building at the Boardwalk. It didn’t take long before the small commercial complex that the PRT had rented out came into view.

With the damage done to their main HQ, Ralph had informed Taylor that most of the PRT operations that weren’t operating out of the Rig were working out of this building now. The idea being that the proximity of the rig would hopefully keep any further attacks aimed away from the PRT. For the moment it seemed to have worked and Lung was happily waging his war with the other gangs, the ABB’s resident dragon’s new game meaning that the other gangs had to play along or else lose face with their supporters. It’d been decades since the battles on Brockton bay’s streets had been handled with such professionalism and it was getting people nervous.

Startled from her thoughts by the car coming to a stop, Taylor unbuckled her seat, exiting the vehicle and following the silent trooper as he headed toward the building. Taylor was stopped just inside the
door, and a soldier carefully searched her. When his hand brushed over the collapsed staff that she’d taken to securing against the bottom of her back, she watched his reaction closely, frowning at the concern. The guard took a moment to draw out his phone, consulting something on it before waving her through. He’d made a vague gesture to the arrows painted on the ground, and Taylor caught the gist about following the blue line.

The sound of excited voices drew her attention, and when she rounded a corner and found Crystal, Eric, Amy and Victoria all in costume awaiting her, she let out a relieved smile.

“Didn’t think we’d let you face these wolves alone did you?” The group approached, and Taylor smirked at them before glancing around. It was Eric that spoke and gestured off to one side.

“I asked my escort where to go. The Temporary Wards staging point is this way. They use this place to stage their patrols and debriefs, but apparently, most of the Ward’s non-patrol logistics are still back out on the Rig. Safer to keep them out of the way.” Taylor hummed in agreement as she walked with the group. When the doorway swung open to reveal a small lounge that held the Wards in costume, Taylor chuckled at their startled expressions.

After giving the Wards a moment to process, most of New Wave split up, Crystal, Amy and Eric moving off to mingle. Taylor was left standing by Victoria. When Gallant’s armoured figure strode up, Taylor was surprised to see Victoria tensing. She glanced at the boy and frowned when he addressed them.

“Glory Girl, your new costume is fascinating.” The helmet’s glowing visor flashed in time with the words. Taylor rolled her eyes quietly and watched the boy staring at Victoria’s new outfit. That Victoria’s boyfriend Dean was Gallant was one of the worst kept secrets in the cape community. Partly, this was Victoria’s fault, and she’d already slipped several times before Taylor had called her on it during the weekend.

As the pair to her left talked about the costume, Taylor did her best to ignore the barely concealed scoff from the couch that held several of the Wards, and she glanced up when Gallant’s visor focused on her. “I was asked to keep an eye out for you, Taylor. There’s someone that wants to speak with you.” Taylor frowned at the boy, watching as Victoria did the same. Still, she didn’t see a reason not to nod and follow him when he clumped off.

The sable-haired teen following the heavily armoured one out of the lounge and down several different halls and Taylor wondered how the other kid managed to navigate the labyrinthine halls without the help of a map. When he reached a door and opened it, Taylor strode over to stand near him. At the gesture to precede him, Taylor slipped into the room, pausing inside when she saw the long table with several stony-faced figures sitting opposite.

Armsmaster, Miss Militia, and Director Piggot all sat on the opposite side of the table, arms crossed on the table and fingers laced before them. They stared at Taylor coolly, and the girl felt her heartbeat rising as she considered what she might have done to upset the PRT. Gallant closed the door in her wake, moving over and taking a seat on the other side of the table. Taylor floundered near the door for a moment before the Director spoke coolly.

“Reach. Please come and take a seat. We have several matters that need discussion.” A gesture toward the nearby chair accompanied the calm words. Taylor approached the table, speaking carefully.

“It’s Vigil.” Taylor dragged the chair back with a loud screech and then took a seat, glancing up to
find the three figures opposite her glancing at each other curiously. It was the director that spoke
again; her voice laced with confusion.

“Pardon?” Taylor blinked and shifted in her chair.

“My Cape name. It’s Vigil. Not reach. New Wave will be announcing it this evening.” She watched
as Piggot glanced at Armmsmaster who nodded before the group collectively peered at Gallant.

“I think that she is being honest. She’s confused and worried, but she’s not hiding anything as far as I
can tell. No obvious nervousness or caution in her when she speaks.” Taylor listened, and a wave of
ice washed through her as she stared at the armoured figure. Touching on the Force, Taylor shrank
her presence in the Force and watched as the kid whipped his head in her direction. With her grasp
on the Force firm, she quickly swallowed the wicked smile that wanted to form as she read the shock
in his pose.

“Thank you, Gallant, you can return to the others. Tell Aegis that… Vigil will be joining you on
Patrol this evening.” Piggot’s voice kept the kid from speaking, and after a moment he slipped to his
feet clumping to the door and exiting. Piggot glanced at her, and as if suspecting her suspicion she
spoke casually. “Before you get upset, Miss Hebert, perhaps we should explain. Are you aware of
the Rogue that’s been operating near your house? Many folks suspected it to be you.” The woman’s
voice was careful, precise. Taylor stared at her quietly, nodding after a moment.

“Yes. Lady Photon mentioned them, said that you suspected I was behind it. What’s this all about,
Director?” Taylor frowned when, rather than answering, the Director picked up her briefcase off the
floor. She cracked it open and rifled within, closing the case and setting a file atop it.

“Last night, the Rogue Cape attacked a couple on a date.” She opened up the file and drew out an
image and slid it across the table. Taylor stared at the image, feeling a flash of dread and anger
clawing its way through her. “They left this in their wake near the battered and burnt bodies of the
boys.” Unable to resist any longer, Taylor reached out and grabbed the image and lifted it up, staring
at the words seared into the wall in the picture.

“No sins are beyond my Reach. Degenerates Beware.” Taylor felt her blood run cold as she read the
words. Memories flashed behind her eyes, and Taylor felt her throat tightening as she stared at the
words burned into the wall. Hands tightened on the image, knuckles whitening as she considered the
words. After a moment, she glanced up and stared at Director Piggot, ignoring the nervous shifting
back from the older woman.

“The people they attacked. What happened to them?” Her voice was cold, and Taylor glanced at the
file. Before anyone could react, a wave of her hand saw the folder spinning across the table to land
before her. When Armmsmaster surged to his feet, Taylor glanced over dangerously at him. The
Director raising a hand saw him shifting back and taking a seat once more. Similarly, the gesture saw
the glowing weapon in Miss Militia’s hand vanishing as well. Both of the capes were staring at her
strangely.

“The boys were both badly burned and bruised. The doctors are concerned about nerve damage, and
they’ve been relegated to the hospital, but their prognosis is good.” As she spoke, Taylor inspected
the images of the Victims, releasing her hold on the Force as a familiar cold bitter sensation washed
through her stomach. She glared at the images for a moment before quickly flipping past the scant
reports. She quickly checked the doctor’s report, frowning when Piggot cut in. “Miss Hebert, I
would recommend against trying to heal the boys, it might be seen as a sign of guilt or an attempt to
interfere with an ongoing police investigation.”
“These are two kids that were attacked because it’d make me look bad.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and she glanced at the figures opposite her. She watched all three, observing their reactions. Part of her ached to reach out and grasp the Force, but the simmering pit of resentment and bitterness kept her disconnected. “I don’t care how it would look; I’m going to find them and heal them.” Taylor laced her tone with stubborn determination and watched the reactions across the table. Miss Militia nodded in agreement, and Armmsmaster remained as outwardly stoic as ever, though the Director observed her as if trying to decipher her. She met the woman’s eyes and eventually, the director sighed, waving a hand in what Taylor took as an invitation to do what she wished.

“Do you have any idea who might be out to make you look bad?” Taylor frowned and glanced down at the file on the desk between them.

“It’s not exactly a short list. I’m sure that you’re familiar with what my school life was like before I triggered. There were several people that would love to do this.” Her voice was cool, and she watched as Miss Militia adjusted her pose quietly. She ignored the trio before continuing. “But my issues weren’t really the greatest kept of secrets. If the ABB or the Empire were setting out to discredit it me, this idea wouldn’t take long to come up with.” Her words were laced with weary regret, and she frowned when the Director nodded.

“Those were our thoughts as well. We’ve been observing your classmates, and keeping an eye on gang activity but with the troubles going on the in the street, direct reconnaissance is harder then you’d think.” The Director leaned down, crossing her arms and studying Taylor. Letting out a sigh, Taylor rubbed her face; she had a feeling that this was going to be a long chat. “Considering how this looks, Taylor, we’ll need to work together to discover who is behind this quickly, or else other people will start making the connection. Neither us or New Wave needs this publicity. If that drops, we’ll need to hit back hard. Team Leader Creighton’s constant presence at your side is good, but...”

The conversation had taken the better part of an hour, and Taylor left the meeting feeling drained, nursing a headache. She ended up ducking into a bathroom a short distance from the conference room, leaning against a wall and resting her forehead on the cold glass of a mirror. Taking a moment to breathe and clear her mind, Taylor let the force wash up around her once more, the warmth easily banishing the pain in her head. As her emotions settled, Taylor felt the tension along her front slowly uncoiling, and she stood taller, stepping back from the wall.

She shifted in place, straightening her uniform and releasing and retrying her hair. She studied her face in the mirror, taking in the serious look on it. She tried to smile, but it seemed forced, and she released it with a soft sigh. Ducking out of the bathroom she headed back to the lounge, listening to the voices beyond. As she exited into the room, she came up next to Miss Militia.

“-could do that, Glory Girl. I understand that you might not want to work with Gallant, but It’d mean that we’d have to switch up another team.” His voice was soft and laced with a genuine apology. Taylor glanced around taking in the figures in the room, the tension almost palpable. She considered Victoria’s fierce expression, and before her friend could open her mouth and say something stupid, she chimed in.

“I’ll switch.” She spoke plainly, blinking when all the eyes swung toward her. She stood in place,
tilting her head. Everyone watched her for a moment, and she wondered if she’d missed something, though another voice eagerly chiming in broke the tension.

“I’m fine to switch as well.” The youngest Ward spoke eagerly and then glanced at Gallant before flashing a smug look toward Victoria. Taylor considered the mocking laugh she’d heard the girl giving off earlier, and shook her head, wondering if the young Ward had a suicide wish. She glanced at Gallant, and her grip on the force allowed her to sense his reluctance. Before anyone else could speak, the woman to Taylor’s left chimed in casually.

“If Glory Girl and Vista wish to swap partners, that’s fine. Vigil you’ll join Glory Girl on the South Patrol. Gallant, you’ll be with Vista toward the center of the Boardwalk.” Truthfully, Taylor was relieved at this turn of events. She’d been placed in the thick of the crowd with the ‘cute’ Ward, and she hadn’t looked forward to all the attention. Actually watching for trouble with Victoria would be more appealing. Glancing over, she caught Victoria’s grateful smile, and she flashed a grin back before listening as Miss Militia quickly began explaining the patrol before they left.

“Amy?” She shifted and got her feet under her, a small part of trilling in delight at the way his form tensed, the flicker of jealousy on his face appealing to her on some level. She briefly considered telling him that it was just Taylor, but instead, she gestured for him to follow her and lead him off to the quiet corner of the room. “Did you know about Amy?” She stared at him, her eyes boring into him watching him wince a bit before speaking.

“I… suspected. The things I sensed off of her were concerning. The lust, self-loathing and bitterness were hard to miss, and hatred toward me hinted at something. I tried to speak with her, but she reacted… badly. I was going to try again soon.” Victoria stood there and stared at the boy, her every instinct screaming at her to do something. She ached to hit him, to smash him into something for keeping this from her. She wanted to scream and then she glanced off, staring at Amy watching her from across the room and she backed up, swallowing and turning to Dean.

“Get away from me. Don’t bother trying to call me.” She turned and stepped away, clenching her fists and doing her best to keep her power under control, to keep the shield from slamming into place. When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she tensed, the words he spoke shattering the tenuous grasp
“Victoria, we need to talk about this. I’m sorry I kept it a secret, but Amy deserved her privacy.” Victoria spun, her shield snapping into place and, with a snarl, she had Gallant, armour and all, suspended nearly eight inches off the ground. She gripped him by the center of his chest plate, staring angrily up at him. She stared at his shocked expression, and her eyes narrowed.

“Privacy?” She hissed through her teeth, keeping her voice low while constantly moderating her grip to avoid shattering the front of the boy’s armour. “My sister was filled with bitterness and self-loathing and rather than tell someone, anyone, about it, you decided to keep her privacy. She was considering letting people die, she was considering letting herself die, and you were more worried about breaking her confidence.” She watched the Wards starting to stand across the room, and she dropped Gallant, taking some small measure of delight when he ended up sprawled on his ass, the helmet rolling across the room.

“Did you know about my aura?” She spoke coldly, glancing up and watching Crystal holding Amy back, the girl’s expression darkening. Victoria reached out, pushing past the anger and savagely forcing her barrier down and off. When her weight crashed into her again, she watched the confusion wash over her sisters face. Turning her attention back to Gallant, she’d crouch down, staring into his eyes. “Did you know that it never truly went off?” She watched him coldly and watched as his eyes held hers only for a moment and then glanced off to the side.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” She stood up quietly. She took a moment to glare at Dean before glancing up at the wards that approached nervously. “We’re done here, I think. Sorry about the disturbance.” She strode around the shell shocked empath and headed toward the others.

Victoria was aware that she could fly along and patrol easier, but part of her was having fun using her improved strength to keep up with Taylor by jumping from roof to roof. The pair wasn’t running and were moving at a languid pace, hopping from rooftop to rooftop, and watching the crowds from above. Occasionally someone noticed them and they’d wave, and smile for the cameras, though requests they come down to speak were politely declined by mentioning their duties.

“So. What was it that I walked into, earlier?” The question from Taylor startled her; the other girl had been unusually silent since she’d returned from her meeting, going through the needed motions of the pre-patrol meeting and the Press Conference with a political smile pasted on her face. She’d been rather quiet for the first part of their patrol, though Victoria nudging her had earned a brief genuine smile that’d soothed Victoria’s worries that her drama had upset the other teen. Snapping out of her thoughts, Victoria gestured to the next building hopping over and checking on the crowd before responding.

“Dean and I broke up. Aegis had us slated on the same team, and I wasn’t sure if I could restrain myself from punting him into the bay and seeing if he could swim in that armour of his.” She glanced at Taylor, watching as the girl raised her eyebrow. Victoria endured Taylor’s look for a few moments, chuckling as she mentally interpreted it to mean something like; ‘My, Victoria, that is certainly an over-blown reaction, whatever could he have done to upset you like that.’ Eventually, though, she offered a grunt and hopped to the next roof, speaking softly as she heard Taylor land next to her.
“He knew about Amy. She didn’t tell him either, he knew from his powers, and I imagine he’d known for a bit.” She ignored the hiss from Taylor’s direction and rubbed at her face. “Said that he was respecting her privacy.” She commented and glanced over, frowning when she saw a frown on Taylor’s face.

“I imagine that he senses a lot with his power that he doesn’t really feel appropriate sharing.”

Taylor’s words were soft, and she leapt to the next building first, and Victoria followed. She watched the white form pause and glance at her, and she sighed faintly.

“I understand respecting people’s boundaries, but this is different, she’s my fucking sister, and she was torturing herself, and he fucking knew and all he did was to try and talk with her. He’s not a god-damned therapist or trained to deal with this.” Victoria growled and hopped to the next building ranting as the wind whistled around her. “What if you’d not encountered her? How long would it have gone on? What if she’d hurt someone, what if she’d hurt herself.” Her voice was low, and Victoria felt her heart clenching at the thought.

“Psychologists go to school for years for a reason Victoria.” The girl hopped up onto the front of the building and stared down at the milling crowd, flashing a smile and waving at a group that cheered at her, doing her best to hide her nervousness at the lights flashing in her direction. Victoria joined her and did a pose in her new costume, focusing on Taylor instead of the reactions. “A big part of it is learning how to use their knowledge ethically, how to deal with people in appropriate ways. Dean’s just a kid.” She hopped back and glanced at Victoria before heading toward the next building.

“He knew about my aura too,” Victoria commented faintly as she hopped onto the next building. Taylor chuckled at her side as she landed and Victoria glanced at her.

“Did he know that you didn’t Victoria? Some powers never go off; for all, he knew you were aware of it and didn’t enjoy talking about it. And if he had told you, what would you have done? You didn’t know how to control your Aura or your shield at that point, and it would have just made you paranoid about every relationship in your life.” Taylor hummed tiredly and hopped onto the next building.

“I would have rather known,” Victoria muttered tiredly and glanced over at Taylor as the girl continued to the next building. “What about you? You were gone for nearly an hour. What’d the PRT want?” Victoria frowned when Taylor tensed and glanced at her worriedly. She saw the girl contemplating lying before something seemed to wash through her and she began to speak softly.

“Someone attacked a gay couple on a date last night. They were found electrocuted, beaten and bleeding in the street not too far from my house.” Victoria glanced down at her clenched fist. Attacks like these had always bothered her, but now a small part of her imagined if Amy had been one of those kids and she felt the anger washing into her. She was about to speak when Taylor continued. “They left a message on the wall, claiming that ‘No Sinner was beyond their Reach.’.”

“What?” Victoria leapt after the other cape, following as Taylor landed and paced toward the edge of the building, glancing down at the alley between this building and the next, checking the few people clustered within. Victoria followed and glanced down, watching three young girls chattering eagerly over their phones. “They thought that you…” She scoffed and blinked when Taylor looked at her confused. “You’re literally the least hateful person that I’ve ever met. How anyone could think you’d do that to someone astounds me.”

“Yeah? You’d be surprised.” Taylor muttered quietly and glanced back down at the Alley before
taking a few steps back to get a running start before leaping the gap. Victoria merely floated over, chuckling at the oohs and snaps of light from below. Check one for the skirtless uniform.

“What’re you going to do?” Victoria’s voice low and curious and she watched as Taylor bunched up her shoulders as she hopped the divider between this building and the next, dropping the few feet to the lower roof.

“I’m gonna go and find them later, see if they’ll let me heal them. Try and apologize.” Victoria frowned and watched Taylor, blinking when the girl glanced up at her and chuckled. “Someone hurt them badly trying to make me look bad Glory Girl. How do you think that makes me feel.” Victoria dropped down next to Taylor and sighed softly as she considered how she’d feel.

“I’ll come with.” She grinned when Taylor looked at her shocked. “I imagine having a bona fide hero with you, will help. And well.” She coughed faintly, glancing off the roof toward the ground. “Considering Amy, well.” She shrugged. Taylor’s amused chuckle startled her, and she quickly followed when Taylor crouched and jumped up nearly ten feet to land on the next building which had an extra story over the one they stood on.

“You know she might not actually be gay. Group triggers show that parahuman powers can overcome the natural sexual orientation of people.” Victoria blinked and frowned at that idea, the thought bothering her even more now. She sighed softly and followed after Taylor watching the girl hop across another alley. She lifted off again and floated across the gap, briefly entertaining the idea of asking Taylor which way she swung.

When she landed though, she found Taylor standing and staring across the broad road that separated this building and the next. She glanced at the street below, considering the much-diminished crowd.

“We really should head back; we’ve gone a bit further south then we needed to.” She frowned when Taylor didn’t respond, standing still and staring to the south-east with unfocused eyes. She moved up to the girl, following her gaze and frowning at the flicker of violet and blue in the distance. She frowned and reached up tapping her collar pip.

“Glory Girl to Console.” She spoke softly. She winced quietly, waiting for that familiar haughty voice to answer back.

{Glory Girl, you have the console, what can we do for you this evening?} Tattletale’s dulcet tones drifted over the headset, and Victoria wondered who’s genius idea this was. Instead of making the snarky comment that she’d been holding onto, she quickly spoke.

“Vigil and I are at the southern end of the boardwalk. Vigil’s frozen up, and she’s staring in the direction of a glow to the southeast.” Victoria kept her voice professional, and she was surprised when Tattletale responded in kind.

{That’s unsettling. Vista and Gallant are the closest to you, I’ve directed them toward you, I’ve also called in Lady Photon. She’s nearby and is heading in your direction.} Victoria sighed at the idea of Gallant coming in but before she could respond Taylor seemed to start out of her stupor, her expression suddenly darkening and she leapt off the building toward the light.

“Vigil’s snapped out of it, but she’s.” She’d pause, and frowned at the sound of a scream from the direction that Taylor was leaping. “There’s screaming. I’m going to investigate.” She released the pip and took off, shooting past Taylor easily and heading toward the light.
{Glory Girl, you’re authorized to scout the effect, you are not permitted to engage. Backup is on the way. Give me a report once you’re in position.} Victoria sighed and swooped down, and she cleared the building that had been blocking the glow. The glow itself had faded over the last minute as she approached, and when she caught sight of the street, she easily saw why. Landing on the edge of the building, Victoria stared down at scattered bodies on the ground. She considered the colours and frowned. Merchants. And judging by how still the gangsters were and the amount of smoke wafting off them the attacker hadn’t been gentle.

Victoria turned her gaze toward the only moving figure. Between her height and Taylors, the figure moved near the wall. The figure was dressed in a flowing purple cloak with a cowl that occasionally shifted to reveal armour covering most of the body. Victoria watched as a glowing hand pressed to the wall, the violet glow sparking as it was dragged over the bricks, leaving a black scorch mark in its wake. Reaching up, Victoria touched her pip.

“I think it’s the person that’s been beating up people near Vigil’s place. They’ve taken out an entire group of merchants, and they’re currently burning something into the wall. They’re dressed in a costume, black body armour, purple cloak. I’m going to speak with them.” She hopped off the roof and landed on the street. She removed the bud from her ears to cut off Tattletale’s complaints and headed toward the figure.

Victoria watched the figure as they burned a black ‘c’ into place after the a, e and the uppercase R, she casually crossed her arms and inspected the text.

“She actually goes by Vigil.” The words were cool, and she watched as the figure tensed. Watching the cloaked figure turn to stare at her, Victoria was surprised by the steel mask it wore with the glowing red eyes peeking out from behind it. She loosened her arms and stepped closer. “You-”

The figure didn’t give Victoria a chance to respond, didn’t wait to hear her comments. One minute she was staring at the glowing red eyes and the next the hands lifted and jagged purple and white Lightning slammed into her form, throwing her across the street. Victoria screamed in pain as she felt her shield shudder and collapse under the onslaught. The energy coursed through her, causing her to spasm in agony, her skin on fire as she was blasted into the opposite side of the street, pinned in place by the lightning.

No words were spoken, the figure advanced on her keeping up that onslaught of violent, painful lightning, and Victoria wondered why she hadn’t already passed out, staring at the purple arcs dancing over her form. Victoria let out a scream as the burning grew along her skin grew worse the longer the lightning was held on her, her body bucking against the wall ineffectively. After a few moments, the figure seemed to grow bored of her screams, and the power winked out, dropping Victoria onto the stones. She lay there panting, her skin on fire as the figure approached and ducked before her, staring down at her with those glowing eyes.

One hand moved to brush the blonde hairs from her eyes, and Victoria panted and muttered something. When the figure leaned closer as if they hadn’t heard her she coughed and then spoke softly.

“I said...you should duck, bitch.” She watched the figure jerk back just in time for Taylor to slam one end of her bo staff into the side of their body, sending the armoured figure careening across the street. Victoria panted softly as she lay back. When Taylor moved toward her, she shook her head. “T-Take care of the crazy in the fucking cloak. I-I’ll be fine.”

Victoria fell back as Taylor rounded on the cape, watching as the cloaked figure staggered to their
feet.

Chapter End Notes

[[ DUN DUN DUN. ENJOY THE CLIFFHANGER NERDS. Seriously though. =] This chapter was amusing to write. Lemme know what you think. I GOTTA WORK IN LIKE 10 HOURS.]]
The odd feeling that had been niggling at Taylor for most of the afternoon grew worse as she headed south. She’d tried to ignore the feeling while Victoria had spoken with her, but as her feet touched down on the gravel of the roof, she felt a wave of something slamming into her. She came to a stop and glanced off in the direction that the feeling had come from in the docks. As she stood there, Bastila and Jolee flickered into view staring in the same direction.

The two spirits glanced at each other before glancing back to Taylor. “That was a disturbance in the force Taylor.” Bastila’s voice was cold as she glanced back toward the flicker of the light in the distance. Jolee chimed in, his voice laced with concern. “Not quite the force, the feeling is...wrong. Like an echo of an echo.” His voice was confused, and Bastila nodded huming quietly in agreement. Distantly, Taylor heard Glory Girl speaking nearby, but she was focusing on the spirits and the feeling. Jolee’s voice continued coldly. “Whatever it is, it was used to do something bad. People are hurt. Potentially dying.” Taylor glanced at Bastila and Jolee, nodding faintly before moving toward the edge of the roof.

She started hopping from roof to roof, heading for the flickering lights. A flicker of white and gold out of the corner of her eye drew her attention. She blinked, glancing up to see Victoria streaking ahead of her. With a curse she redoubled her speed, leaping from building to building, intent on closing the distance. When the flickering lights ahead winked out, and Victoria vanished out of sight, another curse slipped from her lips.

{Vigil!} The shouted word finally drew Taylor’s focus back to the earbud hanging off her ear. She quickly slipped it back into her ear and pressed a hand to the button on her collar, activating the mic pressed against her neck.

“Console, this is Vigil. Glory Girl appears to have engaged an unknown cape. I’m still on approach.” Taylor’s voice cut in. She respected Tattletales professionalism when instead of a stream of beratement and curses she got a professional response.

{She said that she found a cape with several downed Merchants. Lady Photon and Protectorate support are inbound, Gallant and Vista are less than five minutes from you.} Taylor landed on the roof the Glory Girl had vanished over, and she sprinted across the roof,
the sounds of Victoria’s screams egging her on. She caught sight of a figure in black and purple viciously electrocuting Victoria, stalking toward her.

“Glory Girl is under attack. I don’t have time to wait for reinforcements. If you can get them to hurry, do it, I’ll try to stop the attack.” Taylor moved along the roof. When the figure dropped the lightning and stalked over to Victoria, Taylor wrapped herself in the Force, leaping clear over the pair and landing silently behind them.

Drawing her bo-staff, she crept up on the figure as it approached Victoria. When Victoria muttered something, causing the figure to lean in, Taylor slipped close, the girl’s sarcastic comment was all the clue she needed, and as the figure lurched back and flinched, Taylor lashed out, hooking the end of her staff under the arm-pit of the figure. Using the force to augment her strength, she used the weapon as a lever, hefting the armoured figure up and over her head, sending them spinning through the air to land on the ground a short distance away.

Taylor surged toward Victoria, the sounds of her friend in pain setting her heart to racing. She paused when Victoria coughed and stuttered at her.

“T-Take care of the crazy in the fucking cloak. I-I’ll be fine.” Taylor paused and frowned, but she nodded at Victoria and turned to stare at the cloaked figure, pushing themselves to their feet. The figure was dressed in a simple black outfit, the matching tactical kit looking out of place on their modest frame. A heavy violet cape hung around their shoulders, with a deep cowl that was pushed back to reveal the steel mask they wore.

The eyes of the mask had been backlit by LED’s, the glowing red no doubt somewhat intimidating at face value. Taylor strode forward, bo staff in hand. She glared at the armoured figure, moving past the still bodies on the ground. Her eyes caught sight of the half-written ‘signature’ on the wall, and she called out.

“Who the hell are you and what do you think you-” The words were barely out of her mouth when the figure lifted both hands and twin streams of lightning shot towards her. Having seen what the lightning did to Victoria, Taylor was ready, spinning the staff in place and focusing her force deflection into the weapon. A thin barrier formed around the weapon and she used the end of it to catch the lightning.

Deep in the grasp of the force, Taylor saw the shock running through the figure, the growing apprehension. With a savage grin, she stepped forward, advancing on the figure as she held the weapon before her using it as a shield to stop the lightning-caster from hurting her. She’d made it nearly three steps when the figure ripped their hands away and turned, charging toward the nearest Alley.

“Oh no, not on my fucking watch.” Taylor snarled as she reached out a hand, grabbing the figure with the Force and slamming her down onto the ground. The sound of bones crunching was audible even from ten feet away, and she advanced on the figure, holding them down. “I thought you wanted my fucking attention. I show up, and you run? Gives a girl mixed messages.” Taylor’s voice was laced with anger, and she felt the warnings washing through her mind from the spirits, but she brushed them aside for the moment, moving around to stare at the figures mask.

As she held the cape down, she crouched, staring at the fake face and she heard the figure panting softly. She weakened her grip just a bit not wanting the other cape to suffocate before they could be arrested. The figure reacted, sucking in a huge breath. Taylor frowned, worried that she’d used too much force, but rather than continuing to pant; the figure started to scream.
Taylor didn’t have time to react, the sound slammed into her like a physical effect, blasting her off her feet and launching her back nearly five feet, as she skidded along the ground, she felt her grasp on the figure suddenly evaporate, the force acting as if she vanished. As she skidded to a halt, Taylor saw the cloaked figure rising to hover in the air. The screaming had shifted from an audible sound to something that Taylor felt more in her head then in her ears, the sound causing pain and pressure.

The figure shifted before Taylor’s eyes as it hovered a scant few inches off the ground, their form had become smoky and incorporeal, their appearance altering as well. BDU’s and Tactical gear transforming smoothly into darkened plate and chain-mail. The cloak they wore tightened around their form and lengthened to flutter in the breeze. The cloth became more coat-like wrapping around the torso and revealing the armour-clad arms instead of obscuring them. The hood elongated and deepened, the metal mask vanishing into it, leaving inky darkness where the head had once been.

That wail redoubled and Taylor gripped her head, dipping into the force to fight off the worst of the effects, staggering to her feet as the smoky figure surged toward her. Taylor barely spun out of the way, watching the thin trails of inky smoke trailing after the figure like thin tendril-esque wings. Taylor backed away further, keeping one hand to her head and trying her best to ignore the screaming.

When the cape rounded on her and charged toward her again, Taylor raised a hand, forming a haphazard shield that sent even more pain lancing through Taylor’s brain as it was struck, but it caused the intangible figure to bounce back. Taylor moved, carefully stepping to put herself between Victoria and the cape, her shield ringing like a gong each time the smoky Cape slammed into it, the wails growing more painful with each passing second.

When the figure drew back and began hovering dangerously at a short distance from the barrier, Taylor reached out with the Force. Her power grasped a nearby newspaper machine and lobbed it at the figure. When it merely passed through the Ethereal attacker, Taylor ended up cursing. She found that any attempts at Telekinesis also casually passed through the figure, and she found herself gritting her teeth in irritation.

The floating figure whipping around and staring off drew Taylor’s focus, and she swore as she saw the middle of the street warping around to reveal Vista and Gallant were arriving. The figure shrieked in rage and raised its hands, Violet energy sparking along its arms and over the fingers. Taylor watched as the sound washed over the new capes. Gallant staggered back before straightening, but Vista crumpled to the ground. Taylor charged forward and leapt forward, pivoting in the air as she came to a skidded stop before the Wards lifting her hands and catching the lightning as it arced toward the other heroes.

Reinforcing her shields, Taylor gritted as she felt the lightning blasting toward her, the glowing orbs in her palms grounding and capturing the energy. As she stood there, glaring back at the ghost, she felt something cold wash over her, a surge of light exploding over her shoulder and arcing toward the floating cape in breaker form. Something in Taylor shifted, and dread washed up, exploding up and wrapping around her mind. She watched the figure come to a stop before her something changing in how they held themselves.

The figure lowered to rest on the ground, the armour becoming less ornate, less armoured. Belts grew out of brown robes and looping into large rings woven into the heavy, Jedi style, robes that the figure wore. The cloak resumed its previous shape over the robes, everything shifting colour to dull browns, blacks and reds. As the mantle grew more loose and wavy, a mask emerged from the darkness of the hood, the rusted brown mask with its red elements and the black slit that concealed
the eyes.

“So. You’re the child that they sought to replace me with. Guided by the hands of my wife, my friend and mentor, and a sith so terrified of what the idea of me could do that he and his compatriots tried to have me completely excised from the histories of his people.” The words were mocking as he strode up and around her, his robes whispering as they dragged over the stones. Taylor felt her heart racing and, despite the thunderous pounding of her blood in her ears, she heard every sibilant word that the figure whispered as he walked around her.

“They all cling to the image of you saving this broken world, and yet, Taylor Hebert, you know the truth. You know that nothing you can do will stop what is to come. That’s the reason that you refuse to look beyond the now.” His voice was cold as it emerged from that mask and he paced around her casually, walking around to stand before her.

The dark lord reached a gauntlet-clad hand outwards, the finger moving toward her forehead. Taylor stared in horror at the gloved hand approached, her heart beating so fast that she feared that it’d leap out of her chest. She stood there as the spirit’s finger touched her head and everything faded to darkness.

---

It was almost like what Taylor imagined the surface of the sun to be like. The flames towered miles into the sky and danced around her, the entire ground an ocean of fire that didn’t burn her as she walked through it. Occasionally, images erupted from the flames, bubbles forming and showing places, people before bursting and fading.

One flicker showed Victoria in her new outfit, her form radiating a golden glow as she traded blows with a golden figure. In another, Amy faced off against Lung, Massive hulking abominations surrounding her and protecting her from the growing dragon. Taylor glanced around moving through the flames and watching the images dance into view and fade, everything burning brilliantly.

Feeling drawn in a particular direction, she walked through the towering flames, coming upon a massive pillar of emerald fire. Taylor touched the pillar and it exploded, the fire washing outwards over her. When the flames passed, they left her standing in the ruins of the Dallon house. Half the front had been ripped away, and Taylor was surprised to see a metallic figure was trying to drag another version of her battered body through the back door.

“Concerned Observation: Mistress, this is not a safe place to be. We must make our escape with haste.” The battered Taylor looked exhausted. Barely healed bruises covered her form, and her hair was freshly wild from sleep. She wore Pyjamas, and despite all that, she was struggling quite fiercely with the metallic figure, and she ripped her arm free.

“Run if you have to HK. I can’t leave Victoria there to fend for herself.” She reached out, and a section of the floor exploded upwards, a staff whipping out to land in her hand. With a gesture, the top half ignited into a glowing violet blade that hummed ominously as the other Taylor leapt out of the shattered facade of the house.
Taylor moved to follow her double, staring in horror at the long gouge that went through the earth leading past the house toward the water. In the distance, massive flashes of energy were discharging, and Taylor watched her double bounding with surprising ease toward the light show.

The world dissolved into green flames and when they cleared Taylor was stood in her father’s bedroom. Another Taylor stood silently in the doorway of the room staring at the empty and unmade bed. Her face was stony and silent, and she just stared at the bed as if furious at it. Her entire form trembled with a barely contained rage as if any moment she might lose herself and storm the room to destroy every last broken memory that it dared to hold.

Instead, the door creaked open further and a pale hand gently rested on the other Taylor’s shoulder. Taylor stepped closer, and as the flames rushed up to wrap around her, she heard a familiar voice telling her to come back to bed. When the fire cleared again, Taylor frowned.

She was in a bar, standing before a table. Around her Victoria, Amy, and Sabah stood in costume, silent and wary, standing behind several empty seats at the table. Arrayed around the table were other faces. Lung sat casually with Oni Lee and Bakuda beside him. Across from him sat Kaiser, Purity, and Alabaster. Next, to the other Taylor and her group, she saw a figure in a black bodysuit with a snake coiling around it. A tall figure dressed as a scarecrow looming behind him. This image was still and silent, and no one moved, no one spoke.

“Taylor.” The flames came again, but as they wreathed her, Taylor saw something icy blue in the distance. She pushed toward it, and the fire cleared, and she saw icy blue eyes. She heard words whispered over the flickering flames.

“...breathe Taylor... Look into my eyes.” The words penetrated her foggy mind and Taylor felt the burning in her chest, the savage beat of her heart and she suddenly lurched forward, the flames vanishing as she inhaled deeply.

Agony. Everything was agony as that scream slammed around her head. Victoria rolled on the ground, gripping her head as she snapped out, desperately snatching her power and slamming her shield back up, feeling the warmth of the barrier as it crashed up around her. Victoria could feel the strain her shield was under, but as she savagely held it up, she felt the pain from the scream diminishing to irritating background noise. She flopped back panting as she tried to catch her breath.

The sound of a bell pealing drew her attention, and she glanced over watching as the shadowy cape slammed her form into the barrier over and over, Taylor’s form shuddering with pain with each strike. Victoria staggered to her feet, grabbing the earbud and slotting it into her ear.

{...hear me Vigil. Glory Girl? What’s your status.} Victoria blinked in surprise; Tattletale seemed legitimately concerned. She pressed a hand to her neck, keeping one hand against the side of her head as she tried to ignore the pain the cape was causing.
“This is Glory Girl. Vigil is keeping the other… Fuck it. Vigil is keeping Reach off us. Reach is apparently a breaker on top of a blaster. You mentioned something about backup?” Victoria spoke quickly and peered through her eyes as the floating cape drifted back and stared at them.

(Vista and Gallant will be at your position in a moment.) A momentary surge of Dread washed through her.

“You told them that she’s a blaster, right? They’re coming in at a safe distance?” She spoke, though horror washed through her as the street distorted a short distance away, Vista and Dean suddenly emerging from the effect. The wail slammed into them both, and Gallant staggered back before recovering, but Vista went down hard, curling up on the ground. Victoria tried to scream, but the other cape was already spinning on them. Lightning was leaping from their hands.

Taylor moved in a flash; suddenly she was between the shadowy cape and Dean and Vista’s fetal form, her hands held up before her. There was no glowing shield-wall like when she’d been blocking Victoria; instead, the lightning slammed into Taylor’s hands, occasional arcs blasting off it and leaving scorches along the cape’s uniform. Victoria frowned when small burns started appearing on Taylor's cheeks as the arcs grew wilder. Surging forward with a snarl, Victoria suddenly paused when Dean lifted a hand and pointed at Taylor.

A wave of inky purple light washed out of his hands, washing around Taylor, skimming over her shoulder and past her neck, and careening off into the other cape. Taylor remained frozen in place. The shrieking intensified as the energy crashed into the breaker and the figure spin around staring upwards in horror. Victoria glanced up in time to see her Aunt Flying in a figure holding a staff and wearing a flowing cloak zipping along in her wake. Before she could call out, the figure floating pulsed with brilliant violet light, the scream tripling in volume as the glow exploded outwards in a wave.

Victoria saw the light wash over Taylor’s shielded form, highlighting the barrier around her before moving on. The light slammed into Gallant and Vista and sending them both rolling along the floor bodies wracked with convulsions. The barrier slammed into Victoria next, shattering her shield once more and throwing her back into the wall. As she slumped to the ground, her eyes watched the field smashing into her Aunt, the figure in the cloak using his staff shield himself before swooping in to catch her Aunt Sarah. As darkness crowded around the edge of her vision, Victoria watched the cloaked shape suddenly blasting off and out of the area with the agonizing shriek fading as it went.

“Glory Girl.” The words were soft, and Victoria started sitting up with a sudden sharp gasp. She sat against the wall, straining against the white hands that held her down. “Glory Girl. sit still you took several bad hits.” Victoria ignored her aunt, her barrier snapping into place. She pushed the woman aside as gently as she could surging to her feet.

“Taylor.” She turned and stared in horror at the image of Taylor standing completely still where she’d last been, hands held up in the splayed gestures she’d been using to catch the Lightning. The cloaked cape stood with Gallant, and they both were murmuring to each other as they stared at Taylor's statue-like form. Victoria ignored her Aunt’s words, striding past her toward the pair.
“...all I can sense is horror and fear. Most people don’t react like this to my power.” Gallant’s voice was laced with regret, and that was the only thing that kept Victoria from backhanding him into the wall.

“Her powers are fucking emotionally actuated, you simpering idiot. Is it common practice on the Wards to use your gifts through your allies?” She growled as she came to a stop a short distance away. Gallant flinched back, but the cowled figure turned, allowing Victoria to see the shadows gathered under the hood and the beard peeking out. The man seemed to shift in surprise.

“Glory Girl. Glad to see you back on your feet, you took quite a hit. Should you be standing.” He glanced past her and Victoria growled at him till he looked back. “Er. Right. Your team-mate. Miss Hebert seems to be protecting herself. We can’t get to her.” Victoria watched as he demonstrated, reaching out to poke her with his staff, the action causing a spark to lance out at him. He backed up and shrugged at her.

Victoria moved around, stepping up and studying Taylor through the shield. Her eyes were wide, and her face was slack with horror, the girl’s pale skin was unsettling, as were her short, panicked breaths. The clenched fists and the vicious tension that hung off Taylor like a coat weren’t all that great either. Victoria took a breath, reaching out with a hand. When her hand came into contact with Taylor’s shield, she felt her own shield surge violently and then wink out, but her hand wasn’t shocked. She frowned before reaching out.

“Vigil.” She spoke, drawing Taylor’s chin up to peer at her own. She watched the girl’s unfocused eyes. She spoke again. Taylor. That caused a reaction, the girl’s shoulders shuddered, and her eyes started darting around in panic her breathing becoming even more panicked. Victoria spoke again.

“Taylor, breath Taylor.” She gripped the girl’s shoulders. “Look into my eyes and breath.” She watched as Taylor jerked, their eyes locking and Taylor sucked in a lungful of air. The girl continued to shudder as she glanced from Victoria to the others and back, her lips pressed together brutally, her face stony despite the terror visible in her eyes.

“Taylor. Taylor! Ignore them. I’ve got you. Focus on me” She called, forcing the girl to focus on her.

“That’s right. Look at me. Breathe in. Count with me. In. One. Two. Three. Out. One. Two. Three.” She watched as Taylor started to moderate her breathing, keeping their eyes locked. When Taylor’s breathing was less dangerous, Victoria spoke. “Tell me the names of the six positions of the First Path of the Matukai.” She spoke firmly. Taylor stared at her in confusion until Victoria shook her.

“There’s the Standing Ursine, Then Poised Feline…” The girl continued, listing each form. Victoria continued to ask questions, forcing Taylor to focus, until the girl’s breathing settled and her form relaxed. She gently released Taylor’s shoulders once she’d started talking normally, leaning back.

“What the hell was that.” The girl’s voice was unwelcome, and Victoria used every ounce of self-control she had to keep from spitting a nasty comment at Vista. She glanced over to see the younger girl staring at them incredulously.

“Grounding. It’s how you pull someone out of a panic attack.” The cloaked cape spoke the words, and he seemed to be staring appraisingly at Victoria. Everyone was looking at her, and she found herself turning back to Taylor who merely flashed her a thankful smile. The awkward silence dragged on for a moment until Vista chimed in again.

“Fascinating. But I was talking about the fucking Banshee.” Victoria glanced over and watched as Vista turned to stare in the direction the shape had gone. “Console told us it looked like you were
fighting Shadow Stalker, similar costume, but that sure as fucking wasn’t shadow stalker.” Victoria frowned again at language, but the girl’s observations were right.

“She’s a breaker, that’s for sure. She seems to turn intangible. Alters her shape too.” Victoria jumped, startled when Taylor spoke at her side. “I tried to use my TK on her, and she didn’t get affected by it, or by the things I threw at her. She couldn’t fly past my shields though. The way she was coming at us, I get the feeling that she’d have no issues hitting us though.” Taylor spoke softly. “That’s of course on top of the fucking Lightning. And whatever that scream was. It felt like she was digging into my head.”

Victoria nodded quietly and glanced back at Myrddin and her Aunt, watching them conferring quietly and touching their communicators. When the pair moved off, Victoria sighed and stared around at the cooling bodies of the Merchants. She frowned as she briefly considered checking on them.

“They’re dead. I’d feel if they were alive.” Taylor’s voice was deceptively calm, but something about the set of her face, the way her shoulders were just a bit too high told Victoria that it bothered her that someone had done this much killing to get at her. Victoria frowned as she glanced at Taylor. She watched the girl stared at each body as if committing their faces to memory.

---

The adrenalin had long since worn off, and Victoria felt all of her many aches. The weight against her side wasn’t making anything better, but she couldn’t find it in herself to dislodge the burned, scorched and exhausted girl that was using her shoulder as a pillow. Victoria consoled herself with the thought that she would eventually use this as blackmail to get some healing out of Taylor. She considered Taylor’s outfit quietly, noting the scorches and the burns, frowning as she looked at her seemingly untouched outfit.

She briefly wondered just what Sabah had done to this outfit; it was far heavier then it should have been. Furthermore, somehow it’d kept her from taking the worst of damage from the lightning the cape had used. She’d gotten minor burns to much of her body from heat, but none of the actual electricity had passed through her body. With a sigh, she considered finding a suitably thankful gift for the Tailor. She’d probably saved her life with the suit, according to Taylor.

When the girl in question shifted sleepily against her shoulder and muttered something about there being a schedule to who got the Armsmaster pyjama’s, Victoria found herself smiling at the younger girl, shaking her head. Eventually, Taylor settled, and Victoria glanced back up at the door to the conference room. She and Taylor had already had their turns before Piggot, Armsmaster and Miss Militia giving their reports. When the door opened and disgorged Vista and Gallant, the latter carrying his helmet under his arm. Both young capes paused in the doorway to study them, and Victoria found her cheeks darkening at the strange look that Dean gave her.

Rather than glancing away, Victoria returned his look with one of Taylor’s stony expressions. The face-off lasted for a minute before Dean sighed and muttered something about texting her before striding off. Victoria ignored the strange look that Vista offered her as she quickly stalked off in the empath’s wake. If Vista wanted him that badly, Victoria wished her luck, it was just what Dean deserved. When the door opened again, she glanced up to see her Aunt emerging. The woman stopped and snorted at the pair before moving to draw her phone from her pouch.
“Sarah, come on!” Victoria cried, her face no doubt a mess of bruises and burns, but the woman merely moved to line up the shot.

“It’s her first Post Mission pass out; we have to document it.” Victoria sighed, and glanced down at Taylor, waiting for the tell-tale flash. She glanced at her Aunt as if to say ‘Finished?’ and when the woman put her phone away, Victoria gently nudged Taylor.

“Taylor. C’mon. Unless you want to spend the evening sleeping on a bench in the PRT offices, we should get you home.” Victoria snorted when the other girl gripped her arm and asked for five more minutes. “You’ll be able to sleep plenty once you’re home. C’mon. Up and at them champ.” There was a whiny groan, but Taylor slowly wobbled away from Victoria, sitting up and swaying in place as she rubbed tiredly at one eye.

“Why’re you both in my bedroom?” The sleepy question came, and Victoria laughed as Sarah glanced around.

“What a fascinating and long bedroom you have Taylor.” Tayor, confused, glanced around at the empty hallways and frowned.

“Where...oh.” She grunted wearing and slipped to her feet. Victoria glanced at the girl as she glanced around in confusion and she slid to her feet.

“I’m gonna take her home.” She commented faintly, glancing at her Aunt. She watched her Aunt consider arguing, saw the look in her eyes as her forehead creased. She was surprised when after a moment the woman just waved a hand.

“Everyone else has already headed home. Try to fly safely?” Victoria grinned and nodded before trailing after Taylor who’d begun to wander sleepily toward the exit. She caught up with the girl, following her. Taylor continued the zombie march until she reached the doors. When she strode out, the wave of cold Atlantic air slamming into her face suddenly startled her awake.

Victoria loomed back, watching as Taylor came to a stop in the parking lot and looked around. She sidled up as the girl stared around in confusion and felt her lips curling into a smirk.

“Looking for your lift? Cause I’m right here.” Taylor seemed to perk up and glanced at her before snorting tiredly.

“You’re just as exhausted as I am, dude. If you drop me, I’m gonna be pretty upset.” Despite the words, Taylor stepped closer, and Victoria easily hefted the taller girl into her arms. Lifting off gently, Victoria glanced around as the buildings quickly shrank away below them. She felt Taylor’s arms looping around her neck as they got high enough that even Taylor would be in trouble if she fell.

Victoria could have had them at Taylor’s house in fifteen minutes, but she moved lazily, drifting up high enough that they were level with some of the sky-scrapers toward downtown, even if they were a fair distance from them. She allowed the wind to carry them westward, watching the lights drifting below them as the burned out factories turned into houses and residential neighbourhoods.

Neither cape spoke, but the silence was companionable enough, and Victoria kept an eye on Taylor to make sure that she didn’t drift off again midflight. She knew from personal experience that waking up in freefall was a pretty shitty way to end a nap. When Taylor’s house came into view, she drifted
down, landing in the small backyard to preserve some of Taylor’s privacy, gently setting the other
girl down.

“So. Thinking about giving up Caping yet?” Victoria’s voice was laced with teasing, but she was
genuinely curious. She smiled when Taylor merely looked at her and rolled her eyes.

“Who have you ever heard refer to it as ‘Caping.”’ The air quotes were a bit much, but Victoria
shrugged her shoulders. After a moment Taylor’s smile dropped away, and she shook her head.
“Honestly? No. I… I’ve got this power, and I couldn’t stand to see other people suffering.” The girl
moved over and opened the door. She paused in the entryway and glanced at Victoria.

Victoria shifted in place, considering the invitation. Truthfully she wasn’t in the mood to go home
just yet, and she slipped in the doorway, following Taylor toward the kitchen. When the light flicked
on in the kitchen, she was surprised to find two wrapped plates on the table, and she glanced at
Taylor who offered a shrug. Unwrapping the dishes saw some meatloaf and potatoes on each plate, a
fair sized portion for each of them. Victoria took a seat and watched as Taylor, apparently not
looking a gift horse in the mouth, scooped up the plates, and placed one in the microwave to warm it,
handing it to Victoria once it was done. When she had heated her own plate up, Taylor joined
Victoria at the table, handing over a bottle of water.

“What about you?” The question startled Victoria who’d been picking at the food. She considered
the plate quietly for a few moments before shifting over and taking a seat closer to Taylor. She drew
out her phone, removed her headphones and offered a bud to Taylor. She watched the girl’s reaction
as the music began to play and When Taylor nodded understandingly at her, she felt herself smiling
as she turned her attention back to the food, eating it quietly and letting the warmth of the home
surround her.

---

[[ Danny’s such a Dad. I’ve not written him much but he’s got a whole bunch chapters coming
up soonish, and I sorta enjoy like, playing with other characters. =]) Also, Kids fighting in battles
where people die can be rough. The song that Victoria listens to with Taylor isn’t; this, but it’s
similar in theme, and style, and is basically it. =]) Also, the inspiration for Mysterydoodordoodette’s
Breaker state is uh. Malthael from Diablo. Sort of.]]
Sarah hummed faintly as she idly tapped her pen against the table, listening with half an ear to the report from Triumph.

“...as we can tell. The actual fighting has dimmed as most of the gangs pull back their assets and defend them more fiercely. Lung’s efforts have redrawn much of the borders, and the ABB picked up quite a bit of territory. The Merchants appear to have been subsumed entirely. The ABB got most of the freed up territory, but small patches were taken by the Empire as well as they sensed weakness.” The young man adjusted his Lion helmet, frowning. “As of yet we’ve seen no signs of any of the Merchant’s Capes, they all vanished at some point, and the Gang itself has been falling before the more organized ABB, and the Cape-heavy Empire.”

“Everyone seems to be playing by Lung’s rules for the moment, and they’re excluding civilians from their fighting unless we interfere. Every time that we try to break up a fight, the civilian casualties skyrocket. I’m honestly surprised that the news hasn’t been reporting on it. Mostly we have to deal with rumours. When it gets out, the public will tear us apart.” The figure in golden armour smoothly tapped his polished nails on the wooden table, his lips curled into a worried frown.

“That will not be a concern.” Sarah blinked, glancing over at Myrrdin, watching the robed man as he shifted forward. When other eyes settled on him, he glanced at Piggot who nodded at him. “Watchdog is here to do more than find the bomb and disarm it; they’re also on hand to keep the news from getting out. Almost a half dozen thinkers are sitting on important executives around the united states ensuring that the news affiliates aren’t running constant updates on the Brockton Bay situation. Part of that is keeping the news here focused on other things.”

Sarah found herself frowning at the idea, wondering how many times the PRT had used this particular discretionary power in the past. “That can’t work on everyone.” Lady Photon, found herself saying and she blinked when Myrrdin merely chuckled.

“It doesn’t, those that go around us do report the situation, but the silence from the major news outlets soon silences them, and the people go back to worrying which celebrity is sleeping with which.” The cape rested his elbows on the table, resting his beard on the laced fingers, seemingly staring across the table at her. “Most people, if given a choice, would rather not worry about the possibility of someone getting a lucky shot here, and putting half of North America back to the stone-age.”
The words hung in the air and eventually, Piggot coughed quietly, drawing everyone’s attention and changing the subject.

“Yes, well. Last night, there was a bit of a disturbance.” The director crossed her arms on the table and glanced at Lady Photon. “Perhaps Lady Photon can lead this report since she was there?” Sarah shifted quietly and then moved out of her seat, swapping places with Triumph, taking a seat at the head of the table. When all the eyes settled on her, she crossed her arms quietly.

“As most of you know, the Wards and the second generation of New Wave both were patrolling the Boardwalk after the Director’s speech at the Boardwalk’s Reopening. Vigil and Glory Girl were patrolling toward the southern end of the boardwalk when they saw…” She paused, blinking when the Director held up a hand. She glanced at the others before nodding at the woman.

“From what I understood, Vigil and Vista were to patrol together in the center of the docks, and Gallant and Glory Girl were to patrol the south.” The words were curious, and Sarah blinked when Miss Militia chimed in.

“There was a falling out between Glory Girl and Gallant. Tensions were running high, and she ended up politely requesting to switch partners. Vigil offered to switch with Gallant, and Vista agreed. I said that it was fine, focusing on improving the team’s synergy, rather than forcing the pair to work together.” Sarah blinked, rubbing at her forehead. She could guess what this was about and she hoped that her niece hadn’t done anything crazy this time. Piggot seemed to consider for a moment before gesturing at Sarah and nodding for her to continue.

“They’d reached the end of the boardwalk, and when they were about to turn back, Vigil sensed something with her powers.” She watched as several people perked up at this, though most people reacted oddly when Taylor ended up displaying another power. “Near as she could tell, she could sense someone using lightning a short distance away. As she was trying to figure out where it was coming from, Glory Girl caught sight of the visual effect and took off.” Sarah frowned and adjusted the folder before her, carefully checking the pages.

“Glory Girl arrived first and found a Parahuman and several bodies, Merchants apparently. She assumed that the Parahuman, who we’ve taken to referring to as ‘Reach’ since they’ve donned the name, had killed the gangsters.” The woman frowned when one of the others coughed. She glanced up, and found Battery was staring at her with an odd expression. She waved a hand inviting the woman to speak.

“That’s concerning, isn’t it? This cape, Reach or whatever, seems to be escalating. From the hate crime earlier this week to outright murder now. It doesn’t bode well for the direction that this cape is going.” She glanced off to the side at Assault who’d offer a nod in agreement.

“We believe the assault was provoked. After a fashion.” The voice came from one side, and Sarah glanced over finding a young woman with long black hair standing at Myrrdin’s shoulder. She was dressed in an almost casual black outfit, with a lab-coat over it; her hair pulled back into pig-tails. She stood quietly by the cape holding a folder in her arms. “We examined the bodies found at the scene. Nine of the bodies were downed by lightning, and we’re fairly certain from their tattoos and drug use that they were merchants. The other two bodies were not.”

“What do you mean?” Sarah spoke slowly, frowning as she studied the grim-faced young woman. After a few moments, the woman casually opened the folder and reviewed the papers.

“Two of the bodies found at the scene weren’t merchants. There were no signs of drug use on them, and no tattoos. They were also fairly young. We haven’t IDed them yet, but one was probably barely past eighteen, and the other was closer to twenty. They weren’t electrocuted, near as I can tell they
were kicked and stomped to death. If I had to wager a guess, I’m assuming that this cape of yours found the Merchants kicking these two to death, or standing around after.” The woman’s pale features curled with a mixture of distaste and understanding. She glanced at the cloaked figure who’d nod up at her.

“Thank you, Abby. Considering what happened, and it’s more understandable that they might escalate. Most of the crimes that they’ve interfered in up till now were petty crimes, and they’ve been seen as overly harsh. Stepping up the crimes they interrupt, might step up their response. Them being a Breaker makes things more complicated. Breaker powers tend to affect the self-control of the Parahumans that have them.” Myrrdin’s voice was soft, and Sarah glanced at the others seeing them nodding. When the conversation drifted to a halt, she continued.

“Glory Girl arrives and sees this cape burning ‘Reach’ into the wall, and she descends to confront them.” When she saw the others moving to speak she held up a hand. “Yes, she’d done so against Console’s direct orders, and she will be getting spoken with for this later. Upon speaking with ‘Reach,’ the other cape immediately turned on her and attacked.”

“Were they provoked? Glory Girl can be a bit temerarious.” The voice was amused, and Sarah glanced over at Armsmaster quietly. Part of her wanted to be offended, but she merely shook her head.

“I imagine that as they were attempting to frame Vigil, she might have done so if given a chance, but she barely had time to utter a sentence before the cape attacked with their lightning. They used it to pin her to a wall for a minute or two…” The confused hum from ‘Abby’ startled her, and she glanced over.

“You said she was attacked and held under the effect for minutes? Near as we can tell that lightning attack that they use is extremely lethal. The victims that they didn’t kill were probably held under the effect for less than ten seconds; we figure it’s lethal once contact passes thirty seconds considering the likey voltage and its curious effect on nerves. How did she survive?” Sarah was tempted to attribute Glory Girl’s survival to her shield, but considering that troopers might be facing off against this cape, she was more forthright.

“Glory Girl’s new uniform was crafted for her by a friend, and they wove a faraday lining into it. Considering Vigil’s potential powerset, something to keep her from getting electrocuted was seen as helpful.” The woman seemed to nod at the comment, quietly thinking things over in her head. Sarah shifted back into place back resuming her narration.

“This is when Vigil arrives.” She taps a button and an image from a button cam on Vigil’s uniform showed the cape holding Victoria against the wall with energy. She clicked through images, watching as Victoria drops and Taylor sneaks up on the cape and separates them.

“Is that?” Assault speaks up suddenly, and Sarah glances at him, but it’s Piggot that speaks up.

“No. Shadow Stalker was with her team in Austin last night, her mentor there was with her training well past when this started. There’s no way. She claims to have no idea who this is.”

“Vigil assumed the cape was a blaster and attempted to put them down, and then they revealed the breaker state.” The image flicked to the blurry image of the hovering form. “From what Vigil observed, the Breaker state is semi-intangible, since she couldn’t attack it, but it attempted to attack her physically. It also proved unable to pass through energy fields. They seem to have access to their blaster power in and out of the breaker state, and when in breaker state, their movement is significantly increased.” She nodded over toward the other cape and Myrrdin chimed in.
“When we arrived, they loosed an explosive attack, and as I was distracted keeping Lady Photon in
the air, they shot off toward downtown. They had vanished around the buildings at the edge of
downtown within a minute or two. They were doing at least sixty miles per hour.” He glanced at
Sarah. “There was an auditory effect to, some sort of wail or scream,”

“Near as we can tell, the breaker state is invariably accompanied by a disorientating screaming. The
success of this aspect is limited, and it’s entirely auditory, not a psychic progression like Simurgh.”
The looks of relief were mixed with curious looks. She waved a hand as she explained. “Most of us
managed to get around it. Glory Girl’s shields and mine both lessened the effect; Gallant bypassed it
entirely by shutting off his audio feeds. Vista was disabled, and Vigil managed to force herself
through it by sheer force of will. The effect isn’t perfect, but it could be devastating in battle.” When
no one commented, she moved on.

“Vigil managed to hold her off until back up arrived, though it was a close thing when Vista and
Gallant arrived too close to the battle.” Several images from Gallant’s armour showed them arriving,
Vista’s form slumping to one side and Taylor leaping between the cape and them and catching the
lightning she tossed. She flicked through the rest of the images. “Gallant managed to hit them with a
blast and the fear it engendered convinced the cape to back off when myself and Myrrdin arrived.”
She didn’t elaborate on Taylor’s reaction to Gallant’s attack and no one pressed. She carefully waited
for any responses, but everyone seemed to be mulling it over. Eventually, Piggot chimed in once
more.

“Alright, now onto everyone’s favourite part of the meeting, Budgetary reports. So…”

Sarah rubbed at her head when she finally escaped from that room. Some of them had hoped that
Piggot’s improved health would improve her disposition; the woman had proved them all wrong by
being over more hard-assed and exacting. Even Sarah dreaded those meetings, and she was currently
the most budgetary conscious department in the ENE considering the reduced wages most of New
Wave got. With a sigh, she saw Miss Militia emerging from the conference room, and she
straightened up.

“Lady Photon. I’ve been informed that the Wards and New Wave are awaiting our arrival at the
Ward’s conference room. Shall we?” Sarah shifted into a more professional pose, nodding casually
and gestured the other woman on. She followed in the taller woman’s wake, letting her lead them
toward the elevator and down. The ride was silent, but Sarah imagined that Miss Militia was mostly
enjoying the calm before the storm.

When they reached the oak door that concealed the Wards conference room, they opened it. Miss
Militia entered first, and Sarah followed her in. The leader of New Wave frowned at the palpable
tension in the small conference. Sarah found herself quite suddenly struck by the idea of how
difficult integrating the two teams would be as she stared at the way they’d arrayed themselves in the
room. Along the left side of the table, the Wards all sat in full costume. Closest to her and Miss
Militia near the head of the table was Kid Win, with Clockblocker on his other side, Browbeat,
Vista, Gallant and Aegis finishing off that side of the table.

On the opposite side of the table, there was an empty chair for herself, next to which she found Eric,
the boy grinning up at her. Next to him sat Amy, followed by Crystal, Victoria and Taylor who sat
opposite Aegis. All of the members of New Wave were in their civilian clothes, Taylor sporting a
rather formal suit with a jacket that was a fair match to the figure who sat at the far end of the table.
The odd figure was reclined in her chair; her violet pant-suit was a bit ruffled as she was ‘off the clock’ and she seemed to be watching both sides waiting to see if the tension would erupt into outright conflict.

Waiting until Miss Militia sat at the head of the table, Sarah took a seat in the chair and glanced around at the room. She watched everyone staring at each other before all eyes drifted up to Miss Militia when she coughed faintly.

“Wards. New Wave. We’re here to discuss the altercation that happened last night. Last night on their patrol, Glory Girl and Vigil encountered a new cape, upon interacting with the cape a battle broke out. Mistakes were made all around.” The sound of movement drew her attention, and she glanced down the table to see Victoria sitting up, but Taylor’s hand on her arm stilled her. Victoria tilted her head when Taylor muttered something, and then she lowered herself petulantly back into place. When Victoria turned her attention back to the head of the table, Miss Militia continued. “Rather than discussing it immediately, we’ll review the footage we have from the camera’s and then speak on it afterwards.” When the leader of the Wards nodded at her, Sarah shifted.

“We’ve got feeds from Vista, Gallant, Myself, and Vigil, so we’ll miss the beginning of the battle, but it’s only a minute or so, I’m told, so we should be okay without it,” Sarah spoke as she slipped from her seat. She quickly logged into the computer by the wall, bringing up the relevant footage and preparing it all to display.

“Why isn’t Glory Girl’s footage up there.” The question came from Clockblocker, and Sarah hummed as she worked. The screen to one side lit up, divided into four squares, one of which showed the edge of a roof. She grabbed the remote and moved back over toward the table.

“A different tailor built Glory Girl's new uniform than we typically use, and we haven’t had a chance to slot in a button cam like the rest of New Wave uses, it’s on the schedule, but she’s had the outfit for barely two days at this point. We’ll start with Vigil’s perspective, and the rest will come in as they line up.” With a glance at the rest, she tapped a button, and the lights dimmed, and the footage began to play.

There was a hiss when the image panned down to show Victoria suspended by energy and shrieking in pain, though there was no sound from the footage. Everyone watched with rapt focus as the view dropped to show Taylor sneaking up on the figure. Victoria's efforts to distract the cape and Taylor’s strike received an amused chuckle from Clockblocker, though he stilled when the figure stood up.

“Is...Is that. Shadow Stalker?” Sarah frowned when Clockblocker glanced at Taylor, every other ward quickly doing the same after a moment. It wasn’t one of them that chimed in; it was Tattletale that did.

“No.” Everyone stared at her startled, and she rolled her eyes. She slid to her feet and walked over, holding out a hand for the remote. When Sarah offered it out, she fiddled with it, spreading Taylor’s view to the whole screen and zooming in on the figure.

“Look here. The underclothes look like BDU’s but they’re not, costume pieces I think. This ‘Tactical Webbing’ is modified climbing gear. The cloak is the wrong colour, and that mask is very different. Shadow Stalker's was more stern, condescending. This one is almost serene. Zen. It’s an imposter.” She frowned as she backed up.

“Shadow Stalker is in Austin. She was verified to be there. Though they’re considering changing her name, considering how suspicious it’d be for her civilian identity.” The woman spoke casually, and Sarah watched the Wards relaxing with a suspicious look in her eye. As she glanced down the table, she saw more than one matching look on the New Wave side.
“The powers were similar but different.” Gallant’s voice drew her attention, and she studied the armoured figure. She nodded at TattleTale, and the girl smoothlyducked back, resuming the footage casually, tapping something that made the three black feeds return but shrunk down, the view from Taylor still holding most of the space.

Everyone winced when Taylor reacted to the cape turning and running by snagging them with telekinesis and slamming them into the ground. When she walked around and tried to speak with them, everyone gasped as the figure seemed to explode, Taylor’s view showing the sky for a moment until she got her feet back under her.

“The breaker state is different.” It was Kid Win who spoke. “Shadow Stalker never transformed, just became intangible; this one is a full transformation.” They discussed the footage as it pushed on, the Wards chiming in with questions as it came along. When Vista appeared with Gallant in tow, their feeds suddenly lit up and expanded to join Taylor’s on the screen. The Wards watched Taylor leaping in to block them.

Taylor’s view showed clawed hands in front of her catching the bolts of lightning, a few flicking off here and there, Vista’s view of her knees wasn’t useful. Dean’s view was fascinating as he remained close behind Taylor, leaning out once and nearly taking a bolt to the face before ducking back. He tried once more before dancing back. Gallant’s gaze focused on Taylor’s back, watching her form tensing and shaking.

The armoured hand came into his view, moving to focus on the right side of Taylor’s back, a dull glowing forming around it. Several people glanced at Gallant who remained stoically watching the screen. Everyone frowned when he shifted his arm to the side, her whole body leaning over and an arc of energy lanced out toward his view, and he released a blast of light before diving out of the way of the spark, energy washing over Taylor’s shoulder and causing her shield to flare, before flying forward toward the floating cape.

The light smashed into and through the intangible spirit doing no physical damage, but the image seemed to slacken and shrink back, glancing around suddenly. When the cape spun and stared upwards, Gallant’s view followed her, seeing Myrrdin and Lady Photon streaking down toward them. The cape seemed to revolve in place before her form clenched up into a ball and then a wave of violet crackling light exploded outwards, each view going dark when the light slammed into it, though Gallant’s picture showed the sky for a moment as he was tossed arse over tea-kettle.

As the feeds wound to a stop, the lights came back up, and the entire room sat in eerie silence, everyone glancing from Taylor to Gallant and back. Aegis was the one to break the silence, turning to Gallant and speaking seriously.

“Gallant… What were you thinking?” His voice was low and filled with concern. And, like that the floodgates spilled open. Eric and Crystal surged to their feet, their expressions hard. Victoria joined them a moment later. Amy remained in place, her expression shell-shocked. Everyone tried speaking over each other, though nothing intelligible made it out. Sarah and Miss Militia glanced at each other, preparing to cut in over the teenagers but someone beat them to it.

“He thought that if I fell, we’d all be dead.” Taylor’s voice cut over the tumult. The girl’s face was paler than normal, her eyes rimmed in dark shadows. Her words were quiet, and she stared quietly at Gallant. She ignored the dark look that Victoria was giving her. “I was barely keeping that lightning at bay, and it was starting to overcome my shield. We didn’t exactly have a lot of time on our hands. Someone had to do something, and no one else was in a position to do much. I rely on my telekinesis too much, and Victoria was having trouble getting to her feet. He made a judgement call, and he was right.” Taylor spoke quietly and nodded at Gallant.
“I. Yes. That was it basically.” The boy’s voice was filled with nervousness, and he glanced around before staring back at Taylor. “I am sorry that it affected you like that. My powers don’t typically cause such strong reactions, and I tried to keep from hitting you, but I was aware that there was a risk.” His voice shifted to hold a tone of regret and Taylor nodded quietly.

“I understand. It’s a hard choice, but you made the right one.” She jumped, all of them did when Victoria’s hands slammed on the table.

“Bullshit.” Her voice was short and filled with irritation. She shoved her chair back with a screech and stood. “That is fucking bullshit. Just because Taylor doesn’t give a rats ass about keeping her skin intact, doesn’t mean that I don’t, Gallant. You don’t fucking shoot your attacks through or near to fucking allies. That’s a dangerous fucking precedent to set. Aegis doesn’t feel pain, does that mean we can shoot holes through him with Kid Win’s lasers to down villains. They’d never fucking see it coming.” Victoria was glaring at Gallant from across the table. Clockblocker shifted in place before chiming in with a half-hearted joke.

“I mean. Are we going to take advice on limiting collateral damage from-” Then the time-stopper stopped talking as Eric and Crystal both pointed at him, their fingers tips glowing with blue and red lights. Swallowing nervously, Kid Win slowly edged his chair away from the time stopper. Vista glanced between Clock and Gallant before strumming up her courage and moving to speak.

“He saved your life too, Glory Girl, he didn’t just do it to save his skin, sometimes the needs of the many-” She cut off suddenly when Victoria turned and moved as if to lunge, though Victoria didn’t even make an inch before she froze in place.

“Enough.” Taylor’s voice was low and firm. She glanced at the others, staring at Eric and Crystal who were half out of their seats. “Everyone sit back down.” Taylor sat there, glaring at everyone on their side of the table until they all resumed their seats and she watched them all quietly.

“This isn’t about us. We’re here to protect the city, and that means that we need all the help we can get.” Sarah watched the girl, something dark in her eyes as she watched them all. “He’s apologized, and I’ve forgiven him. Even if he’d actually hurt me, it’d have been worth it to save the rest of you.” She said this, but her eyes remained on Victoria before she turned back to the table. “If you can work with Tattletale, Glory Girl, then you can tolerate the rest of the Wards. We don’t have to like each other, but we’ll god-damned well respect each other.”

Sarah watched as Taylor glanced over at Aegis. The leader of the Wards glanced down his side of the table. Every one of the Wards nodded quickly at Aegis’ look before he turned and nodded quietly back at Taylor. She let out a soft sigh and then shifted back into her chair. The peace was tentative and tense, but at least the brewing brawl had been averted.

"That is a sentiment that I can certainly appreciate, Vigil.” The words startled Sarah, and she glanced over, staring quietly at Miss Militia who’d leaned forward. “I appreciate that you’re willing to work with us, and I appreciate your understanding in this situation. That being said, I cannot, in good conscience allow this to pass. The Protectorate has rules about these kinds of things for a reason.” The flag-wearing cape stared at Gallant quietly.

“Gallant you’re off the active duty roster effective immediately. Expect an updated time-table in the next few days that’ll cover your new training regimen. It should never have even occurred to you to let someone else take the hit so you could make the shot, whether they were a Cape or not.” Miss Militia glanced quietly from one side of the table to the other. “You’re heroes, not soldiers. That means that no one gets left behind. No one gets sacrificed.” Sarah frowned at the intense look in Miss Militia’s eye, wondering what she was thinking of as she said those lines.
“Joint Patrols will continue.” Sarah cut in, glancing at Miss Militia who nodded. “We’ll begin rotating partners out. You all need to get used to working with each other. As Vigil said, you don’t have to like each other, but you’re all here for the same reason. I’d personally prefer it if I never had to see you all preparing to battle like that again. Understood?” She stared at everyone, getting weak nods from them all.

When she glanced at Taylor, she found the dark-haired girl in a hushed conversation with Victoria, the blonde seeming rather upset by whatever Taylor was saying. Neither of the pair ended up contributing much to the conversation on patrol routes and their observations from their patrol, and when the meeting ended they were the first two out of the room, Victoria hot on Taylor's tail.

---

“I enjoyed this meeting. I’ve been feeling homesick, and this heaping helping of bitter tension and thinly concealed distaste was just what the doctor ordered.” Tattletales' voice was grating on Sarah, but she nodded at the girl before watching her leave. Most of the kids had vacated the conference room as soon as the meeting had ended, and Sarah had found herself chatting quickly with Miss Militia and Tattletale about the cape.

The Thinker seemed to believe that the cape had been brought in to discredit the PRT’s recovering criminal, to make them look bad, hence the terrible impersonation, but when she’d been transferred suddenly whoever was backing her had been forced to improvise. Sarah had found the idea fascinating, but they’d need more evidence to prove the theory one way or the other. When Miss Militia excused herself and walked over to speak with Clockblocker, Sarah found herself exiting the room and looking for her team-mates.

Rounding a corner, she paused at the sound of Crystal laughing. She paused and watched, seeing Crystal and Eric sitting on a planter in the small lobby by the elevator, Kid Win standing next to them and gesturing wildly with his hands.

“And then Clock goes. I can totally pilot that board, Win, I’ve got like, instincts for it! My parents are from California, and surfing is in my genes. Lemme try.” The masked kid shook his head. “Long story short, it took us nearly an hour to climb up the side of that building to get my board back, and we all swore an oath that no one would ever know that we were the Billboard Bandits.”

Sarah found herself chuckling, and all three glanced over at her. She ignored the nervous babbling from the poor tinker, glancing at Crystal when the blond gestured to one side with her eyes. Moving over toward the side corridor that her daughter had indicated, she was surprised to find Amy lurking nervously in the shadows. When she sidled up to her niece, she found out why almost immediately.

“...I care, Taylor?” Victoria’s voice wasn’t screaming, but it was certainly raised, and there seemed to be quite the fight going on. Sarah stood next to Amy, listening in quietly. Taylor’s voice was indistinct, hard to hear, only Victoria’s harsher replies carrying. “Because you’re not fine Taylor. You were up with nightmares every god-damned twenty minutes last night, and yes, I could hear you, even in the guest room. I don’t know what exactly he did when he hit you with that blast, but it was significantly worse than ‘a bit of a panic.’” Sarah frowned softly and glanced over at Amy, the girl offering a shrug. Amy was frowning as well, but part of Sarah was convinced that it was for a different reason.
Making up her mind, Sarah moved over, opening the door, the sound of Taylor’s wearing voice growing louder as it slid open. “...wasn’t Gallant’s fault, Victoria. That was part of my powers reacting to his. He had no way of knowing that, and despite what you think of him, he was doing what he could to save your life. To me, that means it was worth it.” Taylor’s voice was resolute, and Sarah peered in to see a furious expression on Victoria’s face. Her niece stood silently, clenching her fists and shaking slightly.

“If you want to kill yourself, Taylor.” Her voice was halting and filled with a mixture of anger and sadness. “Don’t go mixing me up into it. I have far too much shit to make up for already.” Her voice had dropped, bitter sadness replacing the anger. Sarah shifted when Victoria rounded on her, but the girl didn’t say anything, merely moving past her and headed out the door. Amy’s startled squeak showed that the girl hadn’t stopped. She casually slipped over toward Taylor, moving to take a seat next to her.

“Times like these remind me that Victoria is certainly her mother’s daughter.” The words startled her and Taylor jerked up out of her misery, glancing over and finding Sarah sat next to her. Taylor frowned at the woman, one hand lifting and rubbing tiredly at her eyes. When she didn’t respond, Sarah clearly took it as an invitation to continue. “Carol’s always had an issue with fear. Never really learned to handle it well. She doesn’t like to be scared and often she’d let other emotions cloud it over. Anger’s always the first step.” The woman hummed and Taylor frowned at her linked hands.

“She doesn’t need to be afraid. I’m going to get better. I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to counter that cape, but their powers seemed to be a direct counter to my own. I’ll... I’ll figure something out. That’s why I’m glad that Gallant was there to help, even if it wasn’t...pleasant for me.” Her voice was faint, Taylor knew, but she was startled when Sarah snorted in her direction.

“She wasn’t scared of that cape Taylor. Victoria’s been in fights like this since she was fourteen, this isn’t the first rough battle that she’s had. She’s terrified cause you nearly died. You put yourself between that maniac and every other hero present, and when you took a hit, you just brushed it off like it didn’t matter. You told her that it was fine because she was safe. Do you have any idea how terrifying that is? Near as I can tell, this last week you’re the only thing that’s kept Victoria from spiralling off the deep end. You’re the only friend that she has that doesn’t seem to care what she brings to them, and you don’t seem to care about keeping yourself going.” Sarah spoke, and Taylor frowned quietly, rubbing at her face as she considered the words. She considered quoting the Jedi code to her, telling her about the duties she had, duties her powers gave her. Something flickering in the corner of her eye startled her, and she glanced up, seeing Jolee standing there.

The figure moved closer, crouching down and Taylor followed his gaze, looking to all the world like she was staring at the floor in thought. Jolee watched her quietly for a few moments before speaking softly.

“You remind me of what I always saw reflected in the pools of water on Kashyyyk, Taylor. You’re the first person I’ve met that was as stubbornly against having people care about them as I was. Just because we’re Jedi doesn’t mean that we’re not people, we still matter. You still matter. You’ve got friends now, as terrifying as that idea is to you. Amy, Crystal and Eric were all ready to jump in to defend you in that room, to defend Victoria. That girl is like a lion at your side.” Taylor chuckled softly and rubbed her face. “You earned her loyalty and friendship, and you act like she shouldn’t care about you in turn? That’s ridiculous.”
Taylor glanced over and saw Sarah watching her curiously. She rubbed tiredly at her face and frowned a bit. She moved to speak, her words drifting over Jolee and Sarah both.

“For a long time, someone spent every minute trying to tell me that I wasn’t worth the effort they’d put into me. To make me believe that I deserved every terrible thing she did to me, and to make everyone else believe that I didn’t deserve friendship. She convinced all of them, and I think I’m coming to realize that she convinced me too. For the last two months, I’ve been… shocked. Amazed that everything was going so well, but I was also terrified that it’d all end again.” Taylor paused, taking a shuddering breath as she tucked her hands together between her knees.

“Every person that’s been kind to me since I was fourteen turned on me, eventually. And I started to expect it. And, I think a small part of me worries that the only reason that it hasn’t happened yet is that I’m useful.” Taylor’s voice was small as she stared at her hands, not seeing anyone else anymore. “I can be a force for good, and people would have to respect me then. I always tell myself that I’m caring and I can help people. Or that I’m smart and I can solve problems. I’m strong, and I can stand between you and the terrible things that are coming. Things like that’ll make them keep me around, but if I fail…” The words were softly whispered, and Taylor felt something cool on her hand. She lifted it, feeling the tears trickling off of it. “If I fail… What good am I anymore? Who’ll want me then.” Taylor’s voice trailed off in a whisper, and she kept her eyes on her hands, not daring to look up at either of the figures in the room. The silence dragged on heavy and solemn for a few moments.

“You’re such an idiot.” The words were gentle and laced with sadness, but they didn’t come from Jolee or Sarah. She heard the sounds of soft steps slipping up behind her and arms wrapped around her from behind, hugging her quietly. Blonde hair falling over her shoulder soothed Taylor’s frayed nerves, and the girl felt the arms sliding around her middle as Victoria clung to her back. When Victoria began to shake softly, and Taylor felt the warmth on the back of her neck, she shifted in place, her form starting to shake as well. Hot tears were burning their way from her eyes as she leaned back into the other girl. The sound of Sarah standing and slipping away was lost amongst the surfeit of emotions.

“I’m sorry.” Taylor’s words were soft, and she sniffled quietly when all they accomplished was making the girl hug her more tightly.

Chapter End Notes

[[So they were totally supposed to go to heal those kids in the hospital this chapter. The story kind of got away from me. >_<. NEXT TIME I GUESS. ALSO, I THREW IN A REFERENCE. But it’s not a crossover. Cause, one crossover is enough. I might throw in more references. Cause I’m a dork.

ALSO, Someone should write an omake about the Billboard Bandits. Cause that’s hilarious.]]
Chapter Summary

[[So in the initial docs for this arc, the hospital scene was supposed to be part of 4.4, and 4.5 literally said; ‘Something, Something, Amy and Vicki talk. Grump!Taylor.’ So uh. =] I’ve basically merged these concepts and shuffled things. LEMME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK. For those of you hoping for more detail on the Taylor bullying shit, well there’s more hints abound. =] ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 11th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

As the car came to a stop at the red light, Taylor felt Ralph’s eyes on her, and she glanced over at the PRT trooper. When he raised an eyebrow, Taylor shrugged up her shoulders before glancing back toward the back seat, taking in Amy and Victoria sitting as far as possible from each other as they could, each girl staring resolutely out their windows at the pedestrians to either side.

Part of Taylor wished that she’d just gone home after the disaster of the meeting, but they’d put this off too long already and she didn’t want to have to scour the city to find these kids to heal them. Initially, the plan had been to have Victoria fly her to the hospital, but when Amy had heard what they were going to do, she’d invited herself along, which had meant that Taylor had had to ask Ralph to give them a lift, which was how they found themselves currently in the most awkward car ride ever.

Taylor felt the headache she’d been fighting off since that stupid meeting creeping back up on her once more, and she shifted over, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against the window. She let the cold material soothe the burning on her forehead for a few moments before she cracked her eyes open, staring out at the dreary overcast sky, ignoring the people as the car moved on once more.

So lost in her thoughts was she, that it took Ralph gently nudging her to jostle her into realizing that they’d arrived. Taylor glanced around at the dark parking garage, wondering how she’d missed the loss of light on their descent. Flashing a smile at Ralph, she ignored his concerned look and thanked him for the ride. She hopped out of the car and tightened her jacket around her shoulders, turning to stare at Victoria and Amy who were both staring at her strangely.

Taylor and Amy conferred over the files. Taylor was shocked to realize that at nineteen and twenty,
both of the ‘boys’ were actually older than her. The younger of the two had been more severely injured taking quite a few bruises and a great deal of nerve damage from the lightning. The older boy, Warren, had merely been shocked into unconsciousness. Amy had briefly attempted to take the more injured victim, but something in Taylor drew her to that file, and she’d requested that Amy handle the other.

They rode the Elevator up to the recovery ward together, but when they separated at the nurse's station. Taylor watched Amy as she walked off accompanied by a nurse, frowning for a moment when Victoria remained at her side, watching her. After a moment a black nurse came around the counter holding a file, and she quickly lead Victoria and Taylor down a different hall, watching the doors. In the end, she didn’t need a number to find the room she was looking for, a woman standing and facing them revealed it.

Long blonde hair framed the woman’s face, and sharp blue eyes locked on Taylors. The healer found her pace slowing as the woman squared up between them and the room, her form intimidating even though both Victoria and Taylor had at least six to eight inches on the woman in height. When she used one hand to brush aside her coat, and it revealed a badge pinned to her belt, Taylor found herself sighing before closing the distance between them.

“Who are you?” The woman stared at them both, before glancing at the nurse who’d escorted them.

“This is Taylor Hebert. She’s offered to heal William.” The Nurse blinked when the police officer stared at her before raising her hands and heading back the way she came. She glanced at Taylor and Victoria, nodding. “I’ll let your friend know you might be a bit, sugar.” The nurse headed off, and Taylor found the stark blue eyes of the woman on her.


“The message that was left over his body. The PRT is pretty sure it was aimed at discrediting me.” Taylor’s frown grew as the woman stared at her quietly, confusion on her features. “They had taken to referring to me as Reach, on PHO and other press releases, since I hadn’t chosen a name. We’re not sure who’s doing it or why, but I found out about the attack and I dislike the idea that someone hurt someone innocent like that to try to get at me.” The detective seemed to stare at her for a few moments before sighing.

“It’s not really my choice. Will’s an adult; he can decide for himself.” Detective Decker moved up to the door, opening it and letting Taylor in. Taylor blinked when the door closed behind her without admitting Victoria, and she stared at it. The cough from across the room startled her, and Taylor turned to follow the sound. The room reminded her of the one she’d been in herself mere months ago, and she quietly padded over toward the bed.

“William?” When the young man didn’t react to her, she gently called out, pausing when his head whipped over to stare at her. Taylor found herself staring at the bruised kid as he shifted and coughed before speaking with an exhausted rasp.

“It’s Will. Just Will.” He was probably rather attractive typically, with his square chin and the wave brown hair on his head, and his unswollen eye was brown. She found herself studying the man for a few moments before she finally spoke.
“Hey. My name is Taylor Hebert.” The visible fear in his eye sent a lance of pain through her chest and took a single step back. Will stared at her in shock for a few moments before his expression hardened and he spoke with another cough.

“Here to finish the job?” His bruised jaw and split lip muffled the words, but Taylor shook her head, doing her best to stand a bit taller.”

“No. I didn’t attack you. I promise. I… I couldn’t… wouldn’t do that.” The boy stared at her, his one good eye staring at her with an intensity that made Taylor want to curl away. She felt like the kid was trying to peel away her skin with his eyes. She held as firm as she could despite the unwelcome vulnerability it made her feel and after a few moments his face relaxed, and he spread back out.

“No. I guess you wouldn’t.” This time his eye danced up and down over her outfit and then he gestured to a chair that had been set by the bed. Taylor moved it closer and took a seat, staring at the kid. When he moved to speak, she gently cut him off.

“I’m a healer. Would you be willing to let me patch you up? I feel sort of responsible.” She stared at him quietly, and after a few moments, he nodded. Taylor slid closer and reached her hands out, fingers glowing softly as she touched the force. The energy moved slowly, washing over the bruises and vanishing them, slowly repairing all the damage to his body. Only once every last scrape was gone, did she slump tiredly back into her chair rubbing at her eyes.

“...Thanks.” Will spoke, and Taylor glanced at him, seeing him sitting up and rubbing at his jaw with a look of wonder on his features. She watched as he carefully checked each wound he’d had. As she considered the young man, she thought back to the files that she’d read.

“What happened in that Alley? Reach barely attacked your boyfriend, but they beat the crap out of you before zapping you twice.” The words startled the kid, and he frowned. He seemed to consider her for a moment before sighing and rubbing at his cheek.

“He...er, she? They hit me harder because I hit them back.” Taylor’s confusion must have been visible because he moved to explain. “We’d been on a date, Warren and I. We’d gone to a club that Chloe’s f-” He paused frowning at her and Taylor stared back confused until she caught on.

“Oh. Uh. We’re only really supposed to deal with Parahumans; under-age drinking is a bit beyond my remit.” The young man seemed to relax, adjusting his blanket and continuing.

“Well we were at Chloe’s friend’s club, and we had a fun night. We were walking back to campus together since the weather was nice, and we ended up getting into a fight.” Taylor frowned at the comment, and he waved a hand. “Not like that. An argument. We stepped off the street for privacy as we started shouting. Warren’s out, and he…” Taylor blinked as Will quietly picked at the blankets.

“He wanted me to tell my parents about us. We’ve been friends since high school, and they like him despite… everything. But they don’t know about…” The young man paused and rubbed his cheek again. “They didn’t know about us. We got together near the end of senior year and came to College together, and they thought we were just roommates.” At her concerned look, he chuckled self-depreciatingly.

“They’re fine with it, I think. My little sister and Mom are like… disgustingly into it. They’ve sent me half a dozen selfies with… actually here.” He whipped out his phone, swiping around a bit and showing her a selfie being taken by a teenage girl with long straight brown hair and an older brunette.
with curly brown hair. Both were in rainbow shirts, waving flags. The kid swiped and showed another image of both of them hanging off a man with a stern expression, his brown hair cropped short, and his robust muscular frame easily supporting both rainbow clad figures. The tiny rainbow pin on lapel was his only sign of overt support.

“My Dad is pretty shocked, but I think the attack bothers him more than the fact that I’m sleeping with my roommate. That and that I didn’t want to tell him. We used to talk about everything.” Will seemed to shift before shaking his head and continuing.

“So. We were standing in this alley shouting. I was so angry because Warren had acted like it was about me not loving him, and he wouldn’t understand…” He shook his head. “In any case. I’d turned away to walk home alone since he was being so stubborn and wouldn't drop it, but I heard him scream and a thump and I turn back to see this figure in a cloak looming over him.” He clenched his fists quietly.

“I was terrified for Warren and furious, and I like, stepped closer? I remember asking them what they were doing. They asked me what I cared if I wasn’t willing to be true about myself and them and then all I saw was sparks and agony. They must not have hit me as hard though, because a few minutes later I stirred. They were using their hand to burn something into the wall.”

He sat up a bit. “It took me like a minute to get up off the ground, to get back on my feet. I was so angry at them, and I just reacted. I tackled them into a wall, and I hit them several times. I thought that I was winning, but they started to scream, and everything suddenly hurt.” He clenched his fists on his lap quietly and glanced at Taylor, straightening up.

“I couldn’t get my hands on them after that, it was like they were smoke, and they took me apart. It was a blur of fists and kicks and pain and the next thing I know I’m laying there bleeding in agony. I kept like fading in and out, but I remember them saying something like they were doing me a favour, and the next thing I know, Warren’s got my head in his lap. I’m laying there, and everything feels broken, and he’s crying and telling me that there are paramedics on the way.” He shook his head and glowered down at his hands, the digits pristine once more.

“Do you remember anything about the voice?” Taylor spoke quietly, and the young man shook his head.

“It was disguised, sounded like the voices you hear on the movies when there’s a bomb threat.” He stared at her quietly. “What’d you do to this person that they’d go through all of this to make you look bad?” He studied her and Taylor shrank back into her chair with a frown.

“I don’t know. The PRT seems to think that it’s an attempt to discredit them. The outfit is wrong for me, and the mask is odd, but we fought them last night, and their outfit is similar to another cape that left town. We guess they were trying to discredit that cape and when they left they sort of went after me because I was an… especially convenient target.” Taylor carefully coached her comment at the end, and Will stared at her for a moment before nodding.

“Yeah. My mother mentioned something about that… I guess she googled you?” He spoke quietly and stared at her. “You don’t uh.” He gestured to the outfit she wore and spoke softly. “You don’t really seem like a bigot.” His voice was soft, and Taylor frowned. She stared at the kid and felt her walls closing in. Something in her mind reacted though. Some tiny angry voice that reminded her of Victoria and she sat up a bit.

“I’m not. It’s… It’s a lie; all of it is a big mess of shitty rumours and lies.” The comment spilled forth,
and Taylor wished that it’d come out a bit more determined and focused, but she’d gotten the words out at least. Will ended up studying her quietly and shook his head.

“Lot of effort to go to spread around some rumours. Who do you know that hates you that much?” The question startled her and Taylor frowned a bit and then rubbed her eye tiredly.

“It’s… It’s a long story.” She spoke softly, waving a hand and she blinked Will glanced at her and then gestured toward his bed to indicate that he had nowhere else to be. She stared at the young man, taking his earnest expression and offering a sigh. At this point, she wanted to tell someone, and he had probably earned a bit of an explanation.

“I warned you, but if you really want to know.” Taylor dragged her chair closer and crossed her legs quietly. “So. I had this best friend. We’ve known each other since we were in strollers. Our dads met one day at the park, both of them evicted from the house with us to allow our respective mothers to get some sleep. Our Dads became fast friends, and we ended up becoming the best of friends…”

“…and that’s the sort of shit that I had to deal with on my mind as I endure what had to be single shittiest summer of my life. The camp was brutal, there was no outside contact allowed at all, and the other kids were all monsters. In the end, though, all that mattered was that it was over, and I couldn’t wait to get home.” She paused, flushing at Will’s eyes watching her with a mixture of amusement and dawning horror.

“Yeah. You can guess where it went from here. I tried calling her, and there was no answer. When I went to see her, her mom told me that she wasn’t available — three weeks of summer with nothing. I was honestly looking forward to school, you know? She couldn’t avoid me then, but that was worse. I get there, and she’s got this new friend, and both of them refused to acknowledge my existence.”

Taylor paused and picked at her pants quietly, fiddling with a loose thread.

“Everyone else though, they certainly acknowledged me. The entire school was always staring at me, and it took me a week or two to figure out why. It turned out that Emma had been using the second half of her summer well. That’s how the rumours started anyway. They were spoken at first, and then some kids discovered the internet and well… You can imagine how that all went.” The girl’s voice was soft, and she blinked when Will shifted to watch her.

“That’s fucking terrible. Kids are fucking monsters.” He shook his head and glanced at her. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. I mean, I was unpopular in school, but it was mostly wedgies and mocking comments about how mediocre I was. Girls are terrifying.” Taylor glanced at Will and at as his playful smile she found herself chuckling. When he resumed speaking, his voice turned more serious, and he nodded at her.

“I’m even more sorry that some asshole is bringing all that up again as a political statement. It’s like they’re using your tragic backstory against you.” He shook his head. Before they could speak the door creaked open. A young man stepped in.

The man was an interesting contrast to Will, with his less bulky build and darker brooding features. His long hair streaked with purple. He was wearing hospital scrubs, and he paused seeing her. He stared at her suspiciously until he looked over and saw Will smiling. When the young man in the bed
offered out a hand, the man that Taylor assumed to be Warren, moved over and took it.

“Warren. This is Taylor Hebert. She patched up my boyish good looks. She seems pretty cool.” Warren seemed to consider her with a dark look for a moment before nodding.

“Thanks. You’re Amy’s friend right?” He spoke brusquely, and Taylor blinked as he snorted.

“She talks a lot. She wanted me to know that you’d never hurt me. Glad to see that her faith in you is well placed.” Taylor blinked and nodded. When the two men glanced at each other, Taylor found herself feeling a bit out of place and she slid to her feet.

“I’m glad you’re both doing okay. I hope everything goes well.” She smiled at them when they nodded and then moved to exit the room. The small waiting space outside held Amy and Victoria, though Amy was standing off to the side, talking to a nurse, and Victoria was chatting amiably with the Detective.

“...wasn’t even sure if he was a parahuman at first. He could have just been crazy. I mean, the name, the outfit. It all seemed like a shtick. But he…” She paused when Taylor approached and then nodded up. Victoria, a relaxed smile on her face glanced up and flashed Taylor a smile.

“Hey, Taylor. Everything good?” When Taylor nodded, she continued. “Good. Chloe was telling me about her partner.” Taylor glanced at the detective who studied her and then nodded.

“He’s a character. Thanks for healing Will. Dan was pretty worried, and my kid was pretty worried about ‘Uncle Will.’” Taylor blushed at the praise, waving it off almost casually. When the woman stood and stretched, she backed up to give her room.

“Since he’s doing better and Warrens in there, I really should be getting back to work, but, good luck, right? Be careful about whoever’s trying to drag your name through the muck.” Taylor nodded quickly and then watched the detective leave the waiting room. Standing next to Victoria, Taylor glanced over to see that the Nurse had left and Amy was standing awkwardly by herself. Taylor rubbed her face as the awkward silence began once more.

---

“Well, you guys have to eat, right? What about… Chinese?” Taylor tried again and was once more met with resounding silence. She glanced back at Amy and Victoria, the pair had gone back to resolutely ignoring each other, and she rubbed at her face. Taylor glanced at Ralph, sighing when the trooper gave her the look of a man that had survived two teenage daughters and wasn’t getting involved with someone else’s, thank you very much. After a moment Taylor felt her frayed temper snap, and she glanced at Ralph.

“Take us back to mine, Ralph.” She ignored the looks on her back and sank back into her seat. She briefly considered what was in the fridge and as she did an idea began to formulate in her mind.

---
She’d never been to Taylor’s house before, Amy thought with a sigh. She’d hoped that the first time that she visited wouldn’t be this awkward. She was the last one out of the car, and she moved to follow after Victoria, as her sister tailed Taylor toward the house. Taylor unlocked the door and Amy followed the other two in, entering right after Vicky.

A bit lost, she moved to follow Victoria, removing her shoes and placing them on the small rack by the door, and taking off her spring jacket and hanging it in the closet. She’d been about to look around to see what they should do next when she felt a hand gripping her upper arm quite firmly. She tried to draw away and was shocked when the hand held firm. Glancing over and expecting Victoria she was shocked to see a determined looking Taylor holding her and her sister by the arms.

Before either of them could say anything, Taylor was moving along, and they were being dragged along by their arms. Down the hall and past the living room that held a relaxing Danny watching a black and white movie, they quickly ascended the stairs. Amy blinked as one of the doors slammed open as they approached and she squeaked when she and Victoria were shoved in the room. She rounded on the door and paused at the furious look on Taylor’s face.

“I’m sick and tired of being slung back and forth between you two like a fucking tennis ball. I’ve had the single shittiest day of my life since I triggered and your constant dramatic bullshit isn’t helping at all.” Amy moved to speak, and Taylor glared at her, her expression shifting to Victoria after a moment. Amy glanced over at her sister, seeing a nervous expression on Victoria’s face that no doubt matched her own.

“Let’s not forget that I know all the shit you two refuse to say to each other. You both care about each other, and I’m not going to serve as a messenger bird anymore. What I am going to do is this; I’m going to close this door, and you two are going to fucking talk like the adults you will soon be. You two have almost two hours to figure this shit out. While you’re talking, I’m going to go down to the kitchen and cook one of my mother’s favourite recipes to calm down.” Taylor stared at them, and Amy wondered if her expression matched Victoria’s stubborn one.

“If I come back up here and you’ve not spoken, then I’m going to kick you both out on your asses, cause this isn’t the sort of shit that I need in my fucking life.” She stared at them both and Amy felt her heartbeat fluttering. Apparently getting what she wanted, Taylor turned slamming the door, and Amy listened to her descending the stairs. There was the sound of muffled conversation and then quiet. Amy stood stock still, staring at the door nervously and not daring to move.

It was the sound of an explosive exhalation from Vicky startled her enough to glance over. She watched the girl dropping back onto the bed and laying there, staring at the roof in silence for a few moments. She didn’t start speaking either, her attention turning to the room instead. She guessed this was the guest room, and she was surprised to see that Vicky had already made her mark.

Amy moved the bag that had been sitting on the chair by the desk, gently setting it down and she lowered herself to peer at the desk. It held a small pile of books, and the haphazard organization was just like Victoria’s room back home. She opened the top book and studied the assignment tucked into it.

The paper held a report on the catcher in the Rye, and while the words on the page were in Victoria’s bombastic style, there were subtle hints of Taylor’s influence as well. The way that she’d structured her report and how she’d chosen to focus on the mentalities of the characters instead of the plot of the book were both probably suggestions from Taylor; it made for an exciting read.

Setting the report back down and closing the book she glanced around at the other signs of life in the
place. The scraps of cloth peeking out of the dresser, and the half-open closet that held a few dresses, and a heavier coat, the guitar she’d seen Vicki playing at the bonfire visible. The book on the bedside table by the lamp and the small silver frame that lay down on it was undoubtedly from Vicki’s room back home.

She turned in the rotating chair and stared at her sister. She was tempted to ask why this place seemed so much like a home to her sister, but when she parted her lips, a different question slipped out.

“Why’ve you been acting so different.” The words were gentle and laced with curiosity, but Amy still prepared herself for the defensive response. She was startled when Victoria just turned her head and looked back at her quietly. Amy shifted as Victoria held her eyes silently for a few moments before letting out a weary sigh.

“I’m starting to remember how heavy my bones are.” Amy blinked at the strange comment before shifting closer. Victoria stared at her for a moment before turning back to face the roof once more and began to speak more earnestly.

“You might have noticed that I don’t have an Aura for you to react poorly to anymore.” She eyed Amy, and Amy found herself blushing at the poor reaction that she’d offered before.

“Taylor was trying to teach me to control it, and it wasn’t going well. We’d learned how to scale it up and down with practice.” At Amy’s raised eyebrow she waved a hand quietly. “She can physically sense when it’s active, it doesn’t affect her, but she says she can feel it as a buzzing at the edge of her perception. With her helping, I figured out the mechanism to increase or decrease its effects without having to rely on my emotions to do it for me.” Victoria laid there silently for a few moments before sitting up and moving over to grasp the guitar case, bringing it back.

“We couldn’t figure out why I couldn’t fully shut it off until Danny gave me this.” She sat down, gently opening the case. “Danny’s wife gave him this, and he found me staring at it. He’s… He’s pretty caring. Let’s me stay here as often as I need to, doesn’t make any judgments, and he just includes me in stuff. Like I’m part of Taylor’s life, so I’m part of his.” Vicky gently dragged her fingers over the strings making a soft sound, and Amy studied her sister’s serious expression quietly.

“He taught me to cook too. Taylor tried to as well, but she’s not super great at teaching people. She’s the kind of person that always jumps in and tries to take over if you make a mistake. But Danny was different, he just stood next to me and helped pointed out what to do, and if I fucked up, he smiled and helped me fix it. I can’t do much but, I made spaghetti. It was pretty good.” The girl paused as she considered the Guitar. Almost as if realizing that she’d gotten off topic she’d shift a bit and continued.

“So anyway, he sees me like, staring at the guitar and he just walks over, takes it off the wall, and hands it to me.” Victoria chuckled. “Tells me his wife would rather see it being used and then wanders off. And I’m standing there holding this literal piece of his and Taylor’s past, and I’m terrified that if I sneeze, I’ll shatter it into a million pieces.” She shrugs.

“So I take it up to Taylor’s room, and I’m just staring at it terrified about what’ll happen if I can’t keep my strength in control and then it occurs to me that if I can lower my shield like my aura, I might not break it. I try the same exercises and while it’s harder…the shield comes down.” Amy blinks and frowns, her mouth going dry as she guesses what that means.

“The shield drops and Taylor sits there staring at me, shocked. I ask her what’s up and she tells me
that the aura’s gone too. It turns out it’s a function of my shield. The reason I couldn’t turn it off fully
is that it's part of my defensive suite.” Victoria rubs tiredly at her face before closing the guitar once
more. “It turns out that I can will my shield off and on. It takes conscious effort to do either, but if I
will it off, it stays off.”

“You asked why I’m different Amy? I can feel the weight of my body again. Every time I move, I’m
aware of it. The shield has buoyed me so long that I’d forgotten what it was like to feel the earth
under my feet.” Victoria stared quietly at the floor.

“I used to be able to get anything I wanted to like ‘that.’” Victoria spoke softly, snapping her fingers.
“Nothing was out of my reach, or too far from me, or too difficult for me to do. And the things that I
couldn’t physically take, my aura meant that a smile and bit of polite conversation could get me those
things too. Nothing ever felt real.” She frowned as she sat there, resting her elbows on her knees.

“I once handed in an assignment that was literally a blank page with my name on it and a smiley
face, and I got an A. The teacher thought it was a funny joke. No one ever disagreed with me. I
made all those ‘mistakes’ in combat cause I couldn’t feel their bones breaking under my fists. Hitting
a person and hitting a brick wall was all the same to me.” Amy found herself frowning at Victoria’s
words.

“I hate being stared at, you know? For years, you were the only person I knew that I thought could
see me. No one else could look past the aura, look past that idealized version of me that it put in their
minds and it’s a lonely feeling. To be at the center of a room with every eye on you and to know that
it’s not ‘you’ they’re seeing.” Amy blinked quietly as Victoria spoke, frowning a bit at that. She
blinked as Victoria looked at her.

“Actually, I guess you might understand that idea better than most.” Amy felt her cheeks darkening
at the girl’s words, and she glanced off rubbing at her cheek. Amy studied her sister, taking in the
dark look of self-loathing on the girl’s face and she let out a soft sigh, speaking quietly.

“I’m sorry, Vicky. About the hospital. About what I said about you. I had no business unloading all
that on you.” She spoke softly and blinked as Vicky snapped over to stare at her incredulously.

“Why are you apologizing Amy? You were right when you said that shit. How you don’t hate us,
Amy I have no idea. How you don’t hate me for everything astounds me. I destroyed your life.” Her
voice was soft, and Amy shifted closer and spoke finally.

“My life was already falling apart before you stomped through it, Vicky. As fucked up as what
happened was, you’re probably the only thing that kept me going as long as I did. I’d been having
trouble with plenty of shit before your aura messed with me, and the healing and everything going on
around it wasn’t your fault. If anything finding out what it had done to me was the thing that got me
help.” She watched Vicky looking her way, and she moved over to sit on the bed next to her.

“I blamed a lot of the terrible things that I was going through on other people for a long time, and I
let that resentment fester and linger till it was the only thing I had besides staring at your aura
adoringly. That was just as if not more unhealthy than everything else that had been ‘done’ to me.
Mel’s been helping me to put it in perspective. The aura isn’t your fault; it wasn’t something you
could control. Mom’s got her own demons to worry about and when it mattered, she was there.”
Amy waved her hand to say, and so forth.

“I just...part of me wishes that I’d known. I should have been able to tell. I always said you were my
best friend and I didn’t know anything about you.” Vicky glanced at her and Amy felt her mouth go
dry at the stark sadness in her look. “You were constantly filled with loathing, and I had no idea. Taylor will bring you up in casual conversation, and half the time its facts about my own sister that I didn’t understand.” Vicky spoke faintly and rapped her fingernails on the guitar case and sighed. “I didn’t even know that you used to draw. And you’re good, you had to have done it for a long time, and it just...nothing.” She waved a hand. “What kind of sister doesn’t know that shit.” Amy wondered what you said to something like that, and in the end, she fell back on one of Taylor’s stock responses.

“Why do you think you didn’t?” Amy’s voice was soft and shaky as she asked, the question had been burning at her for a while, and she was curious about why Victoria hadn’t seen.

“There’s so much about my life that is a blur because I was constantly disconnected from everything. The faces didn’t matter; the people didn’t matter. Everyone agreed with me, and no one was willing to argue. I smiled and played along, all the while constantly looking for the first chance to get away, and to be alone. All that mattered was getting to the next fight, proving to myself, to everyone else that I was just what they saw. The next Alexandria, a pillar of humanity that kept the things that go bump in the night away.” Amy frowned at the words and stared at Vicky, her mind wondering how she’d missed that as well. The pair sat in silence for a few moments and then finally Amy spoke.

“Is it better now?” she studied Vicky, and the girl watched her back.

“Some. I go out without the shield, and I thought I’d be terrified, but it’s freeing. I rode the bus to school this morning Amy, and no one batted an eye. No one looked twice at the girl in the hoodie and the jeans as she rode her bus to school. I sat across the cafeteria from my friends, and they couldn’t even recognize me with my hood up and my music in.” She shook her head. “I thought I’d be more alone if no one could see me, but now I feel like I’m part of the crowd instead of being at the center of it alone and that’s freeing in a way that I didn’t understand. Some aspects of it aren’t as great.” Amy offered a confused look and Vicky clarified.

“People are a lot ruder now. I never got jostled as much before, but that happens a lot. My teachers are surprisingly strict about homework now, and it’s hurt my grades a bit, but Taylor helps there. The big thing is looking at everyone and wondering how much of what I had with them was the aura and how much was the real me. That’s why I spend so much time here.” Amy stared at Victoria, and the girl sighed before speaking in a soft mutter.

“If the aura affected you, who’s to say it didn’t affect Mom, or Aunt Sarah, or anyone else.” Victoria frowned at her hands. “Dad’s had such trouble with his medication and his depression, and considering what my powers did to your brain, imagine what they did to his.” Amy stared with horror at Victoria as she considered those implications. Vicky let it go and shrugged.

“Danny and Taylor aren’t affected by my aura even when it’s up. They treat me like I’m just a normal person and that’s something that I’d missed — more than that it feels like a home. Home is different now. I have to see it, and it’s...hollow at times. You’re not there; Mom spends most of her time at work, and Dad’s... Dad.” Vicky’s voice was soft. “I sit there alone at night, and I wonder if this was how it was for you and I end up hating myself even more.” She spoke softly and paused when Amy nudged her.

“It was rough, Vicky. But you made it better. Even before the love, stuff. You were a ray of light in that place. You’re my sister, and I loved you. Still, love you really. I’m glad you have a place where you can feel safe.” Amy blinked when Vicky glanced at her quietly, and she chuckled at the look she received, the mix of shock and nervous hope. Amy considered her a moment before leaning into her.
“We need to start talking more. We need to learn to confide in each other, and we both have to start talking to Mom. You should really consider speaking with someone like Mel. Taylor is great, but she’s not…” She rubbed her face. She blinked when Vicky nudged her and chimed in guiltily.

“Speaking of Taylor, we should probably try to keep her out of our various sisterly dramas. It’s not exactly fair of us to make the girl who’s had to deal with ongoing targeted social ostracization deal with our interpersonal drama like a badminton fence.” Amy paused and blinked at the metaphor, staring up at her sister with confusion before snorting. Rather than comment on the subject, she held out a hand.

“Deal?” Vicky moved to take her hand, and feeling rather silly, Amy gave the hand a shake. They remained still, an awkward silence dragging between them until a sudden crash sent them both shrieking and leaping off the bed, the door suddenly slammed inwards to reveal Taylor. The telekinetic had lost her coat, tie and vest and her dress shirt’s sleeves were rolled up past her elbows. The top few buttons were done revealing the undershirt that she wore, and the white fabric was spattered with something red. Her hair had been pulled into a messy bun, and she’d removed her contacts since her glasses were perched on her nose once more.

For a brief moment, Amy wondered if they’d missed a fight, but the girl didn’t seem tense. She stared at them both quietly before nodding faintly. “Good. Dinner’s ready.” She gestured for them to follow and then disappeared down the stairs. Amy glanced at Victoria who’d started to smile, and she rubbed her face. This, apparently, was normal. She followed her sister down the stairs, the smell of something rich and spicy wafting around her.

Amy and Victoria paused to wash their hands in the upstairs bathroom before heading down the stairwell. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, the front door swung open, and Danny entered holding an empty plate in one hand. He juggled the plate as he removed the coat, moving over toward the kitchen. He nodded at them before speaking to Taylor as he vanished into the kitchen.

“Ralph passes along his compliments to the chef.” Amy followed Victoria into the kitchen and paused in the doorway. Vicky had dived into the action moving to weave around Taylor who was the stove, and Danny who was rinsing off the plate he’d brought in. She was snagging plates, cutlery and cups from the various cabinets. Amy grinned at the mismatched fare and moved over to sit at the table when Vicky indicated a spot.

“Who’s with him tonight? Maria? She’ll enjoy the meal.” Taylor spoke softly, and Amy shifted to try to get a peek at what she was doing with the stove. The crush of bodies prevented any view, but the smell was fascinating. Amy’d glance up as Vicky filled her glass along with the others before dropping into a seat, and glancing over to watch Danny and Taylor talk.

“Jenkins, actually.” Danny’s voice was laced with amusement, and he cracked open a beer moving to fill his glass which Vicky had left empty, apparently for this reason. Taylor’s bark of laughter was startling, and Amy rested her elbows on the table.

“The poor man, did you bring him some milk at least?” Taylor moved to set a pair of platters down on the table along with a few bowls. Amy considered the first dish, initially thinking that it might be some form of giant soft-shell taco, though the sauce over it was odd. Catching her confusion, Danny chose to explain to her instead of answering Taylor’s question.

“Amy, right? Taylor’s mentioned you a few times, but we’ve yet to meet. Danny Hebert.” He held out a hand, and Amy quickly shook it smiling at him. “Confused about the food? It’s rare that Taylor is in the mood to cook Mexican food; we’re in for a treat.” Taylor seemed to be ignoring her father,
quickly dishing up the food onto everyone’s plates.

“Taylor’s mother went to college in New Mexico, and she brought back an appreciation for the local cuisine. Taylor’s made Mexican fried rice.” He indicated the mixed white and black rice that’d been mixed with corn. Pointing to the deep fried half moons on Amy’s plate, he continued. “These are Empanadas, basically Mexican perogies.” Taylor offered a playful huff at the description. “And this is an Enchilada.” He pointed at the main dish on Amy’s plate that she’d initially assumed to be some form of fancy soft-shelled taco. Amy considered the plate and glanced over, watching Vicky quickly digging in.

With an amused smile, Amy watched Taylor, and her father start to eat before she moved to cut a piece of the enchilada off, placing it in her mouth. She managed to chew for about five seconds before everything she could comprehend was fire. Eating quickly and swallowing she let out a loud ‘Haaaah’ sound before downing half a glass of her juice and coughing vigorously to the amusement of everyone present.

“Everything is fire.” She gasped softly as she glared at Taylor who merely chuckled before sliding the sour cream over to her.

“Dip your food in that, or pour it on top, it’ll cut the spice down. The rice is also milder; it’ll help to cut the burning on your tongue down.” Vicky, the traitor, continued to chuckle as she ate the food like it wasn’t the physical representation of the ever-burning sun. Amy took a moment, letting her mouth cool before adding the sour cream to the dish and trying again. Finding the taste much smoother this time, she dug in quietly, listening as Danny and Taylor began to talk about a television show.

Dinner’s casual discussion had turned into a heated debate, and when they’d both discovered that neither Vicky nor Amy had heard of Doctor Who, nevermind actually having seen an episode. This being a travesty of the first order, according to both, they’d hurriedly finished their meal and absconded to the living room.

Currently, about four episodes into the first series of the reboot, Amy was curled up next to Taylor in the corner of the sectional sofa that took up most of the small living room. Victoria had claimed an entire side, laying over it with her legs hanging over the arm-rest. She was watching with rapt attention as the big-eared Doctor faced off with a giant green alien. Taylor seemed to have finally settled, her expression relaxed as she slowly ate popcorn sandwiched between Amy and Victoria, and to Amy’s left Danny seemed to be half-asleep, his feet up on the coffee table.

The casual comfort of the scene soothed Amy, and she reached over to snag some popcorn, starting when her hand met Vicky’s. She glanced at her sister, watching Vicky glance before grinning and slapping Vicky’s hand and taking a handful of the snack. The mock-offended look let her know that while things might not be perfect with Vicky, they’d at least improved.

Chapter End Notes
BET YOU THOUGHT I WAS GONNA DO LASAGNA. HAH! ALSO, UGH ALL THE REFERENCES. =] On top of the obvious Doctor Who references I snuck in references to two different series. =] And one of them, I think was my other idea for a worm cross over. To be honest, I doubt they'll come up anymore, cause not a multi-cross but I just enjoy the idea. ANYWAY, LEMME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK. Also. Uh. Next Chapter is training with Sabah, so that should be fun. Tomorrow or the next day at the latest =]. ]]
Chapter Summary

[[WHEW. This took a while to write. Hope you like the chapter. If you want some mood music, I listened to stuff by these fellas quite a bit as I wrote this. It kind of reminds me of Taylor under all the Jedi peace.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

May 13th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

The wind blowing through her hair felt wonderful, Taylor mused, as she nibbled on a protein bar. She considered the dark colour of the sky, the dreary clouds from the past few days had taken on a dangerous hue that promised rain soon. Taylor merely hoped that she’d get through the ‘training’ that Sabah had invited her to before the skies opened up.

Taylor pulled out her phone, wobbling dangerously as she wiggled around to get at the hidden pouch that it was concealed in. Clad in her New Wave uniform, Taylor was perched on a half-demolished wall in a very familiar deserted factory yard. The place had a different look about it in the day. It seemed less intimidating and more dreary, though this may have had more to do with the weather, then the lot itself.

Oddly, it wasn’t Sabah or her doll-like alter-ego that Taylor saw first. It was the monster that she’d almost certainly stitched together. When she saw the hulking creature, she felt a stab of fear from Bastila before it’s cloth-like features penetrated and Jolee’s amusement washed away Bastila’s concern. Taylor blinked and hopped to her feet, dropping off the wall and approaching the giant stuffed Tarentatek. She was startled when a second emerged from behind the first, this one significantly more life-like with its beady black eyes, articulated mouth and razor-sharp teeth.

The rubbery look to its skin and the odd colouring gave it away though, and Taylor barely managed to restrain herself from summoning her staff to her hand. She glanced around quietly and finding no sign of her friend she continued to stare up the creation, idly considering if this was some sort of trap.

The two ‘creatures’ came to a stop before her, crossing their arms in a very human gesture and staring imposingly down at her. The one that had large chartreuse buttons for eyes was less scary, but the other made up for it.

When the detente lasted for more than a minute a sigh suddenly drifted over from a nearby wall, and a doll-like figure emerged from behind it, moving over toward Taylor with a huff.

“Not even a bit of fear? How could you know they wouldn’t hurt you?” Taylor snorted at the question and reached out, rapping one on the chest. The material was clearly some form of very thin rubber, and it felt like there was a fabric of some sort under it. Rather than answer the question,
Taylor considered the creatures for a moment before glancing at Sabah and speaking with an amused tone to her voice.

“You’re literally the only person I told about these things, so when one shows up in the flesh, it’s not hard to guess where they came from. They’re fascinating. Giant dolls right? You can control them?” Taylor stared at Sabah curiously, chuckling when the woman nodded.

“This is Abbot,” The Parian doll pointed to the realistic looking Tarentatek. “Cause he’s a straight man, and that’s Costello.” She pointed at the more doll-like one. Taylor considered the realistic one which looked significantly more dangerous. She moved to tap his claws, finding them to be surprisingly hard and sharp.

“The skin was made in a 3d printer, right? Some form of flexible plastic. The claws though, they seem harder than I expected.” Taylor leaned up quietly and inspected the things teeth finding them made from the same material, touching it again. “Ceramic? How long did these take?” She glanced over at Sabah, chuckling when the woman waved a hand.

“Shaped plastics with a special lacquer coating. And not as long as you’d expect. I convinced the sculpture kids to help out. They helped me design the moulds and poured the plastic and applied the coating. I fed them for their efforts, and they did most of the work, though they didn’t see what the claws, tusks, and teeth were used for.” Taylor blinked and reached out, tracing the long tusk finding it just as solid. Taylor backed up, glancing at Parian curiously.

“You mentioned inviting me out for Training? Did you want me to spar against these two?” Taylor spoke casually glancing from Sabah to the two creatures when the girl in the doll costume nodded. Taylor hummed faintly scrutinizing them for a few moments. She considered the creatures, noting their construction and then she nodded at Sabah. “Alright, let’s see what they can do.”

Taylor moved back and got into a ready position, using the Force to call her weapon to her hand, unlocking the mechanism and spinning it out as she watched the two brutes. She was surprised when they both lunged at her at once. The two constructs were significantly faster than Taylor had been expecting, their light frames almost certainly accelerated by Sabah's powers. Costello especially, with his softer exterior, ended up moving a fair bit faster than Abbot. Taylor imagined that Abbot would hit harder though. She leapt up as the soft Tarentatek reached her position, vaulting off his head and landing behind both and she lashed out with a wave of the force, smoothly sending both skidding away in the direction that they’d been charging. Taylor smirked over at Sabah, the expression turning to a grin at the irritated huff that the woman gave off.

Taylor shifted her pose, reaching out the force and anchoring herself, augmenting her strength as Costello came running ahead of Abbot. She smoothly ducked under his first punch, weaving around the headbutt that he tried and snagged him by one of his stubby legs, using her enhanced strength to heave him off the ground, swinging him around to toss him toward Abbot, sending both rolling away in a mess of limbs and scattered stones.

“You’re moving them wrong. They’re supposed to walk like Gorilla’s, On their knuckles. It’ll make them more stable, and they’ll move quicker.” Taylor’s casual comment caused the beast to adjust their poses as they stood, seeming more smooth. “They’re not bodybuilders either. Open with a bite or a headbutt, follow up with a grab or a slash attack. Punching is more of a human thing.

Taylor grinned as Costello fell back, working his way around her in a circle, Abbot approaching her more directly, his movement wary and slow. She watched as the pair worked their way into position. When she noticed that Costello had gotten behind her, Abbot charged toward her, and Taylor
smoothly wove around his head-butt, ducking under his grab and slipping around behind him, pushing the construct into the other’s surprised charge, and causing them both to crash to the ground again.

As she watched them getting untangled, she blinked as Sabah walked up next to her and let out an irritated sigh.

“Hey, they’re great. They’ll deal with most street-level grunts, and any non-movers or brutes would be pretty hard off. I think they’ll be great bodyguards.” She glanced at Sabah watching as the girl straightened up a bit at the praise. “I’d suggest checking out some of the more large chimpanzees and great apes to get a better idea how they fight. The Tarentateks are different, but it’ll help you get a feel for how they should move.”

“They’re very top heavy. Working with human-ish shaped things can be a challenge cause of that. I’ve been considering doing something with four legs. I’ve made a horse and a Lion, but I think you might have more ideas of things that might be as impressive as Abbot.” She’d gesture to the more realistic one, and Taylor paused quietly, frowning at the creation. She tried to slip her hands into her pockets before realizing that she wasn’t wearing pants with pockets and merely resting her hands on her hips.

“Are you sure you wanna do that Parian?” When the girl glanced at her, Taylor let out a sigh. “Right now you’re sort of seen as not much of a threat. It’s part of the whole reason you’ve been mostly left alone as an independent. You don’t threaten anyone. You’re an adorable golden-haired doll with a collection of living dolls. They’re dangerous if you get stuck against them, sure, but if you start fielding things like Abbot there, people will start treating you differently.” Taylor studied Sabah quietly.

“I can suggest a few designs that’ll be a bit faster and a bit more intimidating than a stuffed dog or horse, Parian, but they’ll be monsters to most people. You’ll be the Master with a half dozen or more man-sized monsters under your control. What they’re made of won’t matter.” She considered the girl quietly before humming and rubbing at her face. She glanced over and studied the other cape, taking in Sabah’s thoughtful pose.

Leaving Sabah to think, Taylor advanced on the two constructs again. It took Sabah a moment to direct them back toward her, but Taylor resumed her efforts, moderating her speed and strength to make the spar more challenging and to keep things at least somewhat fair for Sabah.
“Taylor, what’re you doing? I can’t actually fight you, Taylor; I’ve never even thrown a punch.” Taylor moved around in front of Sabah and hummed faintly, studying the doll face mask that she wore. She leaned back on her heels before drawing something from one of her pouches showing Sabah a long thin steel needle. Nearly six inches long and wickedly sharp the object weighed nearly nothing.

“You wanted to train, and we’re going to make sure you can defend yourself.” Taylor held up the object and waved it around before continuing. “These are woven into your outfit now.” Taylor handed it over and watched as Sabah studied the object. She watched the girl test it out before reaching around, using her hands to find the pins that Taylor had woven into her outfit and hidden amongst the wig that she’d worn. “They’re light enough that you can maintain fine control and your control is decent up to a decent distance. Now you don’t need to throw a punch.” Taylor watched as Sabah released the first pin, the object floating up and orientating on Taylor.

Taylor grinned quietly as the girl sent the object lancing at her and she casually stepped to the side. She watched the pin lancing around behind her, arcing back over to hover over Sabah’s shoulder. More pins slipped free from the outfit. Taylor counted the glimmers as they hung around the girl. Eleven. When they all launched as one, she rolled to the side smoothly, reaching a hand to snag the twelfth as it lanced toward her shoulder. She ended up holding it with a grin, feeling when Sabah’s control snapped as it tried to move her and the pin.

She hopped to her feet, playing with the pin and watching to see what Sabah would do next. Taylor was impressed when the girl started to launch the pins one at a time, forcing Taylor to recover and dodge around them individually, instead of just ducking past a wave of them. When Sabah started mixing in multiple pins attacking at once and more varied patterns Taylor laughed and held up a hand.

“Okay! Okay. You got it, jeez, Ow!” She winced as one of the pins glanced off her hand and she huffed. “Stop it!” The pins stopped coming, and Taylor glowered over at Sabah. The woman stood demurely, but something told her that the brat was smirking under that mask. Taylor walked over quietly. “Now I don’t want to give you these.” She huffed, but when Sabah perked up, she rolled her eyes and moved over to where she’d left her bag by the wall.

Rooting around inside produced a wooden chest that she brought over to Sabah, humming faintly. “These, are for you. They might look like cardboard, but be careful, they’re sharp and a bit more solid than you’d think.” Taylor opened up the box and removed a cloth revealing the carefully detailed back of a tarot card. When Sabah reached out to try and grasp one Taylor slapped her hand.

“Did you just ignore everything I said? If you don’t want to lose a finger, you’ll need to draw them up with your powers.” She held the box up and ignored the sharp look from Sabah who reached out with her power, drawing up the cards. They were fascinating. Each had been painted with the image of a Hero on the front, and they seemed very elegant. When Sabah pulled off a glove and moved to touch the material, Taylor spoke.

“It’s plastic — something like a paper replacement this company in Des Moines uses. I got the cards off the internet and Dad helped me shave the edges down to points. They came out very well, and it’s something less threatening than the pins that you can float around you and still do damage if someone’s not stupid to leave you alone after seeing these two idiots.” Taylor gestured to the giant creatures, and Sabah nodded. The cards gently floated down into the box, each laying face down before the cloth wrapped over them once more.
Taylor wasn’t surprised when Sabah studied her quietly. “And they might work with a different theme than the doll, hrm?” The words saw her adjusting her collar quietly. It was a thought that she’d had even before she’d seen the monsters.

“Yeah. Things have been heating up in the streets lately, and it’s only a matter of time before someone decides they need an easy victory more then they need the good publicity of leaving the harmless capes alone. I’ll always be there to stick up for you, but if you look suitably impressive on your own, then that means that there’ll be fewer bullies I have to stomp down for you.” Taylor did her best to offer a charming smile and sighed when Sabah rolled her eyes. She kept the box though, and Taylor considered that a win.

“Let’s get changed into some real clothes, and go get something to eat.” Sabah’s voice was casual, and Taylor moved to hike over, grabbing her bag from the wall and moving to chase after the tailor and her hulking bodyguards.

The walk back to the shop had been lazy and filled with playful banter, at least until they’d reached downtown. When the crowds had started seeing them, Sabah had noticed that Taylor had become quieter, calmer with a tiny, friendly smile pinned to her face. The few brave enough to approach were each greeted cheerfully, and Taylor was generally happy to shake hands, and she signed an autograph or two, Parian even being roped into a few.

Thankfully most people were polite enough to realize that they were busy and there were no reporters around, and they eventually reached Sabah’s shop and ducked within. Locking the door in their wake, Sabah watched as Taylor let out a relieved sigh and rubbed at her face.

“I don’t know how you handle that all the time.” The girl studied Sabah quietly as she removed her mask and Sabah found herself grinning. “It helps that I don’t have to actually smile, but part of it is just a fact of life, even if I wasn’t a parahuman I’d be in the limelight if I am successful as a fashion designer. Part of all this.” Sabah gestured to her outfit. “Was to get well known and then reveal what I really looked like as a talking point. Once my work had stood up for itself.” Taylor studied her quietly before glancing around.

“Yeah, your work is good. It probably saved Victoria’s life.” Taylor spoke almost casually, and Sabah bunched her shoulders a bit. She glanced over at Taylor with a nervous smile. “She was attacked by a cape with lightning powers the other night, and somehow none of the power hit her.” Taylor merely stared at her and Sabah let out a sigh.

“The outfit wouldn’t leave me alone after I sketched it, so I used my powers to put it together, but the thought of armour kept coming back to me. If it were too bulky, it’d restrict Victoria’s movement, and her powers wouldn’t cover it. On the other hand, if it were too thin, it’d be practically worthless as a defence. I figured out that I could use my powers to weave copper thread into it. I Found a decent size and wove it tightly over the outfit, and then considering what I’ve read about your powers, I put contact points in the boots and along the back and sides. As long as she’s touching a surface, electricity dissipates out before it can go through her.” Sabah had spoken quickly, and she shifted back, worried that Taylor might be upset that she’d designed someone an outfit meant to protect them from her powers specifically. She was surprised when Taylor merely nudged her and flashed a smile.
“Thanks. It saved her life, and I’m glad that I don’t have to worry about accidentally hurting her.” Taylor didn’t linger after that and Sabah followed the younger girl with her eyes as she vanished into the rear of the shop. While Taylor presumably busied herself with changing, Sabah moved around and checked on her various projects, waiting until Taylor returned.

The mild cough at the back of the shop startled her, and she turned, chuckling at Taylor’s nervous look. The glasses were back on her face and she’d apparently decided against a vest or a tie today, and she was dressed in simple well-fitted jeans and a dark plum dress shirt with its sleeves rolled up. With a few buttons undone, it seemed oddly casual considering Taylor’s latest forays into fashion.

“You look good.” She spoke simply, smiling when Taylor let out a relieved smile. “Decided to own the look?” She tilted her head when Taylor nodded a faint hint of colour to her cheeks. “Well, it suits you. You look more relaxed like this, approachable. Try to figure out what you want for lunch; I’m gonna get changed.” She slid off, watching as Taylor moved to lean on the desk she’d been inspecting, casually opening one of her design books and snagging a pencil.

---

After she’d changed, she and Taylor had discussed lunch, setting on Greek food after a bit of a debate. Taylor had slipped out first, her public identity meaning that she didn’t need to contrive an escape. While Taylor was making her way downtown, Sabah had slipped out of the rear of the shop and used a small detour to meet Taylor closer to downtown.

The more circuitous path had left her a bit out of breath when she’d finally caught up with Taylor, and the other girl’s amused expression had been particularly galling and not for the first time, Sabah considered if not joining Taylor in her exercises at least doing some of her own. Thought of exercise had drifted to the side when the conversation had resumed, the subjects directed more toward Sabah’s efforts in school and what was going on in her life, as opposed to the cape subjects they’d been discussing earlier.

They’d made it to the restaurant and, after taking seats on the patio, had ordered their meals when a trooper had sidled up to their table and hurried asked to speak with Taylor privately. Sabah sat in her chair sipping at the glass of sparkling water that’d been delivered, watching the direction that Taylor had gone curiously.

“You’re dating a bigot, you know.” The words were softly spoken, the tone laced with caring and Sabah found her attention drifting to the side. The redhead from the previous weekend was there, though she was alone this time. Sabah glanced past the other girl toward the table she’d come from, seeing another young girl with blonde hair sitting there. Sabah was briefly struck by how odd it seemed to realize that Taylor was the same age as these girls as she considered the young blonde sat before a half-finished meal, watching her and the redhead with bald concern on her face. Sabah glanced back at the girl. Emma when she took a seat the next table over and started speaking again.

“Taylor seems great at first, but…”

“Are you suicidal or something?” Sabah spoke, not bothering to correct the assumption, merely staring at the girl incredulously. “You are aware that she could crush you with her mind right. Which, is nothing to say of the various forms of martial arts and various other powers she has. You’ve gone out of your way to destroy her life, and for some reason, you can’t just leave her
alone.” Sabah stared at the girl, frowning at the amused look that flickered over her features before she flicked her hair back. Sabah took a moment to study the girl as she spoke finally.

“I’m not afraid of Taylor. She wouldn’t hurt me.” The girl’s expression was earnest, and Sabah knew that she genuinely believed that. She took in the modest peasant blouse that she wore, and the simple flowing skirt, the way her hair had been plaid and the inexpensive, subtle make-up on her face. The messenger bag she wore had several pins strategically placed along the strap, and the rainbow heart, the peace sign, and the purple pin with the black triangle and Labrys saw her chuckling softly. The girl’s entire wardrobe practically screamed ‘out.’ The girl stared at her appraisal, and she blinked at the smile the girl offered her. It was probably intended to be coquettish, but it came across as almost predatory to Sabah.

“Taylor’s not dangerous, but she’s not who you think she is either.” The girl’s voice was low and conspiratorial as she leaned closer. “I know that I’ve not seen you around, so you probably don’t go to Winslow or Arcadia.” She hummed. “I know that when you go to a school like yours, it must seem like there are not many options, but you’d be surprised at the variety. There’s no reason to settle for someone like her.” Sabah stared in shock at the redhead as she adjusted her pose and she quickly raised her hand.

“I don’t go to Immaculata, Emma.” She spoke softly and watched the girl shift back nervously at her name. “Taylor’s told me plenty about her past, and I attend BBU.” She spoke casually watching the girl’s eyebrows raising quietly. The girl opened her mouth but whatever she was about to say was lost to the ether when Taylor suddenly appeared. Sabah glanced over at Taylor, Emma turning to do the same. The redhead locked eyes with Taylor, tipping her chin back. Taylor stared at her for a moment before turning to Sabah and moving to take her seat once more.

"Sorry about that. There was an issue with the PRT. All handled now." Taylor’s words were crisp and sharp, but when Sabah glanced up, she saw the flicker of pain behind Taylor’s eyes and she understood why Emma was so convinced in her invulnerability when faced with the juggernaut that Taylor had become. Sabah glanced over at Taylor, Emma turning to do the same. The redhead locked eyes with Taylor, tipping her chin back. Taylor stared at her for a moment before turning to Sabah and moving to take her seat once more.

"Delightful as always, Taylor. I was just having a quick chat with your girlfriend here, going for older girls then? I didn’t think you had it in you. But that’s been a theme in our relationship lately, hasn’t it.” The words were biting, and Taylor took her seat rubbing at her head quietly. When she didn’t respond Emma’s gaze narrowed, and Sabah shifted away from the girl. “I was just about to tell her about all the delightful things you’ve done. Can’t have the poor thing not know what she’s getting into.” Emma glanced at her and Sabah felt her skin crawl at the look in her eyes. Taylor’s response saved her from that attention though.

“Delightful as always, Taylor. I was just having a quick chat with your girlfriend here, going for older girls then? I didn’t think you had it in you. But that’s been a theme in our relationship lately, hasn’t it.” The words were biting, and Taylor took her seat rubbing at her head quietly. When she didn’t respond Emma’s gaze narrowed, and Sabah shifted away from the girl. “I was just about to tell her about all the delightful things you’ve done. Can’t have the poor thing not know what she’s getting into.” Emma glanced at her and Sabah felt her skin crawl at the look in her eyes. Taylor’s response saved her from that attention though.

“Sorry about this, Sabah.” The girl’s voice was weary, and Sabah frowned, staring at the pair, watching as Taylor carefully took a glass in hand, sipping at it before placing it back down and looking over to meet her eyes. Sabah studied the pained look on Taylor’s face as the girl behind her seethed in fury. She watched as the girl lunged, jumping when the redhead slammed her hands down on the table. Sabah shifted away, staring at the girl as she glared at Taylor with a fury that seemed worrying. Sabah glanced at Taylor, expecting her to react but she continued to flick her gaze between herself and the table, refusing to react to the redhead in any way.

“I hate when you do that, Taylor. You can’t ignore me forever, Taylor.” When Taylor merely sighed and rubbed her face, she felt the tension in the girl’s form ratcheting up. “You always act like-”

“Emma, right?” Sabah cut in coldly, staring at the girl’s shocked expression. "Just. Leave. She clearly
doesn't want to talk to you, and you're being disruptive." Sabah spoke softly, gesturing around at the tables around them.

The girl continued to glare at Taylor for a few moments before ripping something out of her satchel. She held it out to Sabah who took it unthinkingly and frowning at the business card. A web-address had been printed on one side, and the other was blank. When she glanced up the girl smiled at her a mask of compassion firmly in place once more.

“You should check it out; see what your girlfriend is really like.” She ignored Taylor’s comments entirely and turned in place, sashaying her way back over toward her table. Sabah watched her go, frowning when the blonde girl immediately perked back up, happy to be under the other girl's attention once more.

Sabah stared at the card quietly for a few moments before glancing at Taylor, watching the girl rubbing tiredly at her face.

“What the fuck was that all about Taylor?” She spoke gently and frowned when Taylor seemed to shrink into her chair and stare at her plate. She watched the girl for a few moments as she seemed to tense as if waiting for something. When the silence dragged on, Taylor peered at her and frowned.

“What’s your phone?” The question startled her and Sabah glanced at her with wide eyes. “Why aren’t you going to the address?” She gestured to the card and Sabah stared at it before casually ripping the card in half several times and tossing the confetti to the side. The sound of cutlery slamming in the distance was patently ignored.

“Taylor, you’re my friend, I don’t need some website to tell me about you. But I do want to know what ‘that’ was all about.” She gestured off to the side when she said ‘that’ and then frowned when Taylor glanced in that direction and shrank. When the waitress approached with their food, she leaned close to speak with the woman.

“Something’s come up, and we’ll need to take our food to go if that’s alright.” She quickly removed enough money to cover the bill and handed it over. The generous tip ensured that the woman didn’t complain, merely bounced off and set to boxing everything up for them. She stared at Taylor as the girl glanced off to the side before coughing lightly to draw her attention.

“C’mon, we’re taking our food to go. We’ll talk someplace more private.” Taylor stared at her nervously for a few moments before letting out a weary sigh and nodding, slipping to her feet and following her reluctantly toward the exit looking every bit like she was approaching her execution.

They’d ended up perched on the bench in the park outside the library that had been their spot for the first few weeks of their friendship. Sabah was curled up on the bench, the take out container of Lamb Gyros in her lap. The tailor was fiddling with the food in her lap as she watched Taylor pick nervously at her own container of Roast Lamb and potatoes. Growing tired of the girl’s stalling she spoke.

“Taylor that girl hates you, and she is very convinced that you’re a bigot.” She watched as Taylor frowned at her food, picking up a potato and nibbling. She feared that she might have to drag the
words out of Taylor physically, but eventually, the girl moved to speak.

“That was one of her favourites. Calling me a Homophobe, or whatever.” Taylor spoke quietly and studied her food. “She’d tell people that when she came out to me that I bashed her. Insulted her, sometimes I’d hear rumours that claimed I’d... hurt her when she’d come out to me. They claim that’s what made her so determined to be an ally.” Taylor’s voice was soft as she considered the food. Sabah felt the horror of such a thing, and it must have shown on her face because Taylor reacted poorly when she glanced up at Sabah.

“I didn’t Sabah. I swear,” Taylor had flinched as she said the words, her voice was laced with desperation. “I’m not... I’m not like that.” Sabah studied Taylor and let out a sigh, her face softening as she considered the younger girl.

“That’s…” Sabah spoke, “That’s a horrible rumour to make up. Why would she lie about that?” Sabah’s tried to keep her tone curious, and she frowned when Taylor still flinched and spoke softly.

“I don’t know.” Taylor’s voice was tiny. “She did come out to me, and it went poorly, but I didn’t hit her. I didn’t say anything at all.” She frowned at her hands, glancing at Sabah and when the girl caught her look she let out a sigh. “It’s… it’s not a good story.” She commented faintly, and when Sabah merely lofted an eyebrow, she shifted into a different pose and spoke quietly.

“I told you that I lost my mom, right? She died in ‘07; she was 38. I was 13.” Taylor took a breath and rubbed her face. “It was pretty shitty. She was on the phone with me when the accident happened, and I blamed myself for it for a long, long time. I still do kind of despite... everything.” Taylor’s voice had changed and Sabah, for the first time, truly believed that Taylor was still a kid. She set her food down and moved over to sit next to Taylor, unsurprised when the girl curled into her side.

“So, I didn’t handle it well, as you can imagine. I was pretty miserable, and Dad was too, but then my birthday rolls around. Dad really wanted to do Something you know? Do it in true ‘Anette Hebert’ Style. He was kind of manic about it, and it was nice seeing him trying to be like, there again.” Taylor paused and took a breath, rubbing at her cheek.

“So, the big day rolls around, and bless Dad, he tried his best, but everything went... terrible. He burned Mom’s mom's special braised beef recipe, and I only ended inviting Emma. The weather was miserable, a constant downpour that wouldn’t stop as if the entire world was crying and I spent the entire day trying not to do the same thing. I got through dinner and lasted right up till the cake came out.” Taylor’s voice had begun to shrink as she recounted the Tale and Sabah gently gave the girl a one-armed hug.

“I saw that cake, and I found myself glancing around because Mom would always play the happy birthday music and it just hit me that I’d never heard that again and I just stared at Dad, and Emma and I just. I started sobbing. Dad didn’t last much longer, and poor Emma sat there as we both sat there crying this big ugly tears. Eventually, it got to be too much, and I made my escape.” Taylor let a sort of sad little chuckle before continuing.

“So I get to my room, and I’m just an ugly sobbing mess, and I feel Emma join me, quietly sitting on my bed. She sits there till I cry myself out and I’m laying there exhausted and miserable, and she goes.” Taylor shifts and assumes this pose, this haughty pose and modulates her voice to a fair impression of the redhead. “‘You didn’t even open my present, and I went to quite a bit of work making it for you.’” Sabah blinked wondering at Taylor as the girl chuckled. When Taylor caught her eye, she sighed and waved a hand.
“Emma was like that. She had this haughty like personality about her. She... she was different around me, but in public, she could be a bitch. I guess you saw that, though generally, she tries to be kinder since everything.” At her incredulous look, Taylor quickly explained. “Emms was something of a local hero for a while. She jumped into a fight with the ABB and these two gay kids on a date. She ended up getting saved by a Ward, but she was sort of famous for it, and that’s when she came out to everyone. It changed her, you know? She was suddenly head of the Rainbow Triangles, and she was active in all these clubs. She was just as popular despite everything, and she seemed kinder, you know. To most people, anyway.” Taylor muttered faintly and rubbed her face. Before Sabah could comment, to try and disabuse Taylor of that notion, the sable-haired teen continued.

“So anyway. She says that and I sit up and stare at her an I can’t help but laugh and she flashed me this smile and handed me a box.” Taylor rubbed at her face. “I open up the box, and I see this pendant inside, a silver locket with a clasp and when I open it, I saw an image of my Mom on one side, and another of me and Emma on the other and she looks at me and goes ‘So we’ll all be close to your heart.’” Taylor frowned. “Then as I’m staring at it she leans in and kisses me quietly.” Taylor rubbed at her face quietly.

“I didn’t hit her or anything. I just fucking froze. Sat there like an idiot with my eyes wide and touching my lips.” She rubbed her face, and Sabah studied her. “She just. She starts babbling, explaining that she’s got this massive crush on me and that it doesn’t have to mean anything. That she really likes me, and that she didn’t want me to spend my birthday thinking that no one loved me and then she just...runs. Vanishes.” Taylor rubs at her face quietly.

“What’d you do?” Taylor blinked at her Sabah frowned at the confused expression.

“Nothing? I was... confused. I sort of just ignored it for the week and a half until Emma until I got out of school. I always went to Summer camp during the first month of summer vacation. It wasn’t a pleasant summer at all, and while I was gone, I ended up sort of considering things.” At Sabah’s look, Taylor sighed. “When I came back I had intended to tell her that I was willing to try. But she wouldn’t speak to me, and everything else happened.”

“So you’re...” Sabah spoke quietly and tilted her head, and she blinked when Taylor snorted.

“A lesbian? I don’t know. Up to that point I hadn’t even looked at anyone, male or female. I just didn’t see people like that. Emma would often talk about boys, now in what I assume to be a thinly veiled attempt to see what I was interested in, but I never...saw the appeal. I could see someone was attractive, I could appreciate it, but I never really lusted after people.” Taylor took a few moments and rubbed her eye.

“After Emma kissed me and I started considering it, I wasn’t... opposed. I guess you’d say that I was Demisexual if you had to put a label on it.” Taylor took a breath and sighed, sitting up quietly. “But in the end, it didn’t go great and considering what’s been going on since then; dating was never really a concern for me.” Taylor quietly drew her food back in her lap, staring at it and not seeing the way that Sabah studied her.

“I never really asked where you stood on the whole...” Taylor waved a hand. Sabah blinked at Taylor quietly and frowned at the question trying to decipher what Taylor wanted to know. It took her a moment to realize what she was asking. Sabah was tempted to laugh, but she merely shook her head and spoke.

“If you’re happy Taylor, then I don’t really care who you sleep with, or if you sleep with anyone at
“all.” She flashed Taylor a smile and blinked when the girl seemed to relax finally, flashing her a genuine smile back. “Besides, it’d be a bit hypocritical of me to judge you for that.” At Taylor’s look, Sabah drew her food to her lap, taking a bit, before turning to Taylor. She started telling the girl about her own experiences with relationship drama and how she’d dropped out of her engineering degree.

The conversation had been a bit awkward, but as time went on, Taylor had begun to open up more. Sabah had watched as the serenity that often clung to Taylor like a cloak waned a bit, the girl seeming more relaxed and cheerful despite the constant bone-weariness that was suddenly much more obvious. They’d talked more freely about their pasts, sharing the stories that they’d both been too nervous to bring up in the past, as they finished their lunches.

They’d discussed arranging a girl's day out soon with Amy and Victoria, and Sabah found herself tempted to invite Taylor back to the shop to talk more, but part of her hesitated considering the conversations they’d had. In the end, she’d let Taylor wander off when she’d realized the time, quietly heading back to the shop instead of her apartment. She’d spent most of the evening working on her backlogged commissions only taking a break to sneak out and order a sub from the local deli. As she’d eaten her late dinner, she had picked through the books on her table, opening the one that she’d seen Taylor playing with as she left to change.

She blinked at the creatures that the girl had drawn on several pages, studying the critters and their names. The rendition titled Acklay looked terrifying, as were the Nexu and the Tuk’ata. Sabah had let out an amused smile when she’d seen the Dewback considering the adorable creature along with the Bantha. The last drawing though fascinated her though, the image of a woman in a black and red robe with a veil over the upper half of the face. Taylor had scrawled the word ‘Visas’ underneath, and Sabah found herself considering the image quietly.

Chapter End Notes

[[SO THAT WAS A BITCH TO WRITE. I hadn’t intended to have this whole conversation reveal in this part of the story; it was initially intended as a reveal later between Taylor and Vicky in Arc… Six or Seven? But I realized that after that Emma confrontation, Taylor would have to explain something to Sabah and the whole story came out. I enjoy the ide of Sabah leading a band of Star Wars Critters around, though I’m unsure if she’d use the Visas costume, I was just toying with the idea of Sabah altering her image considering she’s got scary monsters now. I ALMOST DID KREIA. Considering that Sabah’s power would actually let her toss around lightsabers like Kreia did, but the outfit is kinda bleh.

So, Taylor's sexuality is something I hadn’t really intended on touching for a while, but now that it's out there, It's sort of been in the back of my head for a while. I'm unsure how most folks will take it, to be honest, I know that making Taylor not flat out straight het can be a touchy subject for folks but uh. This story has been pretty hecking gay up to this point, anyway.]]
[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I’ll put a timestamp in the A/N’s to show the ones that I’ve edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

I basically changed the Taylor/Emma interaction, to bring it more in line with all the other Emma/Taylor interactions before and after this. It makes sense when you get up 7.7, which is why this change was made.

UPDATE DATE: 06-14-2019]
May 15th, 2011
*Parian’s shop, Downtown Brockton Bay*

Sabah sat in the bay window of her shop, holding a steaming mug in her hands. The middle-eastern girl gently sipped at the strong tea in her hands as she stared curiously out the large pane at the heavy rain that spattered against it. The sound was soothing, and Sabah found her eyes closing as she savoured the heady rattle of the rain crashing on the window. The skies had been threatening rain for the last two days, and this afternoon they had finally given up their bounty, dousing the city in a torrential downpour.

She probably shouldn’t have been sitting in the window of her shop out of costume, but with the rain was so heavy there was barely anyone on the streets, and the poor bastards out there weren’t really looking anywhere but where they were going. Considering the poor businessman that was chasing his umbrella, Sabah figured that she was probably safe, and she settled in, glancing up and down the street to see if Taylor and her friends were coming.

Seeing no sign of the group yet, Sabah lifted the teacup, sipping at it quietly once more and glancing around the shop. As far as she could tell it was as clean as it was going to get. She’d been expecting company today, but she wasn’t sure if Taylor and Victoria would even make the appointment considering the weather. The intention had been to bring Amy along so that they could finally meet, both Taylor and Victoria having insisted that Amy and Sabah would get on like a house on fire.

Sabah shifted nervously, the action almost subconscious. Part of her wished that she’d agreed to Taylor’s first suggestion. The younger girl had initially suggested that they meet at Sabah’s apartment to preserve her cape identity, but after thinking on it, Sabah had said they should meet here. Taylor knew her identity, and Victoria seemed pretty trustworthy. The new girl, Amy, was Sabah’s only concern.

For the third time she briefly considered dressing up in her costume, she knew that Taylor and Victoria would play along but as she considered it quietly something stirred in her and she settled back by the window, sipping at her tea. She didn’t want to hide away, Taylor had been talking about getting all of her friends together for several days, and something deep in Sabah craved for more friends.

Her thoughts were dashed as she saw a bus screech to a halt across the street, the rain sluicing off of it completely obscuring the windows. The bus barely remained in place for forty-five seconds before
it lurched away and Sabah glanced across the street with a wry smile.

Victoria, Taylor and the girl Sabah guessed to be Amy were huddled under the small bus station, each of them already very damp, by the look of things, and none of them had an umbrella. Taylor looked the most prepared for the weather in her fancy outfit, including heavy dress suit jacket, though the lack of a hat was telling. Amy’s sensible jeans and sweater were probably warmer than Victoria’s tank top and skinny jeans, but she doubts that either of the poor was enjoying the rain.

The trio seemed to be arguing about something under the bus station, not quite ready to venture back out into the deluge yet. Sabah gave them a few moments to get prepared before she moved over toward the door. She took a moment to slip on her coat before flipping on the light over the entrance to show them that blessed warmth and a dry roof was a short dash away. She counted to thirty before swinging open the door and bracing herself against the rain.

She heard them coming through the rain before she saw them.

“-course! That makes perfect sense. I’ve got superpowers, so why would I need an umbrella!” Taylor’s voice was laced with mocking, and Sabah quickly drifted back, making room and watching as the girl dashed in out of the rain, pausing just inside the door to drip. Victoria followed her in quickly and snapped off a response as she joined Taylor in wringing out her hair.

“Well, normally I’ve got a magical shield that keeps me from getting wet, so an umbrella seemed like a bit of a waste, Taylor.” The girl’s comment was amused, and Sabah peered past both of them to see the last figure lurch in, huffing and puffing and utterly drenched. She stared at the girl with an amused smile before shaking her head.

“Ohhey. Sabah!” Victoria’s voice lanced around her, and she turned, eyeing the blonde as she perked up. “Did Taylor invite you out here to meet Parian as we-” The girl staggered to a stop and blinked, realization dawning in her eyes. “...how did I miss that Taylor’s fashion designer friend that made me a super-suit was actually the cloth-based superhero.” She rubbed at her face, and Sabah found herself snorting.

“You all just. Stand here. I’ll get some towels.” She gave them a once over, figuring that three towels should do, before vanishing into the back. Sabah took a moment to unlock the door at the rear of the shop before heading up the stairs to the flat over the shop. The upstairs was mostly used for storage, though the kitchen was functional if spartan. Luckily for the girls, the bathroom was also fully set up since Sabah found herself getting into and out of costume a lot around the shop. She quickly ducked into the tiled room she grabbed a few towels before descending the stairs.

Sabah chuckled when she descended the stairs to see Taylor and Victoria fussing over the still red-faced Amy. She slipped over, listening to them quietly chatting with her about getting a bit more exercise if running across the street left her this out of breath. She offered out the towels to each girl, watching as they each took turns towelling out their hair and patting down their outfits. Taylor’s outfit seemed the least affected after she shrugged off the fancy coat she’d been wearing along with her vest and tie, it’d left her dress shirt a touch damp, but still relatively modest. The other two looked more like drowned cats.

“I’ve probably got some stuff that you guys can wear. Taylor, you can help Victoria find something? I know that I’ve got a dress that I did a school project that should look alright on her. It’s over in the back on one of the racks. It’s uh, Saffron and Goldenrod.” Taylor blinked and nodded, heading toward the back. The whispered comment from Victoria confused her, but Taylor’s less subtle response saw her laughing.
“I don’t know; It’s like orange I think? Orange, and goldenrod is probably yellow or gold…” The conversation fell silent as the pair wandered into the back. Sabah turned on Amy and flashed a friendly smile, offering out a hand.

“Amy, right?” She smiled when the girl stared at her suspiciously for a few moments before nervously taking the hand and shaking it. “Taylor’s mentioned you a few times, but it’s nice to meet you in person. I’m Sabah. Or Parian if you prefer.” She studied the girl and chuckled at her nervous smile. It was weird for Sabah to feel like the more comfortable person in social interaction, but she ran with it.

“So, you’re in luck cause you’re pretty close to my size, so I’m sure we can find you something.” She gestured for the sopping girl to follow her, leading her through the workshop and toward the staircase. The only comment she heard from the racks at the back saw her laughing as she leads Amy upstairs.


Sabah was rather impressed with her eye. Despite the frumpy clothes that Amy had been wearing, the girl was actually very close to her size. It’d given her quite a bit of lee-way in dressing the girl, and she thought even Amy was impressed by the comfortable slacks and the asymmetrically patterned blouse that Sabah had dressed her in. The seamstress tried to not take insult at the thick cardigan that Amy had hidden it under; the weather was rather miserable.

Currently, both of the girls were curled up in the bay window of the ‘office’ portion of the small apartment each nursing mugs of tea. Sabah found herself considering the same street from above for a few moments before she nearly ended up on the floor when the door slammed open suddenly. When it merely admitted Taylor holding hers and Victoria’s wet clothing Sabah rolled her eyes. She studied the elegant looking teen for a moment before she vanished into the bathroom to hang up the damp clothing, allowing Victoria to enter.

Victoria casually wrapped an arm around the frame of the door, drawing back to peer in at her and Amy, casually backing into view. The cape looked rather elegant in her fitted dress the complimentary tones of yellow and orange bringing out her hair and contrasting her eyes nicely. The ridiculous look on her face had Sabah commenting though.

“Victoria, that dress is a bit more Gigi Hadid, as opposed to Jessica Rabbit.” She grinned when the blonde looked affronted, covering her chest before slipping into the room. Walking across the room, Victoria snagged two of the chairs from the kitchen, dragging them across the floor to set them on the carpet in the ‘Office section’ of the apartment, taking a seat quietly.

“At least we found it. I nearly gave up and came up here in this kimono I found, but Taylor found it hidden behind a Ninja Turtles costume.” Victoria’s tone was amused, and she eyed Sabah curiously. The girl rolled her eyes good-naturedly, as she leaned back in her chair.
“I do commissions; Conventions are big business, usually. Though I think you’d have looked quite
dashing as Donatello, Victoria.” Sabah found her smirk growing as Amy giggled silently into her
cup at the side, glancing over from the rain finally. The girl’s comment though had her laughing.

“Victoria was always a fan of Raphael. She used to run around with forks as a kid. Even had
pyjamas and stuff. Eric made her cry once when he told her that they were boys pyjamas.” Sabah
glanced from Amy toward Victoria who was shooting her sister a look that said ‘Traitor.’ She moved
to open her mouth, lifting a hand when a hand descended onto her head. Rather than saying
whatever delightful thing she’d planned to say she slowly crossed her eyes and tilted her head back
to peer up at Taylor.

“Don’t pick an embarrassment fight with your sister. Something tells me that you’ll lose hands
down.” Taylor smirked, and Victoria let out a huff, crossing her arms and leaning back into her chair.
Taylor casually spun her chair around, dropping into it and resting her elbows on the back, lowering
her chin to rest on her crossed arms, smirking at Sabah and Amy. “We mopped up the mess by
the door before we came up as well. You two certainly seem comfy. Didn’t even make us tea.” Taylor’s
voice was laced with amusement and Sabah sniffed casually.

“I don’t think you deserve tea, Taylor. Tea is for extra special guests. Like Amy.” Sabah smirked
over at the girl who snorted softly and sipped her tea playing along. “You’re here all the time. You’re
practically an employee.” When Victoria raised a hand, Sabah merely rolled her eyes at her. “I doubt
you’d appreciate the palette.” Victoria blinked, puzzling over the comment as if deciding if she
should be insulted. Taylor merely rolled her eyes at Sabah and headed to the kitchen, moving to get
the kettle boiling once more.

“So,” Victoria spoke, drawing the word out and shifting in her chair, grinning impishly when Taylor
took down two mugs and set to work preparing tea for them both. She glanced over at Sabah quietly.
“Since we’re clearly not going shopping today, Sabah can tell us all about being a super secret
superhero. How’d you end up with the shop? It’s pretty ‘fancy’” Sabah rolled her eyes, chuckling as
Victoria leaned close, resting her elbows on her knees.

“It’s not really that amusing of a story. Not compared to you lot.” She waved a hand toward Taylor.
“Taylor knows, and she’ll agree with me.” Sabah glanced at Taylor who shook her head and
smirked.

“Oh, I don’t know anything about that Ma’am. I just work here.” Sabah narrowed her eyes at the
woman’s tone and grumbled quietly. Glancing over and seeing Amy staring at her curiously she let
out an amused sigh and crossed her legs, leaning back into the wooden walls on the side of the bay
window, studying Victoria and Amy quietly.

“The truth is a bit of a story.” When the girls merely stared at her, she let out a sigh. “So, essentially,
after I gained my powers, I mostly ignored them. I used them as an excuse to get away my
engineering degree and all the conflict that came with it.” She blinked when Taylor let out a soft
growl as she returned. She smiled at the girl who handed Victoria a cup of tea, setting her own on the
nearby desk before taking her seat. Taylor patently ignored Victoria’s playful ‘Oh, what a
gentleman’ comment and resumed her position resting her elbows on the back of the chair, her chin
on her crossed arms.

“So I got into this excellent Fashion Design course, but I didn’t exactly have a lot of money to cover
my expenses. It occurred to me that I could use my powers to make money, and I ended up spending
a few weeks designing the Parian costume.” She felt the odd looks on her, and she figured it had to
do with the fact that she was a tiny middle-eastern woman that dressed as a Victorian Doll.
“It’s... I had this idea about it being a social experiment of some sort, I would get famous as a designer, and then I’d reveal myself to open a dialogue on how cultural identity affects capes. That was part of the reason, but I think it was also that it was a good way to hide my true identity better. In any case, I started using my skills a lot. I could do a lot with puppets and things, and that’s how I first got out there, but people started hiring me to draw crowds to their stores, and I started saving up money.” Sabah hummed faintly and considering the girls.

“I ended up doing a lot of small street shows and tv spots with my powers, and it was pretty par for the course. That is until I met this shady pawnbroker named Remulus Horne. He wanted me to...” Sabah quietly leaned forward as she spun the tale, the sound of rain drumming on the glass was a fantastic counterpoint to the words.

“...and that’s how Circus and I escaped from Midway. They ended up giving me half of their haul, and I used the money to set up this place.” Sabah spoke quietly, as she shifted in place, smirking quietly at the others. As the story had gone on, they’d moved to the table in the kitchen, having set up for a game of cards. They’d cycled games, but they’d been playing Poker as Sabah continued her story.

“Bullshit.” Victoria laughed and pointed her hand at Sabah. It was much less impressive due to the large slice of pepperoni pizza that was hanging from it. The group had ordered the food from a local pizzeria, though the only way that they’d managed to convince the poor kid to deliver had been by offering a sizable tip. “That entire story had to be bullshit; there’s no way you know Circus.” Victoria huffed and glanced at her sister, but Amy merely smirked and munched on her own slice of pizza.

“I dunno, I could see Sabah doing that. She could easily pretend to be a Knife Juggler or Thrower with her powers.” Sabah grinned as she picked up a slice of the pizza, taking a hearty bite. She glanced at her cards and looked at the pot, frowning as she glanced over at Taylor.

It was the girl’s turn to go, but she’d suddenly frozen in place and was staring in confusion off to one side. Sabah studied the girl nervously before glancing over at the others. Victoria was just as confused at her, but Victoria’s face had gone white.

“Taylor.” The blonde spoke quietly and snapped in front of Taylor’s face. It took a few moments of this to snap the dark haired girl out of it, and she ended up jerking back from Vicki’s hand in her face, glancing at the girl.

“I can sense them. They’re doing that lightning close. Few blocks northeast.” Taylor’s voice was low and cold, and Sabah blinked, frowning. She glanced at the others. “What should we do?” She hummed faintly before blinking. “Ralph.” She hopped to her feet.

Victoria let out a relieved sigh and moved to follow. “He’s nearby? Why’d we take the bus if he’d be here?” Victoria grumped as she descended the stairs. Sabah and Amy followed along, watching the two banter.

“Cause you insisted on carrying me to your Aunt Sarah’s, and he has to go along the ground like a
Taylor’s exasperated tone was evident as the group piled out on the ground floor. The hurried banging on Sabah’s door was confusing, and Sabah moved over peering out. Seeing Taylor’s handler drenched she pulled open the door letting him.

The man’s confused expression lasted for a few moments before he turned to Taylor. “We need to get you all out of here. The ABB is massing in force downtown. They’re-” Ralph paused when his phone let out a waterlogged bleep, and he pulled it out, his face whitening. “They’re sieging Medhall.” Ralph’s voice was solemn, and he glanced outside. Medhall wasn’t terribly close to her shop, Sabah noted. But it was in the direction Taylor had indicated, though more than a few blocks. She considered the man quietly before glancing at Taylor.

“Reach is out there. I felt them using their lightning power. They’ve been using every forty seconds or so for the last… nearly ten minutes. Maybe three blocks that way.” Taylor pointed in a direction and frowned when Ralph shook his head.

“Taylor, I can’t let you go out there. The ABB is out in force, and we have no idea what the rest of the gangs are doing. This is the first time they’ve hit a civilian target. If you get caught in the crossfire, it could be a disaster. I’ll call it in though.” The man stepped to one side and moved to dial his phone quietly.

She glanced at the others, taking in Amy and Sabah’s concerned looks. She took a step back and flinched as Victoria stepped closer, her face fiercely determined.

“Taylor. No.” The blonde’s focused eyes burned into Taylor’s and the girl flinched quietly. She stared back at Victoria for a few moments before glancing discreetly toward the door past her. When Victoria squared up again, Taylor felt herself growling. Something was burning in her mind, and she knew, viscerally knew on some deep dark level that something terrible was coming.

“Victoria… something bad is happening. I-I have to stop this.” She flinched when Victoria stepped closer, backing up and gripping her arms. “Victoria.” She spoke softly, her voice plaintive. When the girl frowned at her and glanced around Taylor let out a soft whine and tried to step around her, crying out when the blonde caught her.

“Taylor, no. You can’t. You can’t fight them, no matter what’s coming. None of us can fight them.” Taylor growled. “I have to try.” She glanced at Ralph who was still on the phone, and a surge of panic washed through her, and she had twisted out of Victoria’s grasp, the girl’s normal strength nothing against her own. She quickly charged the door, dashing out into the rain.

The deluge of ice water was startling as the water crashed on her, but she dipped deeper into the Force to ignore the cold. She shifted a bit as she looked around, focusing on the sensation and
moving away quickly. She leapt upwards, flipping and landing on Sabah’s roof before crossing the street and heading for the impression.

She’d barely made it two roofs closer when something tackled her from behind and dragged her through the air. A surge of dread and fear washed into her, and the darkness leapt into her mind, Taylor drawing on it and turning toward her attacker. The furious blue eyes and rain-spattered hair instantly killed any anger, and the lightning on her fingers died away.

“Are you fucking insane?” Victoria’s voice was practically a shout to be heard over the wind and the rain, and the dress she was wearing clung to her like a second skin. Taylor stared at the girl and flinched quietly. “What the fuck was that about, are you trying to get yourself killed or something?” Taylor tried to explain, to tell Victoria how responsible for this she felt, she tried to say anything but the cold fury in those eyes silenced her, and she just lowered her gaze and spoke clearly.

“P-Put me down.” She muttered and blinked when Victoria did as she was asked, setting her down. When she tried to leave, she growled when the girl grabbed her arm. Taylor blinked when Victoria whipped around her purse and opened it, removing a box. She quickly pulled it open and offered her something small. Taylor blinked and stared at the ear-plugs. She glanced up in confusion at Victoria who was slotting her own pair into her ears.

“Did you think I’d let you do this by yourself? Let’s go.” She gestured, and Taylor slid the plugs into her ears and turned toward the sensation in the Force, quickly jogging toward it, Victoria in her soaking wet dress immediately following. The flickering lights showed them the way, and they promptly ducked down an alley, frowning when they came across the caped figure standing at the opposite end of the alley, lightning dancing up and down their arms.

Half a dozen thugs were already face down on the ground, smoke wafting off their bodies, although the breaker seemed to be having trouble with the last two. Both were in strange almost paramilitary gear, and each held an odd looking gun that continuously discharged lightning when it was shot. They kept shooting at the Breaker who was dodging the attacks. Whenever one stopped to reload the other started firing, and it looked like they were trying to pin the enraged cape down.

Taylor stared at Victoria who shrugged. When she glanced back, Taylor figured out the issue with the ear-plugs. The men had seen them and were shouting at each other, but they’d not noticed in their distraction. As the men pointed, the cape spun and stared at them for a moment before suddenly rounding on the goons. Before they could re-orient their weapons back on them, the cape slammed into both, lifting them clean off the ground and slamming them into either wall and dropping their bodies to the ground with what Taylor assumed was a wet squelch.

The figure spun and advanced on them but seemed to falter when it got close. Something about it expanded or shrank, smoke filtering more potently from its long filament-like wings before it seemed to catch on. Instead of attacking the figure shrank down, their smoke like form solidifying and they’d move to clap their hands. Taylor took a moment to stare before tentatively removing one ear plug. The screaming had stopped, and the clapping continued.

“Congratulations on learning, Vigil. And thanks for the save, you didn’t have to go to all the trouble though.” The voice was mechanically concealed, and the figure stared directly at her with those glowing red eyes.

“Loving the new costumes. We do certainly like dressing up, don’t we? Are you two on a date?” Despite the concealing tech on the voice, that playful mocking was patently obvious. Taylor glanced down, taking in the white dress shirt and pants that she wore, and the fancy dress that Victoria wore
“If you are, don’t let me interrupt.” The mechanical voice continued it's mocking tone as Taylor watched Victoria remove her own earplugs out of the corner of her eye. The figure opposite them crossed its arms. “I was just on patrol when these thugs assaulted me. It was entirely self-defence, I assure you.” Taylor felt her expression hardening, and she growled when the figure rested a hand on its hip. “Oh, look at the fierce expression. That upset that I snaked your name?”

“It’s more what you tried to do with it.” The words came not from her, but Victoria and Taylor blinked glancing over. She was startled by the mocking laugh.

“Oh, look at that, Glory Girl’s got claws. I mean, I figured with the outfits, that this one would be playing knight in shining armour. You two should really think about discussing your theme better. Don’t wanna mix up your message.” The figure gestured to Taylor when he spoke of the knight, and Taylor grit her teeth.

“In any case, I should be going.” The figure tried to advance and frowned when Taylor lifted her hands. In return, One glowing hand lifted up and pointed at them both. “Ah, Ah, Ah. Your lovely lady there doesn’t have a shock suit this time, If I hit her hard, she won’t be getting back up. Wouldn’t that be tragic, Miss Hebert.” Taylor jerked to the side when Victoria suddenly lunged forward fist cocked back.

The figure gestured almost negligently, and a wave of violet lightning blasted Victoria back out of the alley and into the street. Taylor lashed out with the Force, smashing a telekinetic strike into the figure and sending them flipping arse over tea-kettle. They didn’t even wait to land before their form exploded into smoke.

Taylor moved quickly, smashing the ear-plug back into her ear, though this kept her from stopping the figures first lunge, cheek crunching ominously as the angelic figure backhanded her clear out into the street. She came rolling to a stop before Victoria and glanced up as the floating figured advanced on them.

“You should just let me leave, Taylor.” The figure raised their hands, lightning dancing up and down the arms. Taylor reached for the Force, trying to push herself closer to Victoria in an effort to shield them both. As the figure lifted its hands, Taylor flinched back and lifted her hands, pausing when something thin and silver smashed into the figure’s shoulder, knocking the smoky figure back.

“What?” The figure glanced up just in time to see Abbot’s plastic fist smash into him as it charged, sending them up to then intangible figure whipping through the air and down the street. Costello was hot on Abbot’s heels as Amy and Sabah in costume charged up the road, both equally soaked. Taylor rolled over, and checked on Victoria, sighing when the girl let out a soft groan.

“Jesus, what fucking hit me?” Vicki glanced up and squeaked at Abbot who was standing over them both protectively.

“Not that, that knocked around Reach.” Taylor slid to her feet, touching her cheek and hissing in pain. She reached down, hauling Vicky up to her feet and glancing at the hovering shade nervously. It seemed to be staring at them carefully. Taylor glanced at Sabah quietly. “Was that one of your pins?” Taylor spoke and blinked when Parian nodded. “Hit them more.” She spoke and watched as Sabah studied her before waving a hand, a half dozen pins ripping free and lancing out toward the breaker.
They dodged the first two, swooping out of the way but the last four slammed into them, and Taylor watched in surprise as the breaker state actually seemed to fail, their form emerging from the smoke with the pins physically stuck in them. Taylor glanced at Victoria who shrugged and moved toward the figure. She held up a hand to block the blast of lightning. The figure snarled as they got their feet under them, ripping the pins free and charging away from them. Taylor glanced at the rest, but Victoria had already started after them.

Sabah and Amy were quick to follow, and Taylor charged down the street in the pouring rain, the pair quickly catching up to the limping figure as they ripped a pin out of their leg and snarled quietly. Taylor watched silently as the figure staggered away, their form expanding into shadow and instantly collapsing back into the flesh over and over, the gleaming silver pin in the middle of their back impossible to reach but somehow breaking their power.

“Surrender.” Taylor’s voice was cold, and she felt the figure turn to glare at them. But it wasn’t the figure that spoke. A cackling demented voice emerged from the nearby shadows of an alley, a figure appearing from the darkness a moment later. The tall skeletal female form was soaked to the bone and wearing a gleaming gas-mask over their face.

“My. My. My. Four on one doesn’t seem very fair now does it.” The words were accompanied by a mocking laugh as the figure tossed a grenade up into the air and caught it slowly, ever so casually staring back at Taylor through the eyeholes.

“Perhaps.” This voice was calm and casual, and it sent chills down Taylor’s spine as the bare-chested figure walked out of another alley, steam steadily evaporating off their form as they peered out from behind the mask. “Perhaps we should even the odds.” The voice was cold as it stared at her, and Taylor flinched back quietly and stared at the figures. Despite the dread that she felt, something deep in her screamed that something even worse was coming.

Chapter End Notes

[[ DUN DUN DUN. ENJOY THE CLIFFIE. ALSO, ENJOY THE SASSY REACH. This chapter was fun to write, sorry about how short it is, but I didn't want to push into the Lung Fight yet, I've gotta be at work in like... 9 hours, and I should sleep. There'll be Lung Fights and stuff tomorrow. =] I find that Amy's the only one that refers to Victoria as Vicky in her mental dialogue. Everyone else usually goes 'Victoria' It's odd. ]]
This hadn’t been how she’d expected to first run into Lung, Victoria admitted to herself, as she stood in the rain, nervously glancing at her sister, Taylor, and Sabah. During the past when the gangster had been particularly vicious, Victoria had entertained the idea of using her powers to put the trumped-up lizard in his place. During these daydreams though, Victoria hadn’t been soaking wet and wearing what amounted to a glorified cocktail dress. The blonde girl stepped closer to the others, placing herself between Amy and the two Asian capes. She glanced at Taylor, hoping that the girl would say something, let them know what to do.

The girl’s pale face and the horror reflected in her eyes weren’t exactly comforting though. She quietly listened to the almost playful banter of Lung and Bakuda, and she glanced around trying to figure out where Oni Lee was hiding in this mess, frowning at not seeing the cape. When Taylor didn’t respond to the comments from the villains, Victoria had moved to speak, but she ended up being cut off from an unexpected direction.

“No thanks.” Everyone paused and stared at Reach, who’d managed to reach between their shoulder-blades, ripping the last pin free. They dropped it to the ground with an almost casual motion, quickly tidying up their outfit and smoothing everything out. When they caught onto the looks from Lung and Bakuda, they glanced back and forth between the pair, the glowing eyes in their mask actually flicking around as they studied the Asian capes.

“I mean. I appreciate the sentiment. And while I am a ‘huge’ fan of the whole... aesthetic you’ve got going on. Not super on board with the whole...” The figure paused, waving their hands ineffectively for a few moments before continuing in that mechanized voice. “Philosophy of it all.”

Victoria glanced at Amy who stared back at her incredulously, glancing to Sabah, watching the glimmering silver pins in the air as they hovered around Sabah in her costume. She glanced from the girl to the two constructs that followed her. The more realistic looking one was slick with rain, the other looking somewhat more waterlogged. Glancing at Taylor saw her barely paying attention to the interplay and Victoria frowned moving to nudge Taylor who didn’t seem to react at the moment her
eyes unfocused.

“What?” The words came from Bakuda and Victoria flicked her gaze back to the trio of capes. The woman seemed almost enraged by the comment, and she clenched her fist around the grenade though she instantly paused as one of those hands lit up with swirling violet sparks. The hooded figure turned his glowing eyes on the tinker making a slow ‘tsk’-ing sound.

“Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. I wouldn’t. I would hate to think what all this current would do to your no doubt extensive and varied collection of explosives. I can turn intangible, but I’m betting that your boss here, and that nice collection of mostly innocent bystanders wouldn’t survive the incident.” When Bakuda carefully lowered the weapon, Reach exploded into shadows, their form swirling into smoke as Lung dashed toward them, swinging out a fist. The smoke wove around Lung and coalesced back into that Angelic shape a short distance away from the not-dragon and his lieutenant, and Victoria found herself frowning quietly.

Something was wrong. The banter had thrown her off, the odd contrast to the almost juggernaut intensity she’d seen from the cape at the last fight, but while the breaker state was identical, the powers weren’t quite right. Victoria frowned at the visibly growing Lung, though she paused as the cape dropped out of the state, rolling her eyes at mocking comment Reach issued.

“C’mon now, can’t we all just get along? Besides. I think you’ve got other things on your mind.” Victoria glanced at Reach, frowning as Lung and Bakuda paused as well, everyone staring at the shadowy cape. When the glowing red eyes glanced toward them, she stepped back. “What. You don’t think they were waiting here for us? Lung’s been in hiding for weeks, and he’s on the street now? What’s the endgame? Let’s give up all tactical advantage to maybe get a shot at the devastating poster girl of New Wave, and her little friends, if she happens to wander past?” Victoria flicked her eyes to Lung, watching as he stared nervously between them and Reach, though the sound of phone ringing starkly cut off any further speculation from the cloaked cape.

Lung turned his eyes toward Bakuda. She drew out the phone and stared at it, nodding quietly at Lung. Part of Victoria roared in outrage as both of the capes turned away from them and glanced down the street, staring toward the other end of it. Before she could do anything stupid though, she caught the sound of screeching tires over the steady crash of the rain on stone. As the sky lit up with bright streaks of Lightning, Victoria watched a trio of identical black SUV’s rounding a corner and approaching them. As they speeded down the street toward them, a trio of brightly painted vans with gangsters hanging out of them followed at breakneck speed.

Victoria doubted that any of the drivers even got a chance to see them. They were halfway between the corner they’d rounded and the loose knot of capes when they rolled over something in the street, and three detonations happened. Victoria had raised her hands to shield her eyes, but something wrapping around her waist startled her. She blinked as Taylor dragged her close, one hand lifting and a glowing azure barrier snapped into being between them and the explosions.

The head car had simply vanished in a wave of golden light. Victoria was horrified, briefly thinking that the vehicle and its passengers had been vaporized, but a half dozen bodies rolled out of the light, but their half-dressed states were somewhat distracting. The car on the left had smashed into a tight forcefield, and Victoria had briefly thought that it was a forcefield trap. Instead, she stared in horror as violent churning energy filled the bubble obscuring the interior from view. Eventually, after a few moments, the field collapsed and left a naked man with bone white skin and hair standing in a perfectly smooth divot in the ground.

The car on the left had been completely flattened, some sort of Gravity bomb Victoria assumed. An
unhealthy-looking mist was leaking from the wreckage of the vehicle, slowly pooling around it. Other things were also pooling from it as well that looked decidedly less pleasant. Something about this situation sent a chill down in her spine, and Victoria was briefly confronted with a sensation that she’d never had before, the temptation to turn and run.

Instead, Victoria watched as the knot of figures that had been sent sprawling on the ground from the first car began to stand. The first one up was a middle-aged man with dark hair and striking eyes, dressed in a silk shirt and pants not too dissimilar from Taylors, barring their obvious differences in quality and materials. He got his leather shoes under him, turning his furious expression on Lung. A short woman with a tan and brown hair was up next, visibly close in age to the man. She was clad in a dark plum dress-suit. Two younger women clad in silk and not much of it were the last ones on their feet behind the other pair.

“This is bad.” Taylor’s tiny voice was stark and sudden, and Victoria glanced over at Taylor, still pressed to the girl’s side as Taylor shielded them and the ones behind them. She’d briefly thought the woman spoke of the ambush, but Taylor’s eyes were focused Eastward. “Something bad is coming.” Her words were filled with dread, and Victoria felt her heart starting to race at the tone in the other girl’s voice. Before she could respond, a roar of rage drew her focus back to the ambush.

Lung had charged, his hands exploding into flames as he charged toward the man. Victoria blinked as metal seemingly erupted from his body, and a long thin spear grew from his hands just in time to slam into Lung’s chest. The armoured figure, Kaiser, Victoria realized with a sinking feeling, shifted with the attack, driving Lung down into the ground behind him and pinning the other cape to the asphalt with his weapon. At least for the moment, anyway. Lung was already starting to grow.

Lungs charge saw the rest of the figures reacting, the brunette suddenly erupting with a painful white light and lifting off the ground. Bakuda snatched something off her chest and threw it at the group, and they scattered. When the glowing cape started arcing blasts at Bakuda though, the woman vanished in a bubble of brilliant light, appearing where the capes had scattered from. Victoria winced when the maniac whipped out more grenades and started tossing them toward the floating glow bug. Victoria watched the glowing woman use her attacks to blast the explosives out of the air to Bakuda's consternation. Unbeknownst to Bakuda, the mist around the crushed car started to drift toward her.

This left two rapidly growing blondes advancing on them, wearing little beyond their expressions of rage and some rather interesting cuts of silk. Victoria glanced at the others with worry. Amy was staring in horror at the ongoing battle, but Sabah’s creations had begun to move up alongside them.

“Ladies. Ladies.” That mechanized voice made Victoria realize that the shadowy cape hadn’t left and she blinked in confusion as they stepped up and into the path of the blondes, holding up their hands. “We’re not actually part of this… shindig?” Victoria blinked when the figure glanced at her and tilted its head. After a moment she shrugged, her mind-boggling at the absurdity of the gesture from the cape they’d been chasing. It seemed to appease them though, and they turned back to the giants. “Yeah, shindig works I guess. We sorta just stumbled into this trap too. We’re not after you or your boss. You’d be better off helping him out before Lung turns into a dragon. Doubt that he can counter that with a spear.”

The two blondes paused, glancing at each other for a moment before turning back toward where a rapidly growing Lung was facing off with Kaiser. When Lung backhanded the cape away, Victoria thought they might go to help him, but Kaiser surprised everyone as he rolled across the ground. Victoria stared in confusion as his armoured figure begun to emit a soft roiling glow, the sound of metal grinding on metal suddenly quite stark among the sounds of rain spattering on the street.
Rather than standing, Kaiser seemed to draw on his power, shards of metal erupting from his body. Thick plates and blades were forming and wrapping around him, his form expanding outwards. After a moment a pair massive steel arms emerged from his body, hands forming at the ends, each finger tipped in curved blades. The sound of grinding metal and the glow continued as the body formed an impression of a European Dragon with massive wings. Considering his weight, Victoria doubted he’d ever fly, but the challenge seemed to infuriate Lung who was rapidly growing to match him.

The glow intensified, and the screeching became almost unbearable as the metal dragon darted forward, charging over and smashing into the growing flesh one. Victoria winced at the jagged steel claws sinking into Lung’s already abused flesh, tearing at the cape. Victoria stared at the metal dragon and blanched wondering what using his powers like that was doing to Kaiser inside that monstrosity.

“The fuck, that’s such bullshit.” The comments came from the cape between them and the giants, and she found herself cursing under her breath as the giants turned on them. They didn’t speak as they advanced and Victoria blinked when the shadowy cape lit up their hands and sputtered again. “Hey. You really don’t want to pick a fight with us. It won’t end well for you.” Victoria briefly wondered when they’d become an us, but Taylor’s shivering drew her focus.

She glanced down at the trembling cape, wondering if the cold had gotten to her, but the other girl’s expression of dawning horror stabbed at her heart. Taylor glanced up at her and Victoria felt her mouth go dry.

“It’s coming.” The voice was filled with dread, and then something brought the entire fight to a standstill. The long low Wa sound that seemed to stab through her confused Victoria for a few moments. She tried to place it. A Siren. An air-raid siren. The Endbringer siren. Victoria felt a flash through her form as she turned and glanced toward the water even though the buildings were between her and the ocean and she couldn’t see anything. Everyone else stood stock still as the sirens continued.

They all seemed to be staring at each other, waiting for a hint on what to do. To continue the fight or to leave. It wasn’t until Taylor spoke that everyone turned toward her.

“It’s Leviathan. He’s coming here.” Taylor spoke, and her voice seemed to carry, reaching everyone present who shivered and glanced around. Taylor seemed to stand straighter, her expression still filled with terror, but her back was straight, her lips formed into a thin line. “The Endbringer truce is in effect. We need to get to the staging point.” Taylor stared at everyone with a cold look in her eye. Victoria watched Lung, the one with the least respect for the rules but when he started to shrink everyone backed away from each other. Taylor stared at the rest for a few moments.

“There’ll be messages going out on the news about where they’ll be organizing things.” She said it like she expected all of them to show up for the fight, and Victoria frowned when Lung’s monstrous head seemed to nod at her. Taylor glanced at her and then she turned, quickly striding off. Victoria stared at the milling capes in confusion for a few moments before glancing at Reach. The cape seemed to stare back for a moment before shrugging and exploding into a mist, rocketing upwards. They seemed to hover in the air for a moment before shooting off toward the docks.

Glancing at Amy and Sabah, taking in her sister’s uncertain expression she offered a shrug before moving to hurry after Taylor. She heard the others moving up behind her, and they all rushed down the street, heading in the general direction Sabah’s shop.
Taylor rounded the corner and saw Ralph’s PRT issue jeep still sitting near the shop. She let out a relieved sigh, heading toward the shop, glancing over as Victoria caught up to her and kept pace. The slow fading wet slapping hinted at Sabah and Amy’s reduced speed in their wake. She headed toward the shop, letting out a relieved sigh when Ralph emerged and glanced at her. She saw the look of irritation on his features but was relieved when he didn’t say anything merely glancing at her before gesturing to the vehicle.

“The defenders are organizing in a building downtown; you’ll need to get home and change into your costume Taylor. New Wave will meet you there.” He glanced at Victoria who’d let out a nod before glancing at her sister. Both girls seemed reluctant for a moment but then Amy stepped close and allowed Vicky to heft her up. They were about to leave when Victoria paused and glanced her way. Taylor let out a soft smile and waved her on.

“I’ll see you at the building.” Victoria seemed to hesitate for a moment as if wanting to say something. Whatever it was she shook it off and then lifted from the ground with Amy in her arms and rocketed off toward the Dallon estate. Taylor turned and glanced at Sabah, tilting her head curiously. She gestured the jeep in clear invitation, but the doll figure merely shook her head before speaking.

“I’ve got to get these guys over. I’ll just ride something over.” The words were mysterious, deliberately so, and Taylor shook her head. She considered the large creatures and knew that Sabah needed to get them there, herself. With a tired sigh, Taylor hopped into the van. She watched as Ralph drew something from a pocket and handed it to Sabah before jumping into the car. This trip wasn’t like the others she’d taken with Ralph around the city. The PRT trooper was focused and going significantly faster than the speed limit. He seemed to know which paths to take, and he ended up dodging down a lot of streets that had been cordoned off for PRT traffic.

Wondering why she had yet to hear from her father, Taylor reached for her pocket, Taylor paused at finding nothing. She frowned as she remembered leaving her phone and wallet on Sabah’s kitchen table as they’d played cards, wanting to keep the things from getting too wet. Taylor stared out the window, dreading the conversation that she’d soon be having with her father.

The house was eerily silent despite the audible blowing off the wind buffeting the place, and Taylor moved around inside, silently grateful that her father was already gone. She walked through the house, quickly dashing up the stairs. Grabbing a towel from the bathroom before heading to her bedroom, Taylor stripped down and dried herself off with surprising speed. She quickly shimmied into her uniform’s body-suit portion as she snatched her gloves and boots out of her closet.

The sound of the phone ringing drew her attention, and she hurried down the stairs, buckling her brown belt in place. She hit the ground floor and hopped along one foot to slip her boot on, swapping her hopping foot and pulling on the other boot. She charged into the sitting room and snagged the phone hitting the button and holding it up to her ear and speaking as she slid her gloves on.
“Hebert Residence, Taylor speaking.” She blinked as the words slipped out casually, and she chuckled at the weary relieved sigh that came across the line.

“Taylor, thank god. I’ve been trying to call you for almost twenty minutes. What are you doing at home, you need to get to the shelter over on Peterson, they’ll be closing it down shortly.” Taylor blinked, frowning quietly at her dad’s words. She glanced around the empty room silently and let out a soft sigh. She heard her Dad’s inhale and she cut in before he could start.

“Dad. I’m going to help. I can heal, and I’m significantly more powerful than most capes. I have to do this.” Taylor spoke softly, biting her lip as he cut back.

“You don’t ‘have’ to do anything at all Taylor. You’re a teenage girl, you’re not obligated to stand up to anyone at all-” Taylor cut in quickly, silencing him.

“Dad they’re attacking the city, I can’t just huddle in the dark and hope that I’m one of the lucky ones that survive. Amy’s going to be there, Vicky and Sabah too. I have to help.” She glanced at the wall as she took the phone in her hand once more. “I don’t have time to talk with you about this dad. I’ve got to go. I’m sorry. I love you, and hopefully, we can argue about this once it’s all over.”

Taylor quickly hit the end call button and turned, heading out into the hall. She saw Ralph standing on the stoop about to knock, and she headed over.

Opening the door, she glanced at Ralph, flushing as the ringing resumed in the background. She glanced at him quietly taking in his own reaction before she shut the door and locked it, tucking her keys into her costume and moving toward the Jeep. Ralph didn’t comment as he followed, though as they slid into the vehicles, she watched the man pull out his own cell phone and quietly swipe something on it before starting the call and heading off.

Taylor had expected the building to be more impressive, for the last stand of the city it seemed like any other commercial complex. Five or six stories and muted in colour, Taylor only picked it out because of the five sprayer equipped vans parked outside, and the massive, terrifying dragon suit that was standing between it and the ocean. Ralph parked his jeep in a nearby lot with several other matching vehicles, and then he hopped out. Taylor moved out as well, and she slipped around the car, coming to a stop before Ralph. She stared at the man quietly as he glanced around.

“The capes are meeting in there, Taylor. Just head in, and you’ll probably find some of New Wave waiting, most of them probably beat you here, it’ll be a toss-up depending on how fast Glory Girl flew.” He glanced at her quietly and ran a hand through his hair. “Taylor-” He paused, frowning as he stared at her and Taylor let out a weak laugh, moving forward and hugging the trooper quietly.

“Yeah, I get it. Don’t die either.” She smiled up at the man who snorted at her before they separated. Ralph headed for the vans and Taylor headed for the building. She’d approached the lot, moving past the vans quietly and heading for the building. Most of the troopers were watching the parking lot, but a few nodded at her as she passed and she ducked into the lobby finding it packed with capes of every shape and size, the kaleidoscope of colour rather startling at first glance.

She stood at the door looking around but a flash of white drew her eye, and she saw New Wave in a
knot of colour off to one side, everyone present including Victoria in her new costume and Amy in her cloak. The adults had grabbed a bunch of chairs, forming them in a ring that they were sitting in, talking to each other. Taylor quickly approached them, frowning when Carol got up and approached with a severe look. She studied the woman quietly and sighed when she got close enough that the woman could speak.

“Your father has been calling me; he’s rather upset that you’re here.” Taylor studied Carol quietly before squaring her shoulders. Carol studied her with a sigh and rubbed her nose. “I can understand his concern. Taylor, Amy and Victoria are here. If this goes as the other fights have gone, Leviathan typically has a kill rate of one in four.” Taylor took in Carol’s severe expression and remembered what Sarah had said in the PRT offices.

“Let’s beat the odds then, yeah?” She tried to offer a confident smile, but it faltered, and Carol just nodded back. When Carol moved back to sit in the chairs with Neil, Mark and Sarah, Taylor headed past them and stopped near where Amy was sat over a chair. The healer had sat over it backwards facing a standing Crystal, Eric and Victoria. Taylor joined them quietly, giving Amy a squeeze on the shoulder that saw the girl glancing up at her with a soft smile. Taylor didn’t speak to the others, but she offered Victoria a quick smile when the blonde looked at her with relief.

Not too far from where they stood, the Wards were talking with a bunch of other young looking capes, Wards from different cities, Taylor guessed. She watched Aegis speaking with a metal skinned young man, the pair speaking in hushed tones. The rest of the Wards had mingled together, and Taylor blinked as she saw Gallant tucked in among the crowd, glancing in their direction. She glanced toward Vicky who seemed to be looking anywhere besides in his direction. Taylor let out a soft sigh but didn’t broach the topic, turning toward the crowd quietly.

Taylor let her eyes ghost over the capes she recognized and quickly inspected those she didn’t. Her mind was far too focused on the dread she felt to really react to them, though. Something deep in her was still filled with a pit of darkness and terror at the oncoming storm. She knew what it was now, what was coming, but something still niggled at her. She was so focused on her thoughts that she didn’t notice anything going on with the crowd until Legend audibly cleared his throat. She started and glanced around finding all of New Wave’s eyes on Legend.

“We owe thanks to Dragon and Armsmaster for this early alert.” Taylor glanced over and focused on the leader of the Protectorate, studying him quickly before turning her attention to what he was saying. “We’ve had time to gather, and that means we have just a few more minutes to prepare and brief for Leviathan’s arrival, instead of jumping straight into the fray as we arrive. With this advantage, some luck, teamwork and a solid effort from everyone, I hold out hope that this could be one of the good days.” Taylor blinked quietly, listening to the words and let out a nervous sigh as the Force seemed to bubble ominously within her.

“But you should know your chances going in. Given the statistics from our previous encounters with this beast, a ‘good day’ still means that one in four of the people in this room will probably be dead before this day is done.” Taylor let out a quiet sigh as she crossed her arms. Legend, it seemed, agreed with the bubbling in her gut.

The rain had gotten even worse as the explanation progressed, and Taylor watched the others
shifting nervously as the ominous sounds of the wind buffeting the building were heard. She watched out the window, listening raptly to Legend’s description of Leviathan’s tactics as the torrential rain turned the ocean into a mess of froth, the waves starting to grow worse and worse as Taylor watched.

“Capes! If you have faced an Endbringer before, stand!” Taylor turned her attention back to Armsmaster when the man called out, and she remained off to one side with the rest, watching as a third of the group stood. She listened as Armsmaster separated the groups out and assigned roles. Taylor listened, starting when Aegis handed her one of the bands. She took the band in hand and slotted it over her arm, adjusting it carefully. Following the directions, Taylor pressed both buttons before moving to speak her cape name into it. When it displayed her name, she confirmed it and then glanced up.

Taylor nervously fidgeted with the band on her arm, listening silently as Armsmaster had been dividing them up. She could help in several areas, but she’d glance over at Amy lifting an eyebrow. She was a healer, and while she wasn’t at Amy’s level, she was better than most of the others present. Staying here and helping with the injured would probably be her most advantageous position, especially as she could assist with the defence of the support staff until she was needed. She let out a soft sigh when Amy nodded at her and quietly hung back. She felt a few eyes on her from the local capes as she remained with Amy, but they all ended up moving on without comment.

Taylor frowned when the rest of the team besides Amy stood and scattered amongst the various groups. Taylor’s eyes followed Victoria, watching as she ended up joining with Alexandria. When the girl came to a stop next to the cape with the Tower on her chest, Taylor was surprised when Alexandria leaned over and whispered something to her. Taylor was curious about what had been said that saw Vicky’s cheek’s darkening. When the blonde glanced at her Taylor flashed a gentle smile her way. Taylor watched as the others began to move out.

Several groups vanished with cracks as teleporters started moving them into position and she glanced over at Amy. The girl in the cloak flashed her an encouraging her a smile before moving off to speak with the Othalla and the other remaining capes. With little else to do, Taylor slipped silently over to stand at the window, staring out at the water quietly.

Taylor watched as the shielders spread out along the beach, Eidolon among them and the shields sprang up to intercept the first of the tidal waves. Taylor watched the water smashing on the waves something in her niggling at her. She saw the wall of water crash into the barrier, breaking on it and then as the water started to recede, Taylor shivered as four glowing lights suddenly appeared beyond the barrier.

Taylor watched in horror as Leviathan smashed through the overlapping shields like they were tissue paper, taking in his appearance with quiet dread. Part of her considered his overly long limbs, his entire body seemingly adapted for life in the water. Despite the seeming fragility of his form, he seemed to have no issue standing, or, more importantly running.

The monster had smashed through the shields and the capes that had been maintaining them on the beach, but he didn’t stop to attack the fallen, to finish them off. The Endbringer seemed singularly focused and hadn’t stopped his charge, heading straight up the beach. Taylor watched as the creature’s legs carried it forward, headed directly for the building she stood in, his four glowing eyes locked on Taylor’s own. As she stood stock still and stared, Taylor heard her band on her wrist spring to life, speaking.

“Dauntless down ED-1, Lionwing down ED-1, Bastion Down ED-1, …”
[[DUNDUNDUNDUN, Cliffhanger again xD. But uh. This’ll be interesting. Leviathan wasn’t as quick to attack this time, but he does certainly seem to have something in for Taylor. S’odd that. As always, loving your feedback, lemme know what you think. As for the metal dragon thing, I imagined it as Max using his power to constantly form and vanish the metal in a way as to simulate movement. I figure he’d have come up with the idea as Lung steadily picked apart his forces. So, I'll have an interlude up on Tuesday or Wednesday, with another one up each day after. Next Arc will start on Friday or Saturday of next week probably. =] ]]

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Summary

[[Easter wasn't that hectic, and I found some time to write something out quickly. Figured that I’d start us off with Sabah interlude, introduce Lily and stuffs. =] Nothing overly new covered here, but it’s a different perspective, and we’ll get to see some new interactions. The next two interludes will be wholly unique. We’ll have Leet and Dragon saving Uber on Wednesday, and Coil's stuff on Friday. ]]

May 15th, 2011
Brockton Bay Docks

She’d gotten a few strange looks as she’d emerged from the rain, riding atop the large six-legged creature, with the massive spike covered brute following her, but they’d eventually waved her through. No one had even made a fuss about her bringing her creations into the meeting area, though few had been willing to sit near her, much less interact with her. Sabah had spent most of the time since she’d arrived staring at the rain on the windows, though one person had eventually struck up the nerve to come and speak with her.

Sabah stared quietly at the tiny girl in the old-fashioned frock as she chattered on about their outfits matching. She watched the strange little girl as she kept glancing nervously up at Sabah’s pets. The girl, Bambina, was a villain of some fashion, and her faux girlishness was grating. Sabah glanced around but finding no escape turned her focus back to the small girl, waiting till she glanced up at Sabah’s newest creation.

When the bright blue eyes of the little maniac drifted up, Sabah let her power move, causing the ruddy brown head of her ‘Acklay’ to lower and nuzzle her shoulder. She reached up, trailing her fingers over the large rubbery crest on the praying mantis-like head, barely feeling the long, dangerous looking teeth ghosting over the fabric on her shoulder. She glanced back at the tiny girl, watching her face pale as she tilted her head in a manner she imagined made the mask look slightly creepy.

“Sorry, did you want to pet Alice?” She peered up at the creature, moving the mouth open and letting out a hiss behind her mask to make it seem like the beast was doing it. When she glanced back, she saw the flutter of the poor girl’s hair as she spun in place and stalked off. Sabah found herself grinning behind her mask, and the casual chuckle to one side startled her.

“Impressive. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone unsettle Bambina before.” Sabah blinked and glanced over, curiously inspecting the speaker. Skintight purple suit and a visor. The armour panels were shiny and vaguely arrow-shaped, and Sabah chuckled, studying the weapon hanging from her back. Sabah eventually shifted a bit, allowing Alice’s head to draw back, the Acklay moving to mimic Abbot, their eyes occasionally focusing on random capes, watching them for a few moments before looking away. Sabah imagined that this why she had a small section of the meeting room to herself despite the size of the crowd.

“She’s certainly...intense. Is she from your city? I’m guessing she’s a villain of some sort.” Sabah
finally spoke, bowing her head in greeting to the other cape. She smirked behind her mask when the
other girl shifted nervously under her gaze, finding the nervousness almost cute.

“No, she’s on this team with these two other child-capes. They’re all insane though, and I think that
they’re nominally based out of LA, but we’ve only seen them in New York once or twice.” The girl
seemed to pause, considering her for a moment before speaking, “I’m Flechette, by the way. New
York Wards.” The girl offered out a hand Sabah found herself chuckling as a voice that sounded a
lot like Taylor whispered in the back of her head, telling her that the girl was trying to see if she was
a villain or a hero.

“Nice to meet you Flechette, I’m Parian.” Sabah casually offered out a gloved hand. Sabah chuckled
when despite the dampness the other girl reached out and shook her hand quickly. Only once the
other girl had released her hand, did Sabah take mercy on her and continue speaking, “I’m local, and
what most would term a ‘rogue’ though I mostly consider myself an entrepreneur.” at the girl’s
curious look Sabah ran a hand through the fake hair on her head. “I’m a Fashion Student, and I work
as a seamstress and tailor.”

“Really?” The girl seemed shocked and impressed, and Sabah stared at her curiously, frowning
behind her when the young hero casually continued. “I don’t know if I could manage to do a
‘normal’ job on top of the whole, ‘hero’ thing.” Sabah stared at the girl quietly, frowning at the tone.
It was clear that this girl was only a year or two older than Taylor, but she spoke like her entire life
was already decided. “Have you done any work that I’d be familiar with?” The girl continued,
unaware of Sabah’s internal conflict. “Like with clothes, I mean.” She clarified, and Sabah snorted,
glancing around.

“Oh. Uhm.” Sabah floundered for a moment about what to say, but she was saved when the doors
hisset open. Glancing over, Sabah watched as Victoria and Amy entered in their costumes, nodding
at her before heading toward the rest of New Wave. She returned the nod, before glancing back at
Flechette. “Typically I work in the civilian market, but I did redesign Glory Girl’s outfit recently.”
she gently pointed toward the blonde girl with her flowing sash. She glanced at Frechette, watching
as the girl glanced over and paused, staring just a bit too directly at the other girl in the form-fitting
costume.

“Woah.” Sabah watched the girl, chuckling behind her mask as it took the girl a few moments to
recover before shaking herself and glancing back toward Sabah. “W-Wait, you know Glory Girl?”
Sabah blinked slowly before tilting her head and allowing her amusement to leak into her voice.

“Yes. I did have to meet her to design her outfit. We had a mutual acquaintance, and we’ve sort of
become friends because of it. Actually, before the sirens went off, we’d been back at my place
playing poker.” She spoke quickly, deciding on keeping things simple, oddly this still seemed to
shock the other girl. Sabah frowned quietly and took in the visible shock on the lower half of the
girl’s face. “What?”

“It’s just. It’s an odd mental image to have.” She paused, shifting quietly in thought. “I’ve never
really considered meeting up with other capes, even the other Wards, outside of ‘work.’ They
disourage us from being too close in our civilian identities, to keep from outing everyone if one of
us gets unmasked. Add to that most of us attending different schools, and it can be hard to make
’work’ friends.” Sabah frowned quietly and took in the visible shock on the lower half of the
girl’s face. “What?”

“New Wave’s identities are public, so that means that they have fewer hoops to jump through in
regards to all that. It’s...odd. Up to recently, no one knew who I was at all, not even my family,
but... It’s nice having friends that know who I really am under the mask.” Sabah shrugged. She was
tempted to explain more, but pointing people toward her friendship with Taylor would probably end up outing her eventually, and she didn’t really want to do that to this stranger. Instead, she glanced over at Flechette, taking in her weapon curiously. “So, you have some magic arrow power I’m guessing?”

“They’re needles actually. I can sort of mess with the physics of them. Make them fly through anything as long I charge em.” The girl grinned and reached into her quiver, drawing out a single long pin. She casually showed them off and feeling a bit bold, Sabah let her own power move, slipping one of her smaller needles free and allowing it to hover near her side. She grinned impishly over at the other girl, even though the Ward couldn’t see it. She saw the shock on the girl’s face. “...How...” She glanced up at the creatures looming near her and Sabah found herself chuckling.

“I’m more of a telekinetic than a master. They’re not real creatures. They’re more like puppets really. Stuffed animals with special coatings and attachments.” Sabah gestured the girl toward the creatures and watched the poor things trepidation in approaching and touching Alice. Sabah kept the creature still, though part of her refused to not mess with the girl at all, and she had the creature’s eyes follow Flechette as she approached. She observed the girl dragging her hand over the creation quietly humming as she watched the girl. “My power sort of fills them up, and I can control them as long as it remains in them.”

“Huh...” The words were cut off by a polite cough from one side, and the girl glanced up from the monster she’d been touching to stare over her shoulder. Sabah followed her gaze, and frowned at the sight of the figure in armour and holding a lance. Part of it, Sabah imagined, was the similarity to Crusader in appearance, but another was the bald distrust on the young man’s face as he stared at them. Parian watched as the girl turned and shuffled over, speaking in hushed tones with the slightly older boy. It was difficult to guess what they were talking about and Sabah was hardly surprised when the girl returned a moment later. “I’ve uh. I’ve got to get back to my team, but...” She trailed off and frowned, and Sabah found herself chuckling.

“I’m on PHO as Parian. Feel free to message me sometime.” She snickered at the sudden eager grin on the girls face, though another cough caused the girl to huff and spin in place, Sabah couldn’t see the girl’s expression, but whatever it was caused her team-leader to take a nervous step back. The girl stared at him a moment before turning and quickly dashing back to Abbot. She dragged her fingers along the creatures Talons, tapping each tusk and tracing the teeth before flashing Sabah a smile and charging after her team leader. Sabah watched the girl go with a bemused smile, curiously turning and studying her creatures.

She spent several minutes ensuring that they were both battle-ready, though the sight of a flash of white in her periphery caused her to glance over. She let out a sigh as she saw Taylor enter the building. She watched the girl’s cursory glance around the area, but she figured that Taylor hadn’t spotted her when she seemed to catch New Wave First and disappeared over toward them. She was tempted to slip over too, but before long the meeting began and she chose to settle into her chair and listen to Legend speaking.

Sabah quietly fiddled with the bracer on her arm that casually displayed ‘Parian’ on its face. She glanced around, moving to peer at Alexandria. She blinked at a cough to her left and glanced over seeing Victoria staring at her curiously.
“Didn’t think you had any sort of invulnerability.” The girl spoke, and Sabah snorted gesturing up at the two constructs that hovered close to her.

“Expendable minions.” She spoke quickly and then blinked when Victoria glanced up and took in the creatures quietly. The sound of shouts drew her attention to the water, and she watched Victoria glancing down and watching her cousins forming up with the rest, glowing shields forming and overlapping up and down the beach. Sabah crossed her arms against the chill and the wet, watching the wave rising and smashing against the shields.

She turned her head toward Victoria, parting her lips to ask a question, though the words died on her lips at the horrified expression on the girl’s face. She turned her head back toward the wave just in time to watch Leviathan smash through the shields, sending half a dozen capes flying as he crashed through them. Sabah stared in horror as it ignored everyone and charged unerringly toward the building she’d just vacated. The building that still held Taylor and the healers.

The creature was unnaturally spry, charging along on legs far too thin to carry his bulky form, and Sabah watched as he leapt forward, spinning in place and smashing his long, dangerous tail down on the building. She flinched back at Victoria’s shout as the creature spun and lifted both hands crashing them viciously down on the building, reducing it to rubble. Victoria was already moving as were a half dozen capes and Sabah charged after them, her two creations effortlessly bounding along in her wake.
“Seamus.” The words ripped a curse from blonde man, though for the moment he didn’t look at or respond to the face on the screen that was the newest addition to his ice cream truck. Instead, he focused on trying to drive the blasted thing. Making the damn thing a standard had seemed like a great idea when Uber was around. Harper couldn’t drive standard, and that meant that Uber would always have to drive, but now that he was playing at being a statue, Leet found himself grinding the gears as he navigated the rainy streets. As he finally got the damn thing into second gear and drove down the mostly deserted streets, he flicked his eyes over at the simulated face on the screen that he’d installed in the dash. “Seamus, think of all the good you could—”

“Dragon—” Leet paused, frowning at the severe look the woman’s face sent him from the screen. The young man rubbed tiredly at his face, and let out a sigh. It was still bizarre that the world’s pre-eminent tinker insisted that he call her by her first name, especially considering the rather… unimpressed looks that Armsmaster sent him whenever he acquiesced to her demands. Still, she tended to get even more irritating when he didn’t play along, so the next time that he came to a red light, the tinker tried again, speaking nervously.

“Sorry, ‘Tessa.’ I’ve told you several times that I’m not fond of my first name. If you must refer to me by something other then my cape name, please call me Harper.” He stared at the face on the screen for a few moments before she let out a nod and continued. He listened with one ear as he got the truck back into gear and headed toward the docks, cursing quietly each time he had to shift gears. Several times he was tempted to admit that he should have followed Dragon’s suggestion about using one of her transports.

“Fine. Harper, you should seriously consider the deal. We could do a lot of good together. The Guild’s gone out of their way to arrange this deal with the PRT, and it’s probably the only way that you’ll keep yourself out of prison.” Harper rubbed tiredly at his face instead of responding, glancing around the empty streets. The young man watched the rain splashing over the windshield through the wiping blades. The silence continued as he carefully took a turn and drove on, glancing between the various burned out buildings as he guided the terrifying looking ice cream truck toward the cordoned off area that contained his partner in crime.

“I’m considering it Tess, but I’ll have to talk with Uber about it.” Truthfully he’d enjoyed working...
with Tessa. The other tinker had been amusing to speak with, and her powers meant that she could understand and counter the constant mistakes that his power typically wove into his work. It’d meant that he’d completed the device in the back of the truck in half the time his creations often took and Dragon had even helped refine the process of developing the device, despite having no idea how the thing would work. Truthfully, even Harper had no idea what the thing would do beyond targeting specific energy fields and cancelling them.

As the familiar sight of chain link fences came along, Harper found himself staring forlornly up at the familiar silhouette of the Dockworkers Association, and it took a flash of lightning before he noticed the broken windows and the fire damage. The truck rumbled along, only coming to a stop when the bubble of sunlight and dry air was close to the grill of the truck. He glanced around watching the PRT troopers off to one side, sitting in their tent and staying out of the genuinely horrible rain storm.

Harper took the keys from the ignition, pocketing them and moving to rest his elbows on the flat wheel, resting his chin on his crossed arms and staring out the window at the glowing bubble. The rain splashing over the windows soon obscured the bubble itself, but the sunlight effect was still visible even through the running water. The young tinker took a deep breath before letting out a long sigh, and a soft noise drew his attention back to the screen, finding Tess watching him through the feed. He knew what she was going to say before she said it, but he let her get the words out finally.

“Harper, you need to look out for yourself. It took a lot for us to get you out of your charges, and you’ll be paying those off for a while but—” Harper had heard enough, and he moved to speak, quickly cutting across the other tinker.

“But Uber isn’t as useful. He’s just a basic thinker. Not as helpful. He’ll have to take the fall.” He snapped his eyes over at Tessa and frowned at the look on her face, rubbing tiredly at his face before continuing. “It was my idea you know? Beck could have done anything, been a mercenary or a hero even with his power. He was my best friend though, and it was my idea to do the pranks, do the crimes. I was the one with the shitty power that always exploded in his face and backfired, and I didn't trust myself, I made it a game, and he went along with it. You’re asking me to leave my friend hanging for the shit that was -my- idea, Tess.” Harper glanced at her and saw the conflicted look on her face and felt a bit of satisfaction lance through him. Good. He shouldn’t be the only one feeling guilty about this.

Before she could continue though, the short blonde tinker pushed the door open, hopping out and grabbing his toolbelt from under his seat. Snapping it on, he moved over, carefully pulling open the side door. The black tracking band on his left arm crackled to life before Dragon’s voice issued from it, the light on its face blinking on and off to show that she was listening in.

“Are you sure it’s safe to use in the rain?” Harper snorted softly as he ignored the cold water splashing through his outfit. Tess had been less appreciative of the video game costumes, and he was clad in simple cover-alls and a lab coat, goggles hanging around his neck. He’d pull on the giant rubberized gloves before dragging the mobile power supply out of the truck, hauling it over to set it on the ground next to the bubble. The power supply was one of Tess' creations, and it seemed much more rugged and straightforward than something that he would have made, but it worked, which was probably the trade-off. Harper flipped open the screen, tapping it several times with his giant gloves and getting it charging.

“Trust in the Harper, the Harper is good.” He spoke casually, heading back and climbing into the truck. He lifted the case, wheeling it over and gently lowering it out of the truck and then dragging it over to rest next to the power supply. Cracking open the case, Harper curiously inspected the weapon. At first pass, it seemed like a chainsaw or a mini-gun that had had their ‘dangerous’ parts
When the power supply nearby let out a three-toned chirp, he shifted the ‘weapon’ around and drew out a giant orange cable with a big attachment on one end. He pulled one end of the wire out of the case and dragged it over to the power supply. Taking a moment to say a prayer, he carefully slotted it into the power supply, wincing and waiting. When nothing happened for a few moments, he opened one eye, peeking at the power and the wire before letting out a whoop.

Dragging the other end of the cable back, he quickly slotted it onto the rear of the weapon. Quickly pulling his goggles up off his neck and over his face, he grasped the two handles on the device, using both to heft it up and out of the case. Struggling and grunting at the weight, Harper pulled it up and turned it toward the field. He paused here taking a moment to juggle the weapon as he tried to brace it with one leg while so he could free one hand. Once the tinker was reasonably sure that it was stable, he quickly opened up the small screen on the weapon’s side that would control it, tapping a few times. When the display lit up, he hefted the weapon and moved it, pointing it at the bubble.

“Settled on a name?” Tess’ voice was casual, and Harper glanced down at the band on his arm. He knew that the subject change was a peace offering and he took it for what it was worth.

“Not really, why don’t you name it? I’m sure we could something like… Gae Bolg that fits your theme I think?” He smirked to himself as he oriented the dish on the bubble of sunlight and smoke-tainted air. Pulling one trigger, he watched the screen as the device locked on the effect and began tuning the weapon to the time-stop effect. His arms hurt but he did what he could to keep the weapon steady, bracing it with his leg as the progress bar crept along slowly.

“Yeah? I’m surprised you knew that name, I didn’t think you knew of any culture that existed before the microchip. The name is suitably impressive, though are you sure you don’t want to call it something like; the M490 Blackstorm.” Harper chuckled as he watched the progress bar pass 80%. He adjusted the weapon carefully but did his best to keep it aimed right.

“Oho, Tess’s got some game. Didn’t take you for a player.” He hummed as he adjusted his grip.

“Though this isn’t really an accurate reproduction of a Black Hole Launcher. I mean, I’m not even sure what the effect will be like. I sort of went into this a bit blind.” He paused, frowning as the weapon let out a soft ding. He glanced down seeing a ‘READY’ displayed on the weapon’s tiny status screen. He shifted, lifting the weapon.

“Alright, Tess. Let’s see if this blows up in my face.” He grinned and before Dragon could respond, he’d press the second trigger. He was surprised when after whirring up the weapon shuddered and issued forth a familiar brilliant golden light. The energy was contained, spraying forward in a glowing cone from the weapon’s dish. Anywhere the glow crashed into the barrier; the field suddenly shrank until it wasn’t touching the golden light. Harper stared in shocked horror at the glow, glancing down seeing a ‘READY’ displayed on the weapon’s tiny status screen. He shifted, lifting the weapon.

“I-Is that.” He spoke as we stepped forward. “Did we…” His voice was shaky, but he moved the weapon, carefully waving the glowing field over the time-stop bubble causing it to shrink rapidly. Tess didn’t respond, and he moved continuing to attack the bubble, each time the glow hit it causing the field to shrink until it barely contained Uber in his power-armour. He adjusted his grip, pointing the glowing cone up, not wanting to kill Uber by unfreezing him too slowly. He stepped right up to the edge of the field before bringing the bright energy cone down and over Uber in one sharp pass, collapsing the time field entirely.
He watched as Uber suddenly staggered forward, ending up on his knees. He’d quickly lurch to his feet, spinning in place with his shield and sword in hand. Seeming to realize something was off, Uber paused and shifted, staring upwards at the rain. Leet quickly released the trigger, ending the stilling effect and turning to stare at Uber as he spun around once more. When the suit’s helmet’s gaze settled fully on him, Harper found himself smiling. After a moment, he pushed his goggles up, watching Uber staggering towards him.


“What’s the last thing you remember Beck?” The lack of cape name seemed to bother the armoured figure, and he’d pause, glancing around before sighing, and setting his weapons down.

“...Harper, what’s going on?” When Harper didn’t respond, Beck lifted a hand removing his helmet and setting it next to his leg. “We were fighting off Bakuda, and you took a bad hit. Those two girls showed up, and she tossed a grenade at them. I got between it and them, and the next thing I know it’s raining, and we’re all alone. What’s going on Seamus.” Harper rubbed his face quietly.

“It’s been weeks, Beck. That grenade that you jumped in front of trapped you in a time stop field. You were stuck in it, and it didn’t look like it was going to collapse on its own.” He winced at his friend’s serious look, nervously rubbing his face. “I went to the PRT, turned myself in. Leveraged this against their help saving you.” He hefted the weapon. “They figure it’ll be able to save Gray Boy’s victims, and they’re mostly right I think. Dragon helped me make it.” He watched his old friend standing there with a conflicted look on his face before Beck could say anything else though, a sound quickly cut across them both.

The Endbringer Sirens. Harper stared in horror at his armband, finding the light off. He glanced at Uber quietly and gestured him along. The blonde tinker moved to unhook the weapon, quickly stuffing it back in its case. When he glanced up, Uber had already disconnected the power cord and wound it up. He thanked the other man and stuffed the wire away and dragged the case along, Uber quickly outpacing him with the power supply. Harper left Beck to put the gear away and jumped into the passenger set, pulling the screen around and tapping it, letting out a sigh when Dragon’s face appeared on it looking distracted.

“Harper, I can’t talk right now. The Endbringer detector I developed with Armsmaster has predicted an attack on Brockton Bay. Leviathan is coming, and he’s coming by sea. You need to get back a PRT safe house. I’m sending you-” He glanced up as Uber pulled open the driver’s side door and climbed in. He pulled the keys from his pocket, tossing them toward his partner. He watched as Uber caught them in one hand, throwing his helmet in the back and turning the vehicle on, shifting it smoothly into gear.

“We’re going to help.” Harper cut Dragon off, ignoring the incredulous look from Uber. “There’s a lot of people out here, squatting in the ruins. We’ll get as many of them together as we can and deliver them to the shelters, help out where we can. The trucks pretty durable and it does have weapons, we’ll be fine. I’ll see you when it’s all done, Tess.” He nodded at Dragon on the screen and ignored her look, but it seemed that the other tinker had more important things to do since she cut out after a moment.

Harper glanced over to see Uber’s raised eyebrow and shrugged softly. “Endbringer truce is in effect; we can see anyone around here dropped off at the nearest shelters then we can get out of the city.” He quickly studied the armband he wore, trying to figure out how to remove it without Dragon noticing. The offer was enticing, but he didn’t want to leave Uber hanging. As he studied it quietly,
he didn’t see Beck staring at him curiously as they pulled out of the lot and headed off, quickly driving down side streets.

Harper glanced up as Beck grabbed the microphone control over his head, pulling the device down to his mouth and speaking into it as they drove down the side streets. As he spoke, the words would be tossed out, echoing down the street around them as Harper watched each of the burned out warehouses creeping past.

“If you can hear my voice, make your way down to the street. These Sirens are not a test, there is an Endbringer coming, and you do not want to be out here when it arrives. We will be providing transport to the nearest Endbringer shelter. I repeat…”

Chapter End Notes

[[And that’s Interlude 10. Uber and Leet back together, and wandering the city once more. =] We’ll be seeing a bit more of these guys fairly early into Arc 5. As always, lemme know what you think and hopefully, you didn’t find the Harpy shift too jarring.]]
In one timeline, Thomas Calvert sat quietly in his office, watching the rain splashing on the window, his dark gray eyes enjoying the way that the water cascaded over the window. Currently, this version of him was doing his best to look busy. In another timeline, the man that called himself Coil was ensconced within his base, carefully watching the feeds he’d had spread around the city. As he watched the Asian gangsters descending on Medhall, he had to admit to being privately impressed with Lung’s plan. Not terribly dissimilar to his own barring the difference in their levels of openness, Lung had managed to start to turn the public against the PRT.

As the gangster smashed in the front windows, Coil quickly shifted camera feeds, watching the gun-toting criminals screaming threats, getting people all over the lobby face down on the ground, zip-tying each person and moving on. When the security guard came up, Thomas was impressed when one of the gangsters produced a long-distance taser and downed the guard, tying him down as well. Lung had to have been training these people in secret because to practiced and precise motions of each uniformed gangster was startling to behold.

They moved like soldiers, walking in perfect formation with their weapons drawn, covering exits and quickly taking out threats with the minimum amount of force necessary. That, Thomas imagined, was the sticking point to most of the public. To the people that hadn’t personally dealt with the gangsters, the ones that lived in the more affluent parts of the city that were covered by the PRT or the police, or to those that struggled under the racist Empire or the drugged out Merchants, Lung had done something astounding.

His efforts were precise, cold, and without remorse but they were targeted at their enemies and no one else. More than that, like Marquis before him, Lung had forced the other gangs to play by his rules, and his efforts were working. The gangs had been so focused on each other that the crime rate in the city had plummeted, the risk of getting caught by the Empire, or the ABB doing something
wrong had put most unaffiliated criminals on hiatus until things settled. The war going on had actually stalled his plans entirely.

With a few rare exceptions, Dinah hadn’t produced a percentage above 8 percent on any of his plans until the one he’d come up with last night. Coil had been focusing on keeping his assets preserved, though he hadn’t missed a chance to acquire a few new Parahuman mercenaries, even if it’d taken some convincing on his part. But when Lung and the Empire had finally pulled back to consolidate, Thomas had come up with an idea. He’d known for a bit who the Empire’s leadership really were. He’d been tempted to leak the information out, sic the PRT on them, but Lung had proven himself far more capable.

A bit of leaked information, and he’d turned the dragon loose on the Empire. He knew that Lung cared little for the unwritten rules, and he’d hoped that the dragon either managed to wipe out the Empire or that the Empire wiped out Lung, hopefully losing quite a few capes in the process. When one of his feeds flickered, he navigated away from the camera view of the thugs ascending the building to see a hidden door open in one of the lower levels of the building.

With an amused smirk he watched as over half a dozen figures emerged escorted by armed guards and headed toward a trio of armoured vehicles. He was unsurprised when halfway across the parking garage a trio of painted vans lit up their high beams, and a hail of bullets emerged from them. After a moment of panic cost him two security guards, Max Anders was quick to react, and a wall of steel erupted from the ground, protecting them all as they rushed toward the cars. Four of the figures ended up in one, two more in another and a single white-skinned man in the last.

He watched with rapt attention as the cars peeled out of the garage and he tapped a few commands, sending one of the tinker tech drones he owned to follow the running battle. The Asians seemed to be herding the Empire, the vehicles separating and cutting off alternate routes and Coil followed along, observing their frantic attempts at escape. He imagined that if they had their way they’d get away from prying eyes so that they could turn their powers on their pursuers, but the vans kept pushing them toward downtown, instead of away from it.

The older man quietly lifted his arms, resting his elbows peacefully on the table, lacing his fingers and watching. The soldier in him perked up as he saw the trucks pushing the SUV’s down an empty street and he knew that it would happen here. He was impressed when the mines came out, and all three cars vanished into three wholly destructive displays. It was a shock to see that the Empire had only lost one or two capes in the ambush, though the fact that there were near twice as many capes arrayed against the empire as Coil had expected was a surprise.

He shifted the drone around, ignoring Lung as he charged Kaiser, and paying little attention to Purity and Bakuda’s show off. He moved the camera around and observed the twins growing and stalking toward the motley collection of capes. He blinked as a familiar figure in black and purple arrived, and he raised an eyebrow as they placed themselves between the Empire and who he suspected was Taylor Hebert and her somewhat drowned looking friends. Coil watched the interaction, frowning as not for the first time he lamented the lack of audio on the drones, being forced to watch the silent images moving.

His phone buzzed, but he ignored it, well aware that the attempt to capture Reach had failed if the figure was interfering in this fight. He briefly considered offering the cape a more friendly invitation to work for him, their powers certainly seemed versatile, but if what Coil had uncovered was true he’d be better off sitting on that secret and using it to destabilize the relations between the PRT, New Wave, and the public when the time was right. Oddly, it was the other timeline that told him something was wrong first.
In his office, his work line began ringing several minutes before his private number followed suit. The sound of the Endbringer Sirens, coming on around him told him what it was likely about. Coil would collapse the timeline where he’d remained in his base, snatching up the phone and quickly speaking into it.

“Thomas Calvert here…”

He’d split timelines again as he worked, allowing one version of himself to continue to work more hands-on with the PRT in moving around their assets that would be too difficult to remove from the city, but would be too dangerous to leave unattended should the worst happen. As that timeline spun out, Coil joining up with the Various PRT team leaders, the other timeline saw him dodging out of work and leaving his own lieutenants in charge as he made his way to his own bunker.

Entering the bunker and changing into his costume, he had a minion summon Dinah to his side. When she arrived, he found himself rubbing at his face. Somehow the girl had been leveraging her powers to get the guards on her side, and several had taken a liking to her. Not enough to turn on him or free her, but they often did errands for her, including helping her expand her wardrobe. As Coil took a seat behind his desk, he found himself watching the tiny nine-year-old in the expertly tailored pant-suit moving to sit opposite him. When a low droning warning shuddered through the room, Coil was satisfied to watch the smug expression on her face falter as she glanced around.

“There’s an Endbringer coming. It’s attacking the city.” He spoke casually, watching as she stared at him in horror. Parts of him exulted in her fear, but the rest didn’t want her to be too panicked to be useful. Lacing his hands on his desk, he kept his ‘face’ pointed at the young woman waiting for her to collect herself before speaking. “You’re safe enough here, it is a former Endbringer shelter. In any case, we have other matters to discuss, Dinah.”

“I imagine that you can guess what we’re here for. I need you to answer some questions.” He opened his briefcase and drew out a folder with the letter ‘O’ stamped on the front. He’d found that writing out his plans on paper allowed Dinah’s powers to map them better, even if she never actually read them and he consulted the file quietly. He studied the letter for a moment before glancing at the titled head of the first document, considering the poetic name of the project. Glancing up from his musings, Coil carefully took in the young girl opposite him, he studied her sour look and was about to speak when she merely gestured for him to get on with it.

“This is Ouroboros.” He tapped the file quietly. “If I were to follow Plan A in it, how would it affect my goals going forward. As far as your powers can map, and to one decimal point, please.” He stared at the girl as she considered for a moment before speaking.

“6.3%” Coil cursed, that had been his preferred plan. He sighed faintly and shifted quietly before gesturing to the file.

“Plan’s B and C?” He studied the girl when she considered and then flinched.
“Plan B is 14.2%, and Plan C is 2.6%, and we both end up dead in the next week.” Coil shifted nervously, gently opening the file and taking a pen and carefully crossing out the line that started with ‘Plan C.’ He glanced down at the file quietly, moving along.

“Plan D, E, and F?” He stared at her as he considered the tertiary strategies that he’d listed with a frown.

“D and F are 22.3%, and E is 36.6%.” The girl winced, rubbing at her head. Coil sighed softly, these were the best numbers in a while, but there had to be a way that he could boost the chances. He blinked quietly before opening the file. He reconsidered Plan E for a few moments before moving to write something at the end of the entry for that plan in his records. Once he placed a final period and set his pen down, he let his gaze drift up to Dinah.

“How about Plan E with the changes that I just made to it.” He saw the dark look on the girl’s face and let out a soft sigh. “This is the last one, I promise.” He studied her quietly, and she considered him for a moment before letting out a weary sigh. He saw the shocked look washing over her face and the faint tremor of fear.

“Uh. With whatever you did, Plan E jumps up to 89.8%” Coil blinked quietly and allowed himself to consider Plan E. It wasn’t ideal, or really what he’d been aiming for, but if it worked it could certainly get him something close to what he wished. And all it would cost him was an already compromised asset. He waved a hand quietly.

“Thank you, Dinah, you can return to your room. We’ll speak again later.” He watched her go with a tired frown on his face before glancing around. Taking a moment to tap a few keys on his computer, he listened to the heavy locks on the door sealing. Reaching down and gently opening a drawer on his desk, Coil took a moment rooting around within. Removing the false back he drew out a tiny wooden case that easily slid open. He stared at the empty vial within, carefully tapping the empty glass before moving it and taking the card from beneath. He sealed the box and placed it away before getting to his feet and straightening his costume, gently studying the card. Part of him knew that this was the only way to move forward, but the rest of him wondered what exactly this bit of help would cost him. Still, with his options in mind, he turned to the wall and moved to speak slowly.

“Door.” A minute later, Coil vanished from the office leaving the space empty for several hours in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

[[Dun, Dun, Dun. Wonder what Ouroboros has to do with anything. Unique name if nothing else. And Cauldron’s getting involved on Coil’s side. Should make for a bit of fun Post Leviathan interactions. Also. Folks have gotten the Andromeda Reference, and the Lucifer reference, but no one got the Sky High one. For shame. Anyway. Nothing to special reference wise in this just. Coil manipulating things for his own gain. Lemme know watchu nerds think.]]
PHO Interlude 2 by NGamer11

Chapter Summary

Here's my second PHO Interlude submission based on my earlier suggestion. - NGamer11

Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, UnlimitedPowah
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

_topic: ABB on the Offense
In: Boards ▶ News ▶ America ▶ Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Apr 28th 2011:
Today this morning, the ABB decided to turn the Docks into an war zone. They're reports of numerous explosions thanks to the gang's new Tinker named Bakuda. Link to her thread here. Oni Lee was also sighted, delivering grenades left and right. And of course the rage dragon himself, Lung. Reports are, he fought the local Protectorate and New Wave all by himself. He later escaped via jumping into the bay, with no way to pursue him.

This seems like a major escalation for the ABB. Who knows what they'll do next. On a happier note, it has been confirmed that Bakuda has been taken into custody thanks to Glory Girl and Taylor Hebert, the latter of whom has been designated as Reach by the PRT. Hopefully the ABB will stay low now that their source of explosives is behind bars.

(Showing page 1 of 10)

► Childdrizzle
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Whoa. That is seriously terrifying. Glad I don't live in the Bay. But enough about the pants-wetting dragon that runs a gang. Let's talk about the capture of Bakuda. Glory Girl and Reach captured her? I thought GG wouldn't like her after being smashed into
the ground in the bank heist. Also, nice to know that the PRT can give names that aren't lame.

► Laser Augment
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
I guess they buried that hatchet or something. Nothing like fighting Villains to mend a relationship.

► GstringGirl
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
What about the rest of the ABB capes. Is anything being done about them?

► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
The Protectorate and the PRT are doing everything in their power capture them. We will give more information when it is available.

► Mac's Dual Rocket Propelled Grenades
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Meaning nothing. The PRT and Protectorate have come up with ziltch once again.

► Loyal
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Cut them some slack. They're going up against a teleporter/cloner who likes knives and kamikazes and a dude who went mano-a-mano with Leviathan. It's not like they're trying to capture no-name rookies. These are serious heavy hitters who could drop them if they're not careful.

► Acree
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Have to side with Loyal on this one. Dealing with them won't be easy. We should just be thankful that Bakuda is down for the count. Thx a lot Reach and GG!

► Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Actually, they had some help. Uber and Leet were actually fighting Bakuda first, believe it or not. They were apparently defending a bunch of dockworkers when Reach and Glory Girl came to assist. The video gamer duo saved a few lives and even put a good fight using a pair of battle armor. Unfortunately, Uber pulled a Heroic Sacrifice and took a grenade to the face to protect Reach and GG. Even worse, it was a grenade that made a bubble of stopped time, think Gray Boy bubble, but with Clockblocker's power.

► ArchmageEin
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Christ. I only know those two from those video game videos they upload. What a way to go though. For what it's worth, I don't think they were actually that bad as Villains go.
Today this morning, the ABB decided to turn the Docks into a warzone. They're reports of numerous explosions thanks to the gang's new Tinker named Bakuda. Link to her thread here. Oni Lee was also sighted, delivering grenades left and right. And of course the rage dragon himself, Lung. Reports are, he fought the local Protectorate and New Wave all by himself. He later escaped via jumping into the bay, with no way to pursue him.

This seems like a major escalation for the ABB. Who knows what they'll do next. On a happier note, it has been confirmed that Bakuda has been taken into custody thanks to Glory Girl and Taylor Hebert, the latter of whom has been designated as Reach by the PRT. Hopefully the ABB will stay low now that their source of explosives is behind bars.

(Showing page 7 of 15)

▶ XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Still can't believe that Uber and Leet would have the balls to stand up to the ABB. Is it some sort of hoax, were the suits actually robots being remote-controlled? I find that more believable than the two of them actually taking the ABB head on.

▶ AverageAlexandros (Cape Husband)
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
The boy literally dove into a grenade to save someone else. Please don't spread any lies about the sacrifice he made.

▶ Glory Girl (Verified Cape)
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
I'd prefer it if you didn't badmouth Uber. He saved my life last night, Taylor's as well. Leet confirmed that it was him in that suit and he got between me and a really bad situation. He's currently trapped in a time stop field that shows no signs of dissipating. Barring some sort of lucky pass from Scion, or another Tinkering figuring out how to break him out, he may have killed himself to save our lives. Please afford him the respect that that deserves.

▶ Aloha
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Glory Girl, can you shed some more light on what happened? All we know was that the ABB went on a rampage, Uber got time bubbled, and Bakuda was captured thanks to you and Reach.

▶ Glory Girl (Verified Cape)
Okay, Taylor's not actually on PHO, so I'm sort of serving as her mouthpiece here. She's not overly fond of the Reach name that was assigned by the PRT and she's working on creating one of her own, but there's a whole thread about that in this subforum so hop there to chime in on that. As for the Bakuda situation, we saw the explosions and Taylor we went to see if we could help. We've both got powers that would helpful with search and rescue. Taylor went to check on her dad and when we arrived we found two figures in armor protecting them. They actually tried to warn us off, before they realized who we were. Bakuda showed up, told us to let her kill the DWers, and Leet and Uber went to try and fight her off. Taylor and I went to help, and we nearly got taken out by a Time Stop Grenade, Uber got between us and her and took it instead. This wasn't a good thing and it upset us both, though Taylor was quicker on the draw and managed to down Bakuda almost instantly. Before we could secure her though, Oni Lee attacked. Taylor lead him off to keep the rest of us safe, and I took Bakuda back to the Workers. She must have woken up faster then Taylor was expecting though cause she started swearing and tried to escape. I pinned her down and she did something that summoned a bunch of gangsters around us that started attacking. Leet and I managed to fend them off as Taylor kept Oni Lee distracted. She managed to scare him off, but then Lung was heading for us. She basically did the same thing to him, pissing him off and leading him around until the Protectorate and New Wave could get there to take him on.

► Feychick
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Are you saying one cape was able to take on all of the capes of the ABB (admittedly not at the same time)? That's awesome!

► Coyote-C
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
Agree with Feychick. Is she joining New Wave?

► Glory Girl (Verified Cape)
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
I wouldn't know, my Aunt is the one that handles that sort of thing, but I know that Taylor's been a great help to the team.

► Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On Apr 28th 2011:
I think she'd be a great addition to New Wave. If she does end up joining, I wonder how she'd work with the rest of the team. She already seems to get along fine with Panacea and GG.

Also, hope that the ABB stay low. I really don't want to live in a wreck thanks to Lung rampaging against the Heroes.
Today this morning, the ABB decided to turn the Docks into a warzone. They're reports of numerous explosions thanks to the gang's new Tinker named Bakuda. Link to her thread here. Oni Lee was also sighted, delivering grenades left and right. And of course the rage dragon himself, Lung. Reports are, he fought the local Protectorate and New Wave all by himself. He later escaped via jumping into the bay, with no way to pursue him.

This seems like a major escalation for the ABB. Who knows what they'll do next. On a happier note, it has been confirmed that Bakuda has been taken into custody thanks to Glory Girl and Taylor Hebert, the latter of whom has been designated as Reach by the PRT. Hopefully the ABB will stay low now that their source of explosives is behind bars.

Edit - The ABB struck again just one day later. They blew up places near several hospitals, actually blew up the Rig, and busted out Bakuda. That isn't the worst part. The worst part was a giant smoke hologram of Lung threatening the other gangs and the PRT and showing that a dead-man switch has been rigged to an EMP that'll annihilate the entire East Coast.

(Showing page 33 of 40)
Replied On Apr 30th 2011:
It's because they're spreading terror and attacking people. Even criminals have rights, with the exception of complete psychos like the S9.

► NoMoreNazis
Replied On Apr 30th 2011:
Hey, if this means the skinheads who try to coerce me to join are gone, I think I could live with a dragon in charge of the Bay.

► Laotsunn (Kyushu Survivor)
Replied On Apr 30th 2011:
I still can't believe that things there are so bad.

► Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On Apr 30th 2011:
It's Brockton Bay. Things have been bad here for a looong time.

► Acree
Replied On Apr 30th 2011:
It's kinda depressing when you think about it. Which is why I try not to at all times.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 31, 32, 33, 34, 35 ... 38, 39, 40

♦ Topic: Name that Cape
In: Boards ► Capes ► America ► Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Apr 19th 2011:
I've gotten information that the temp name for Taylor Hebert from the PRT is Reach, presumably for her TK. It's not bad but I think we can do better. My suggestion: Sentinel

(Showing page 1 of 9)

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
I got it! Revanche.

► Answer Key
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
What's that supposed to mean?
XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
French for revenge.

Acree
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
Why? I think it should be related to someone else from New Wave, like Lightwave.

Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
If we're just riffing on New Wave, how about Lightbreach.

ArchmageEin
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
How about Prodigy.

Divide
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
Wavestunt.

QwertyD
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
Helping Hand. Cause she uses her hands to heal or to smack them around with TK.

Coyote-C
Replied On Apr 19th 2011:
Lame. Lame. Lame. How about something cooler sounding like Serenity.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 7, 8, 9

Topic: Name that Cape
In: Boards ▶ Capes ▶ America ▶ Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Apr 19th 2011:
I've gotten information that the temp name for Taylor Hebert from the PRT is Reach, presumably for her TK. It's not bad but I think we can do better. My suggestion: Sentinel

(Showing page 12 of 12)

Laser Augment
Replied On May 1st 2011:
How does Vigil sound?
Glory Girl (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 1st 2011:
Taylor's loving the enthusiasm, but she would prefer to have some input on her name. She's also come up with her own suggestion; Tython. I'm unsure what it means, but she seems fond of it.

Dawgsniles (Veteran Member)
Replied On May 1st 2011:
Tython? I tried looking that up but the closest I got was Typhon, a monster from Greek mythology. Was that a typo?

Acree
Replied On May 1st 2011:
A monster from Greek mythology? That doesn't sound heroic.

ArchmageEin
Replied On May 1st 2011:
Definitely not. Sorry, but I don't think that name's going to work out.

Lasersmile
Replied On May 1st 2011:
The name really sounds like something an ambitious new villain would pick, not a young new hero looking to join a hero group.

Antigone
Replied On May 1st 2011:
I'm a fan of Greek mythology, and I don't see how that name would suit you at all.

Deadman
Replied On May 1st 2011:
We'll keep looking, but that's a good effort.

Good Ship Morpheus
Replied On May 1st 2011:
Don't be discouraged. A lot of capes take a while to think of a good enough name.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 10, 11, 12
So, lately there has been a few criminals who are being electrocuted. The only cape I know who can do that is the public trigger from Winslow, who has been given the temp designation Reach. Is it her?

(Showing page 1 of 4)

► NoMoreNazis
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
If so, then at least we have more heroes to fight the ever present gangs.

► Ekul
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
Not so fast. I heard some of the victims weren't criminals and were ordinary civilians.

► Not_a_Victim
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
I told you! She's a bigot. She doesn't deserve pity or compassion.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
I don't think this was her. She never really got violent even before she got powers.

► Acree
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
I can't believe I'm writing this, but listen to Void. There has to be a reasonable explanation for this.

► Dawgsmiles (Veteran Member)
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
Innocent until proven guilty I say. If any of the victims claim it was her and the PRT find proof, then feel free to vilify her. Until then, please keep a cool head.

► White Fairy (Veteran Member)
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
Not what it seems at the surface. More to this electrocuter than meets the eye; complicated motivations and thought processes.

► SssnakesForLife
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
Is there even any information on what this vigilante looks like?

► bothad (Original Poster)
Replied On Apr 29th 2011:
Nope. Kind of the reason I made this thread, so that people who do could post something so that we aren't in the dark.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4
Topic: Vigilante?
In: Boards ➤ News ➤ America ➤ Brockton Bay
bothad (Original Poster)
Posted On Apr 29th 2011:
So, lately there has been a few criminals who are being electrocuted. The only cape I know who can do that is the public trigger from Winslow, who has been given the temp designation Reach. Is it her?

(Showing page 27 of 27)

➤ LoverBoy
Replied On May 11th 2011:
I was one of the people attacked by Reach, they attacked me and my boyfriend, and I can confirm that it's not Vigil (Taylor's chosen Cape name). She showed up last night at the hospital in her New Wave Uniform and healed me. Panacea healed my boyfriend.

➤ BadSamurai
Replied On May 11th 2011:
Are you saying that you know what this person looked like? Also, great that your better after being electrocuted.

➤ LoverBoy
Replied On May 11th 2011:
It's all a bit hazy, to be honest. I remember that they had a purple cloak and a metal mask with glowing red eyes. Vigil told me that the PRT thinks that it may have been an attempt at discrediting her. I asked her about the rumors that have been cropping up here about her, (My mom googled her after they thought she attacked me, she was pretty pissed that it might have been a hate crime. It took a while to calm her down.) She explained the story behind them to me, and she says that the stories were made up by people at her old school. It's pretty messed up, considering the lengths that they'd gone to. She told me a lot more private stuff about it, but suffice it say, she doesn't seem like a bigot to me. She seemed really kind, and I don't think she deserved that sort of bullying. If you're reading this Vigil or Panacea, thanks again. I won't let anyone talk shit about you if they do it near me. If you're reading this Reach, I hope you go down hard.

➤ NoMoreNazis
Replied On May 11th 2011:
Wait. Trying to discredit a hero by using their PRT name and making her look like a bigot? Do you think it was the E88?

➤ Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On May 11th 2011:
We are giving the criminal in question the designation Reach, as they have already appropriated it. There is currently no proof of him/her being a member of the E88 as of now.

➤ Ekul
Replied On May 11th 2011:
Okay. Nice to know the truth now. However, this still means that there's a cape here who electrocutes people for seemingly no good reason. Also, I know you don't like the Nazis NoMoreNazis, it's in your name, but you can't always assume that the E88 are behind it.

► Acree
Replied On May 11th 2011:
Hope Vigil can take them down. It would serve them right, being taken down by the hero they were trying to make look bad.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On May 11th 2011:
Maybe this Reach is crazy jealous of all the attention Vigil is getting. The attacks are just a tantrum and a way to gather notoriety in order to make everyone look at him/her.

► BadSamurai
Replied On May 11th 2011:
That's completely stupid. Who in their right mind would electrocute people as a way to get attention. That would only be true if Reach were legitimately crazy.
May 15th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

Danny had been washing the dishes when the sirens had started. Part of him hadn’t believed it at first, and he carefully set down what he’d been cleaning, the dishes from his lunch, and moved over to turn on the tv. Clicking through the stations showed the same image on every station, a woman in a suit carefully reciting instructions. The words didn’t penetrate his shock, but the images did. Leave your homes. Find the nearest shelter. Follow the directions of local authorities. When it repeated he numbly shut off the station.

There was a knock at the door, but Danny ignored it for the moment, making his way over to the kitchen. He grabbed his jacket, slipping it on and moving to grab an umbrella. Danny started when the door opened to reveal a familiar PRT trooper slipping in out of the rain. Vasquez, he remembers the woman’s name, one of Taylor’s favourites. As she wiped her face, Danny slipped over and moved to speak quietly.

“Taylor-” He frowned when the woman lifted a hand and gestured outside.

“Creighton’s already with her; he’ll ensure that she gets somewhere safe. Right now we need to deal with you. The rest of us have places to be, and I cannot get to mine till I’ve ensured that you’re safe. We need to go, Danny. If need to you can gather anything important, but space is limited.” Danny frowned at the serious look on the woman’s face and shook his head. He could imagine the insanity in the streets as people tried to drag around valuables. He merely waved the woman onwards.

He waited till he was out in her jeep and moving through traffic toward the cordoned off streets before he drew out his phone. Dialing Taylor’s number he was concerned when it went to voice mail. Speaking as clearly as he could, he left a message telling her to call him before shooting off a similar text to her phone. When neither were answered, he solemnly stared at his phone, ignoring the press of bodies moving past as the car carried him toward the nearest shelter.
‘Endbringer Shelter 12’ was emblazoned on the sign directly over-head. Danny watched the press of people as they slowly forced their way down the ramp into the converted parking garage. Danny remained by the sign, staring at his phone. He’d get no reception under the ground, and he tried calling the house once more. Taylor evidently didn’t have her phone, or it was dead, but Danny hoped that she’d be smart enough to head home when she heard the news. He was shocked when after a few rings the phone was finally answered.

‘Hebert Residence, Taylor speaking.’ He held the phone to his ear and let out a tired, relieved sigh she was okay. He shifted in place, quickly adjusting the phone and waving off the concerned looking trooper. The crowd filing in had dwindled, but he still had a few minutes at least, he carefully considered the crowd doing some mental math before speaking.

“Taylor, thank god. I’ve been trying to call you for almost twenty minutes. What are you doing at home, you need to get to the shelter over on Peterson, they’ll be closing it down shortly.” Danny let out a soft sigh as another small crowd showed up, hopefully, if processing continued to take as long as it had, they’d still have the doors open when Taylor got here. He was so busy worrying about the danger that he didn’t even hear Taylor’s response at first.

“Dad. I’m going to help. I can heal, and I’m significantly more powerful than most capes. I have to do this.” Taylor’s voice was laced with nervous tension, but Danny could hear the underlying steel. Despite this, he had to try to convince her not to do this. She was just a kid, and there were grown heroes coming that could deal with this threat. Taylor was strong, sure, but from what he knew he didn’t think there was anything that she could do against an Endbringer.

“You don’t ‘have’ to do anything at all Taylor. You’re a teenage girl, you’re not obligated to stand up to anyone at all–” Danny was shocked, and a little impressed when she cut him off, speaking with a heat to her voice that reminded him of his own arguments with his father.

“Dad they’re attacking the city, I can’t just huddle in the dark and hope that I’m one of the lucky ones that survive. Amy’s going to be there, Vicky and Sabah too. I have to help.” Danny took a deep breath and rubbed his face. He considered the phone carefully for a moment before returning it to his ear and preparing to try and talk her out of this. He was shocked when she cut in before he could speak.

“I don’t have time to talk with you about this dad. I’ve got to go. I’m sorry. I love you, and hopefully, we can argue about this once it’s all over.” Danny tried to cut in, to say anything. To tell her to think about it, to beg her to reconsider, but there was no time before he was confronted with the long tone of the disconnected call. He stared at his phone for a few moments before sending out a prayer that she’d be there when this was all over so that he could ground her for the rest of her life. As he stared at his phone, the polite cough to one side saw him looking over to see the ramp empty and one of the troopers staring at him quietly.

The man’s expression was understanding and Danny couldn’t find it in himself to snap at the poor man, so he merely nodded and followed the man in. Signing in had been easy enough, he’d merely filled out the various forms at the registration desk before asking if there was somewhere that they could see what was going on. He’d been directed to the rear of the main floor where a trooper mentioned that they’d set up televisions that displayed the ‘local’ news as long as the broadcasts lasted. Nodding, Danny had made his way through the crowds.
Danny had expected the press of bodies to be worse, but people tended to cluster together, and it let him squeeze past most, making his way deeper into the shelter. He saw staircases scattered around were entrances to the lower levels were visible, and he imagined that the actual housing would be below, most of the areas on this floor seemingly dedicated to communal areas. He saw troopers unpacking a kitchen with a number of seeming volunteers.

He did his best to ignore the cries and wails among the crowd, and he came to a stop in a densely packed room at the rear of the main floor. Chairs had been lined up in the room, but they were all full, and people were standing shoulder to shoulder in the aisles and edges of the room. Despite the crowd, it was almost eerily silent as everyone sat quietly and stared at the large screens that were visible one wall, each lit up with a different news station. They didn’t look like local news affiliates, but local stations out of Boston, New York, Washington, and Chicago.

“...joining us, we’re currently reporting on the situation in Brockton Bay. For the first time since their arrival, we’ve gotten advance warning of an Endbringer attack thanks to the hard-won efforts of the independent tinker know as Dragon, and the Protectorate sponsored tinker known as Armstmaster.” The volume came from the central monitor, the one from new york and Danny listened with rapt attention. “The two heroes have developed a system that predicts Endbringer attacks, and it has let us know that the danger was coming to Brockton Bay allowing for an unprecedented level of preparation and evacuation.”

As the figure spoke, the screen to his back shifted, showing the view of a camera that was apparently flitting around a meeting room filled with various capes. The camera seemed to focus on particular groups, pausing for a minute on each so that the audience could take in the various capes that had gathered. Danny recognized a few masks, and he let out a relieved sigh seeing Carol and the rest of New Wave present, hoping that they’d keep Taylor safe out there as best they could. He stared at the screen quietly, watching the camera flitting around to show various figures, not paying much attention to the droning news anchor until he heard a familiar name.

“...not mistaken that’s Taylor Hebert, historically the first person to join New Wave since their disastrous loss of a team-mate over four years ago. Something of a grab bag...” The man’s voice was tuned out, and Danny turned to watch his daughter speaking with a visible distressed Carol. He watched as Taylor talked to the woman, gently gripping her arm and flash the other woman a terrified smile. Danny nervously chuckled when Carol’s shoulders visibly relaxed, and they moved to join the rest of New Wave. He let out a silent curse when the camera shifted away to show a doll standing amongst a trio of terrifying monsters, speaking with a teenager in a skin-tight purple body suit.

He listened with half an ear as the coverage continued, the camera’s shifting around. Each time they passed Taylor, Danny let out a soft sigh, smiling faintly and observing the way she spoke quietly with each member of New Wave present, looking very out of place despite her outfit, her entire form screaming nervous tension. Danny found his way to a wall, crossing his arms and leaning against it and listening as Legend’s voice cut over the room his speech rousing and terrifying in equal parts. He continued to watch, letting out a sigh when despite her gifts Taylor remained behind with the healers, avoiding getting into any of the other groups that she could probably join.

Danny watched as the groups vanished one after another under the guidance of various teleporters and he blinked when the camera feeds cut away from the interior, showing the various groups getting read up and down the beach. He watched a dramatic shot of the tide pulling lower and lower, leaving more and more west sand visible. When the drone shifted its focus up toward the horizon, Danny frowned for a moment before realizing why the horizon was darkening faster than the sky letting out a nervous breath as the wave became visible, rising higher and higher.
The camera panned down and showed a dramatic shot of shields springing up and overlapping up and down the beach, glowing barriers forming over the whole beach, the bright lights vanishing into the distance. Danny watched with bated breath as the wave crashed into the glowing shields and then sighed as the water held. The relief washing through him froze into horror in an instant as the camera panned down just in time to see something smash through the barriers, a blur dashing along the beach in the wake of flying capes. Danny watched with silent horror as the creature charged along the beach and smashed its form into the building that still held his daughter.

Something snapped in Danny as he watched the blue-green fists raining destruction down on the building, everything going dark around the edges of his vision as he stood silently and stared. He expected an unending wave of rage and darkness, something fiery to wash up and consume him a pressing need to destroy but instead it felt as if every tenuous grasp he held to the world snapped one by one until he was standing at the end of a dark hall, staring at the distant image of the site of his daughter’s death. He felt cold for a moment.

Then like twin spikes of burning steel, agony smashed into his temples, and everything that he saw dissolved into inky darkness and Danny Hebert knew no more.

Swimming back to consciousness with an almost lethargic heaviness around him, Danny lay in agony on the cold metal floor he’d found himself on. The repeated tones of the klaxxon didn’t help the aching in his head, and after a few minutes of laying there, one of Danny’s hands lifted to rub over his face. Finding no glasses on his nose, Danny reached out, one of his calloused hands dragging over the corrugated steel of the ground to try and find them. After a moment of flailing and finding no spectacles, Danny tiredly opened his eyes. Finding blinking lights set in a console directly over his head was startling. Seeing them in focus, was more unexpected. Danny shifted carefully on the ground, pushing himself up and looking around.

‘Communications.’ The words washed through his mind with a flicker of pain, and he pressed a hand to his head, doing his best to ignore it. Getting his feet under him, Danny slowly spun in place taking in the advanced design of the space, the two glowing consoles that flashed red lights. Danny took a few moments to get his bearings before approaching the large circular door. He stared at it for a moment before another flicker of pain washed through his head, and he understood. One of his calloused hands reached out and tapped in a sequence on the small screen beside the doorway, and it casually whirled open.

Danny turned to the right as if expecting the cockpit, and he knew it was a cockpit, to be manned. Instead, he saw an empty room filled with equally flashing screens, the chairs empty, the view outside the viewport dark and empty in a way that chilled Danny to his bones for some reason. Danny turned to the left instead, and the sound of voices drew him in.

‘...don’t know Bastila, the communication between us and this shard isn’t quite right, but - something- is wrong. It’s shooting off error messages and piling up even more junk data then we’ve seen, and it’s burning through its energy reserves at nearly 500% the rate it’s been doing up to now.’ Danny stepped into the Security Hold, staring curiously at the speaking figure, an elderly black man hunched over a display, typing rapidly into it. ‘Jolee Bindo, Retired Jedi, Smartass.’ The knowledge washed into his head with a flicker of pain and Danny winced, glancing up when a new voice cut in.
“I’m picking up something, some sort of connection or interference. I thought that the Shard had severed every communication link it had during the initial contact, but it’s streaming vast quantities of Data in and out, that must be why it’s drawing on so much power, but. There’s no programs running, Jolee.” Danny let his gaze drift toward the figure he’d been speaking with, taking in the tall woman with her unique hairstyle. Danny waited, and that same flicker of pain pulled at his mind, and more information washed into it.

‘Bastila Shan, Jedi Master, Former Grand Master of the Jedi Order, far older than she looks, Mother, Grandmother, eventual Ancestor of she who crafted this Noetikon.’ Danny shuddered as that Knowledge washed into him, and at the curiosity at the term Noetikon, he felt that same flicker of pain and wash of knowledge. ‘Noetikon: Jedi creation, experimental, linkage of three Holocrons, backed by the knowledge of the Jedi Archives. Holocron, Imprint of once living mind, Sophisticated AI with emulation of life and emotion…’ The words scrolled on, and Danny had to press a hand to his head to silence them, his body staggering to the side as he glanced around at the space. He’d missed the further debates between Bastila and Jolee, but he didn’t miss the serious and dark tone that emerged from behind him, a shiver going down his spine.

“Jedi. How you survived so long with that spatial awareness is beyond me. Instead of arguing about what is causing this, how about we ask our new guest about it.” The words caused Danny to surge forward, and he blinked when he leapt clear over the table, spinning himself in mid-air, landing neatly on his feet and raising his hands in a ready stance he’d seen Taylor do before. Instead of words feelings and impressions streamed into his mind, correcting his posture, adjusting his grip. He stared at the three figures staring at him, Bastila and Jolee with visible shock, the other with something akin to anticipation. That one was the most dangerous, and if he was to be attacked, Danny knew on a visceral level that he would have to take out that spirit first if it came to a battle.

Nearly seven feet tall and covered in a metal ‘suit’ ‘Powered exoskeleton and integrated life support system, constant use of the Dark Side of the Force has degraded host to the point that he cannot function without the suit. Hardened for battle, but weaknesses still present, Joints and lines all prime targets.’ Danny shuddered at the words and the flicker of pain before turning his focus on the being behind the suit, more words flowing into his mind. ‘Darth Marr, Former Leader of the Resurgent Sith Empire, Former Dark Council Member, Former Head of the Sphere of Defense. Sith with a unique reputation of civility and honour, stood against the Emperor, Died. Returned as a Force Ghost, Redeemed himself with the aid of Satele Shan, She who created this bastion of knowledge.’ The words continued to come fading into a background murmur in his mind, and the pain lowered to a tolerable ache at the base of his skull. Something that was more concerning to Danny was that the words were beginning to come with context, he understood what a Sith was; he understood who and what the Sith Emperor had been. Danny stared in horror at the spirits around him as their lives fed themselves into his brain, every glance shifting his view as the details of everything he saw started to flesh out in his mind. The sound of a voice drew his gaze, and he found his dark eyes meeting the concerned green ones of Bastila.

“Danny? Danny what’re you doing he-” The words were nervous and laced with worry, and Danny took a single step back, the world around him jittering suddenly, the interior of the Ebon Hawk, and Danny now knew that that was what he’d been standing in, shattering and transforming into a mess of flickering numbers and letters, pain crushing into his brain as he felt everything go dark once more.
’...flow of data has nearly trickled to a stop, but it’s still going. The energy drain has lowered to a mere 250%, but it’s still not good.’ The concerned tones of Jolee greeted Danny as the world swam back into focus. Danny opened his eyes, finding himself reclined on a couch in the side of the room. The other spirits were still arrayed around the room. Marr was watching him, and when Danny met his ‘eyes’ the spirit nodded, Jolee and Bastila were still at the consoles. Danny shifted in place, getting his feet under him.

“Danny!” The words came from Bastila, and the woman ducked around the console. He shifted to his feet, and staggered a bit, though the other spirit caught him. “You need to rest; something is-” Danny didn’t let her finish, pushing to his feet fully and gently shrugging the concerned Jedi off.

“I don’t have time to rest, Taylor-” The words cut off and the knowledge flooded into his mind. Every technique Taylor had used, her entire combat style, everything he remembered of his daughter’s actions over the last few months was suddenly given context. A flicker of irritation washed through him at finally uncovering her secret, but a wash of emotions shot back at him, Disapproval from Bastila, and wry amusement from Jolee and Marr both. Danny understood really, even if Taylor had told him this, that he probably wouldn’t have believed her. He glanced at Jolee and found the man smirking at him before glancing down at the console.

Something else niggled at Danny, and he pushed along the connection, ignoring the flicker of Pain through the center of his head, and suddenly Taylor’s thoughts washed into his mind, vague sensations of fear and concern, pain and exertion. She was alive. Danny jerked back, releasing the connection and glancing at the others. Bastila was the one that nodded.

“She’s alive Danny. She’s shielding the other healers, and the capes are trying to keep Leviathan off of her.” Danny shifted and glanced around.

“...How long have I been here?” He stared at the others, blinking as they glanced at each other. “For that matter, where is here, and how did I get here? The last thing I remember is watching the battle on the news.” Danny’s voice was quick, almost rapid-fire, and he watched the spirits as they stared at each other. Reaching out with his mind, Danny felt their rapid communications, but the words moved to fast for him to comprehend. Once again it was Bastila that spoke.

“This place is...A simulation of sorts. It’s a duplicate of the Ebon Hawk that Jolee and I spent many years living on. The Noetikon creates this ‘space’ for us to operate in when we’re all awake. Typically only one of us is active and they usually just stay tuned into Taylor. The others hibernate to conserve power most of the time. When we’re all active, we get dumped in here since our ‘programs’ aren’t really designed to operate in a wholly digital space. For some reason, this place was activated, and we all jumped in here when the Shard outside started going crazy.” The woman stared at him, and Danny was tempted to ask about the shard, but he knew about the extraterrestrial object that the Noetikon had struck and taken over, so there was no point. When he didn’t press Bastila continued smoothly.

“As for how long you’ve been here? You’re operating on our speed near as I can tell which is significantly faster than the mental speed of a human. Since the time we noticed your presence in this room, about a minute and a half, has passed outside.” Danny stared at the woman considering the words and wondering how long that worked out to in his own time. Before he could try to muddle through the math, the answer came to him. Two minutes, eight point eight seconds. Danny stared at his hands quietly and frowned. “As to how you got here, we have no idea.”
"That’s not entirely true.” Danny blinked, glancing over at Jolee when the spirit spoke, and he watched the others following his example, every eye on the Gray Jedi. “There are both active uplinks and downlinks from the Shard side of things that are nearly ten times the size of the ones to Taylor. Add to that the power consumption being off the charts, and suddenly Danny is here? It’s not hard to put the pieces together. He’s not even asking what half the words you’re using are Bastila.” Jolee pointed at him, and Danny frowned before finally catching on.

“How?” He glanced at the others. “I’m not…” Danny frowned. He wasn’t a parahuman, but he knew what the shards knew, and he saw them glancing at each other once more silently communicating. He didn’t need to wait for Bastila to explain it to him. “Yes, Yes. I get it. I went through a traumatic experience. If the initial triggering command comes from the biological side as opposed to the shard side, then it means that I could have started this process.” Danny considered the situation before an understanding of computer programming that stounded him washed into his pain. He winced and gripped his head, staggering back and closing his eyes tight. It took a moment for him to push off the pain, to steady himself. When he glanced up he saw Bastila and Jolee approaching.

“The Shard tailors the connection.” He held up a hand to halt the others. “Whatever it does to give people powers, once the connection is established it then changes things to tailor the connection, to set the powers, whatever they are, and to keep presumably whatever this is.” He gestured between himself and them. “From happening.” He sighed faintly and rubbed at his head. The pain from the upload was fading, but the constant background ache was getting worse. The knowledge was cementing itself in his ‘mind,’ and he understood how the Noetikon worked, how its connection to Taylor worked. As he considered the mechanics and idea occurred to him and he shifted his focus, pushing into and past the other spirits, and suddenly the view around him flickered away and he was stood on the pristine circle of the floor that was all that remained of the meeting hall.

The circle held a half dozen chairs, and several bisected chairs, nearly a dozen capes had clustered up around Taylor, and she was holding her hands aloft, presumably maintaining the barrier around them. ‘Force Barrier, draws on the user's stamina, effective against all but the most destructive of attacks.’ Effective in the short term, Dangerous in the long term due to how the technique bleeds off excess damage.’ Danny shook his head to clear the snap of pain as he glanced around, everything seemed almost frozen in time, and he inspected the capes around Taylor only recognizing Amy at first glance. He stepped back and frowned, finally turning his attention outside the shield.

He stared at and through the glowing barrier, at the figures past it that were layering matching barriers over it, watching as Leviathan seemed to be frozen in air above them, mid-strike, his three glowing eyes focused on the barrier and those within it. He saw Carol, and Sarah and her kids all arrayed outside the field, and he glanced back at the horrified look on his daughter’s face, the figures huddled behind her and then something wrapped around him, and he snapped back into the security room of the Ebon Hawk.

“Danny!” The words came from Bastila, and he glanced at her quietly. “You have no idea what you’re doing; you could hurt Taylor projecting yourself into her mind like that.” Bastila frowned and studied him. “How did you do that? Jolee’s right. How come you’re not constantly asking me to explain things? It took weeks before Taylor wasn’t stopping me between every other word as I spoke.” She spoke curiously, and Danny rubbed at his face the pain on his mind growing a touch more severe.

“I don’t know. I understand things. I look at them or think of them, and the knowledge springs up, laying itself in my mind. I know what this ship is; I know where it’s from, and who owned it. I know
where it went, and who it fought. I know everything about all of you, and I understand everything that Taylor has learned. The knowledge is constantly springing into my mind.” Danny spoke quietly and winced again gripping his forehead.

“Danny.” It was Jolee that spoke, glancing down at his console. “Danny your mind isn’t meant to process this kind of information, you should be sloughing it off like water off a duck. The only way that it’s being ‘retained’ is if your brain is using the entire archive as memory, you’re continually downloading everything and replacing it. I have no idea what that is actually doing to your mind, but it can’t be good.” Danny stared at the dark-skinned Jedi, frowning though everyone glanced over when Marr spoke.

“On the other hand, this presents an opportunity.” Danny sized up the former sith quietly and felt a chill run down his spine as he got the feeling that despite everything, Marr was smiling at him, and that this wasn’t a good thing.

It turned out that getting back wasn’t actually all that complicated, Danny simply projected himself back into his own mind, as he’d done to Taylors, and everything snapped back into motion. Danny lay still for a moment, realizing that he was still laying on the concrete where he’d almost certainly fell during his trigger. He shifted and slowly sat up, glancing around to see a PRT Trooper with a first aid kit in hand moving toward him in slow motion. Danny watched in confusion as the man slow sped up to normal speed, skidding to a stop before him and staring in shock. Danny looked at the man quietly before rubbing at his face.

“Sorry about this.” He spoke quietly and glanced around. He let the man quickly checking him over, feigning low blood sugar at Jolee’s whisper in his mind and getting his feet back under him. He suffered quietly under the inspections and concern, waiting for a moment when he could slip away unnoticed. Once he’d been forgotten by most, he moved around and did his best to find an out of the way corner, ending up alone in the empty dining hall that still hadn’t been lit up, seeing as the cooks were still cleaning and arranging the kitchen. Danny glanced around, and when no one came, he closed his eyes.

Danny nearly collapsed to his knees as his thoughts on ‘The Force’ saw a deluge of information slamming into his head and savagely wrapping itself into him, words and concepts flooding into him. It took nearly ten minutes for the ache in his head to go away, his entire body shaking from the pain. When his vision cleared, Danny staggered away from the wall he’d been leaning on to support himself, and he glanced around.

It took him a few moments to center himself, the pulsing pain in his head making it hard to focus, but it actually helped, and he let out a relieved sigh when the sensation of the force greeted him, it being somehow oddly familiar and alien at the same time. Danny greeted it happily allowing it to wrap itself around him. The warmth pushed the pain back, lessening the ache that had begun to spread along his spine. It didn’t numb him to it, he was aware of what parts of him continued to hurt, but he didn’t actually feel the pain.

Danny shifted in place quietly, not entirely trusting the sensations that he was feeling, and he reached out a hand, something in him clicking and a box of utensils that had been sitting in a pile of dust in the corner rose with almost practiced ease, floating toward him. Danny stared at the hovering box,
and the mixture of concern and relief that washed into him from his connection with the shard was hard to separate from his own emotions.

Considering the box, Danny shifted, standing quietly. As he headed toward the exit, he was shocked when Bastila appeared in his path, staring at him. He met Bastila's eyes, studying the somewhat concerned look in the woman's eyes, and he understood. She didn’t need to explain, the Noetikon quickly filled him, his mind was burning up, and the pain that he felt was the signs of his brain slowly spooling out. More and more of his mental processes were being offloaded to shard as the mechanism of the connection continued to expand over his mind, subsuming it. He had maybe a couple of hours left at this rate, less if he kept pushing himself. He watched Bastila and despite them both knowing the futility of it, he found himself smiling when she still spoke and tried.

“Danny...If you keep drawing on the Noetikon like this, it’ll only make your condition worse.” Danny stared at her quietly and frowned, more knowledge whispering into his mind. “How much of my consciousness is still even in my head at this point. 10%, maybe 20%? My Brain wasn’t meant to run this kind of data through it, and it’s only a matter of time before it burns out.” Danny stared at Bastila and watched the mournful look on her face. “I can stand here and wait for my brain to melt, hoping with all of you that it doesn’t take the shard with it when it goes. Or, I can go out there and maybe help my daughter.” Danny watched Bastila quietly, and he let out a tired sigh when the woman flickered out of view rather than responding.

Danny squared his shoulders and moved through the crowd. As he moved Marr’s knowledge washed through his mind, every lesson the Sith Lord had learned for dealing with people and Danny absorbed the knowledge, squaring his shoulders, and shortening his step. He stopped walking like a middle-manager and moved like a warrior with certain, precise steps. His head was on a swivel and Danny met every eye directed his way with a respectful nod, his form loose and ready for battle. Danny approached the troopers standing at the desk, studying them quietly as they turned to regard him nervously.

Danny let out a soft smile when the ‘understanding’ trooper from outside stepped up to him. He studied the young man and leaned in, Marr’s charisma washing through him as he spoke in low tones about his powers, and what good he could do for the city. He subtly laced the force into his words, convincing the young man and those near him what an eminently reasonable idea it would be to open the door and allow him out to join the battle. When the gate rolled upwards, no one in the crowd even commented as Danny ducked under the raising door and strode out into the pouring rain, drawing even more intensively on the force.

Victoria stared in horror at the sight of Leviathan’s hulking form crouched over the wreckage that had until a minute ago held her sister and the girl that had rapidly become one of her best friends. She was moving before she even really realized it, leaving Sabah in her wake, her form lifting off the ground and she rocketed forward with an inarticulate scream of rage.

She ignored every lesson that Taylor had taught her and she hit Leviathan going nearly eighty miles an hour, smashing her form into his side as hard as she could, staggering back when the creature wasn’t torn off his feet and merely surged to one side. When the Endbringer lashed out almost distractedly to bat her away, she flipped in the air, feeling her shield re-asserting itself and she charged again. She saw Alexandria sliding up one side, the mask obscuring most of her face but she
timed her attack with the other cape, the pair of them crashing into Leviathan’s torso at the same time, lifting him off the ground, allowing the momentum to toss him away from the building.

The water sloughing off his form was making things even more complicated, each strike he made or anyone made against him dumping deluges on the capes that were harrying him like bees. When the beast flipped up onto his feet a wave of water blasted her and most of the flying bricks away, and it took Victoria a few moments to get her body re-oriented. She watched as the beast moved to spin in place, lashing out with its tail, a wave of water blasting out into their ranks as it turned, a long watery tail smashing them all several dozen feet away. Victoria heard the words issuing in a monotone from her bracer, but it all melted together as she sailed through the air, glancing down to see Taylor standing with her arms spread a shield around her and the other healers clustered around her. She watched as her mother, aunt and cousins slid around Taylor’s protection and raised their hands as well, layering their own shields over Taylors as Leviathan rounded on them again.

She spun in the air, moving to watch as Leviathan moved to turn back toward the building, his focus shifting back to Taylor. He’d been about to lunge, Victoria had seen it in his body as it tensed and lowered, but then something had changed. Victoria watched as the comparatively tiny form of one Sabah’s creatures, dashed in front of Leviathan, carrying the other. The six-legged one crouched and leap, springing the second up into the air, and allowing the vaguely-humanoid shape to latch its claws into Leviathan’s ‘face.’

Everyone ended up freezing when instead of batting off the creature attached to his face Leviathan flailed as the claws and teeth of the spike-covered beast actually ended up sinking into his flesh, digging its form in and shredding the Endbringer’s single eye on the right side of its face. Victoria watched in awe as the tiny creature ripped considerable rents in the ‘face’ of the giant. The distraction barely lasted a minute before a wave of water washed out when a clawed hand snapped up grabbed the creature. Ripping it free dragged new rents in Leviathan’s face, but it didn’t react crushing Sabah’s creation in its hand before tossing it away. Victoria watched as the Monster turned again, once more ignoring the gathered capes and lunging toward the barriers, raising a hand and lashing out toward Taylor and Amy.

She saw the jagged claws slamming into the shield, buckling the layered shields, shattering all of them but Taylors, with a single hit. She heard her aunt scream as she ended up on her knees, and she watched in horror as Leviathan readied himself. When the beast raised its hands, she found herself letting out a happy cry as Alexandria slammed into Leviathan’s chest at full blast and sent him careening through the air a dozen feet away. She watched her mother helping her aunt to her feet, watching as the barrier resumed and began to flicker ominously, glancing between the barrier and Leviathan.

When the Endbringer lashed out with its tail sending several tonnes of dark saltwater rushing toward her aunt, she dove down toward the barrier, hoping against hope that she could get there first, unsure what she would do if she could get there. She stared in horror as the water overtook her, but she blinked when a black blur flickered down before her, arriving before she could. She watched as the wave closed in on the darkened figure, but suddenly jerked back and away when a wall of violet lightning smashed into and through the water echo, instantly vaporizing it. Victoria hovered in the steam for a moment before the rain washed it away revealing, to her shock, the sight of Danny Hebert dressed casually standing before the barrier that held her family and his, staring down Leviathan as lightning danced up and down his hands and forearms.

Victoria watched as Danny stared coldly across the ground that separated him from the Endbringer, the older man’s vivid eyes narrowing in anger as he stared down the Endbringer. When Leviathan seemed to shift, lashing out Danny lunged forward, one hand lifting and sending out another wave of lightning that instantly vaporized the water echo. When the steam hit the shield a black shape
appeared from it, leaping through the steam toward the Endbringer. Danny's arm snapped out, and a
length of rebar ripped from the wreckage, slamming into the outstretched hand. The man spun it
around, light coalescing around the metal rod and a shimmering golden light shaping itself into a
glowing spear around the rebar. Danny twisted in mid-air in a way that reminded Victoria of
Taylor's acrobatics, and then he slammed the glowing weapon into the upper-most eye on the right
side of Leviathan’s face. The creature flailed in seeming pain before the older man viciously dragged
the spear down through the other three eyes and kicked off, backflipping through the air and landing
neatly on the ground in front of the shield once more.

Victoria hovered in the air with the rest of the bricks as Danny faced down Leviathan on his own,
the beast squaring itself up against him despite the ruined remains of its face. The tall man lashed a
hand and wave of lightning smashed up against the side of the Endbringers face, glancing across and
over it’s skin to little effect. When the beast suddenly charged at him, Danny lashed out with two
hands. One hand viciously backhanded upwards and a wave of something crashed into the
Endbringer, lifting it up and off its feet, causing it to flip through the air before crashing down its
back, the other hand lashing out another wave of lightning that instantly vaporized the water echoes
that Leviathan's flailing was shooting out, keeping it from adding more water to the field.

Victoria watched in awe as the Endbringer got its feet back under it, raising itself warily onto all
fours. It ‘looked’ at Danny despite its lack of eyes and Danny stared back, his entire form ramrod
straight and a look of deep fury visible on his paling features. When the creature looked like it might
try to dash at, or past him, Danny shifted in place, squaring himself. A wave of glowing light washed
up through the water around his knees, up and into his torso and then down his hands which came
together, cupping precisely before pushing out and releasing a wave of glowing cerulean light that
smashed into the side of Leviathan’s face. When the blast hit the scaly skin of the Endbringer, the
right side of its head exploded outwards in a cloud of pulsing sparks of multi-coloured light. When
the glowing energy fizzled away, Victoria found herself gaping at the jagged rend that had been
ripped in Leviathan’s face, a gouge that went from one of it’s smooth ‘cheeks’ to where an ear would
be on a human.

Victoria hovered in place, much like the rest of the capes present when instead of countering, the
Endbringer spun and charged north toward Downtown away from the assembled capes. Danny’s
lightning was easily smashing apart the water echo that the Endbringer left in its wake as it vanished
deeper into the city. Victoria watched as Alexandria descended toward Danny, moving to follow as
Legend’s voice erupted from her band issuing orders for the chase. Victoria landed as the capes
turned to give chase after the Endbringer. Victoria moved toward the rest of New Wave feeling a
level or surrealism as she watched Alexandria speaking softly with Danny while the shields around
Taylor and the healers dropped. Victoria watched her mother catch a collapsing Lady Photon as
Amy trailed after a pale looking Taylor. She watched her friend approaching her father, frowning
when before she could reach him, Taylor ended up slowly crumbling to her knees.

Chapter End Notes

[[So, it ended up being longer, lawl, and we’ve adjusted the scenes with Danny’s
interactions with the spirits, hopefully making it more believable despite the fantastical
nature of it, and I’ve altered the way that the ‘triggering’ happened to be more in line
with what my cousin suggested. Hopefully, it works better. I also tweaked the battle
scene in the second half to make it more mixed bag in terms of powers used; I changed
the Force Destruction to Force Burst, which is basically the Light Side version, and]}
Danny’s still using Lightning. The Rebar into spear thing is a slight modification of the ‘Force Weapon’ Power with a bit of ‘Darkshear’ mixed in to make it into a spear. 5.2 will be out some point tonight or tomorrow.]}
Chapter Summary

[[Decided to change the initial perspective from Carol to Amy for this chapter. I feel that it better shows off the things we needed to see. This is a bit of a rehash of what’s going on with Taylor while Danny and Victoria do their things in the first part, but it’s relatively short, and then we get into the Danny stuff, so that’s good.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

May 15th, 2011
Docks, Brockton Bay.

“...just because you’re so much more versatile than most of the rest of us. I am-” Amy tuned out the older woman, ignoring her posturing as she did everything to keep from slapping the Protectorate Cape. Tincture was a middle-aged woman, apparently based out of a minor Protectorate base in Michigan that, as the cape herself had spent nearly ten minutes explaining, served as the primary recovery point that the Protectorate used for capes with serious injuries. Tincture had explained that she was one of the longest-serving healers in the Protectorate that was why she was in charge of the Triage station. Amy was tempted to point out that the woman’s personality was almost certainly the reason that she’d been assigned an out of the way post with nothing but broken capes to keep her company, but instead, she turned her attention worriedly over to Taylor.

The newest addition to New Wave had been oddly silent most of the afternoon, a palpable air of dread hanging around her that had only gotten worse as the bad news continuously rolled in. Most of the healers were speaking amongst themselves, but Taylor had wandered off to one side and was standing near one of the large windows, staring out at the ocean. Amy watched as the shields began to flicker in place, but a slightly pronounced cough drew her attention back to her speaking companion. When she glanced back she saw the short toad-like woman’s eyes focused nastily on her, Amy restrained a sigh, barely, as the woman began to speak.

“Excuse me, Panacea. I didn’t mean to waste your time with-” The woman’s lecture was instead suddenly cut short by the scraping of chairs across the ground. Amy glanced around to see that a circle had been cleared around herself and the Protectorate Tinker, and she turned in time to see Taylor charging toward them. She ignored the girlish shriek of the woman to her left taking in the severe look on Taylor’s face as the woman charged at her. She glanced past Taylor at the window, her face paling as she saw the monstrous form of Leviathan charging toward them, and she flinched as he ripped across the sand.

Amy stared at the glowing eyes as the Endbringer charged toward them and she flinched when a number of screams accompanied by the sound of scuffling washed over her. It wasn’t until she heard Othala cursing up a storm that she managed to tear her eyes from the glowing ones of the Endbringer, startled to find every other cape and trooper in the room suddenly crushed up against her, Tincture and Taylor.
The troopers had spun outwards, obviously aware of what was going on but the healers hadn’t cottoned on yet, and Othala and Tincture were both screaming at the top of their lungs, lost amidst the angry shouting of the rest. It wasn’t until the sound of crumbling stone and shattering glass reached them that everything went silent. Amy flinched and closed her eyes, waiting for the end to come but it was only the low mournful whimper of Taylor’s voice and the sound of rocks settling that greeted her.

Slowly opening her eyes, Amy glanced up and stared in wonder at the thin glowing barrier that was holding a wall of rubble in place, she glanced over, seeing Taylor standing in the middle of the group, her arms thrown skyward. Amy slipped closer and frowned as she studied Taylor, her entire form shaking with tension, but she was remaining stoically still; her eyes pressed shut and lips pressed into a thin line. Everyone in the bubble was silent as they stared at Taylor in confusion. The silence lasted maybe ten seconds before a resounding crash shook the ground they stood on, and a considerable mass of the rubble on them was cleared away.

Amy stared upwards in awe, watching the rain crashing onto Taylor’s shield, staring through the film of water at the massive scaly creature that loomed over them. The creature’s four asymmetric eyes stared down at them, and it didn’t even react when Amy’s sister smashed into the side of its head moving at full speed, slapping out a hand and almost casually batting away one of the most potent capes in Brockton Bay like she was a mosquito.

Amy watched in dawning horror as Leviathan shifted and wound up, viciously slamming his fist down on the field. Amy had expected pain or darkness, but she wasn’t expecting the loud gong-like noise and another shriek of pain from Taylor. Leviathan didn’t give up, and two more slams ended up drawing louder cries from Taylor, but the field remained apparently stable. As this went on, Amy glanced over at the rest of the healers, staring in horrified awe at Taylor as she protected them single-handedly from an Endbringer.

The Endbringer shifted back, lifting both of its monstrous claws above itself and preparing to smash them both down on the shield. Amy felt something tightening in her chest as she wondered just how long Taylor could keep this up, and luckily they wouldn’t have to find out because her sister returned to view, this time lined up with Alexandria. Both of them crashed into Leviathan and managed to drag him away. Amy slipped over closer to Taylor, moving to grip her shoulder quietly.

She could feel Taylor’s form shaking with the strain of the field, and she slid her hand up, gently brushing it over the back of Taylor’s neck, her power reaching out and scanning the girl’s body. There was a great deal of cell fatigue, and it seemed like whatever she was doing to maintain this barrier; it was putting a great deal of stress on her body. Amy let her power wash through Taylor, repairing what she could, but most of the damage first went through the brain and Amy didn’t have the first clue what she’d do to fix the fatigue there. She saw Taylor flash her a relieved smile and Amy stared back with a concerned look that Taylor casually ignored.

“Amy!” The voice was familiar, and she pushed past the healers, heading toward the edge of the barrier, finding her mother and aunt standing there. They seemed to be staring in awe at the shield, and when they glanced at her, she casually rolled her eyes at their confused looks. It took them a moment to catch on.

“Right. Taylor. Of course. Is she okay? It looked like this thing took a hit from Leviathan.” Sarah spoke softly and lightly touched the shield, drawing a soft gasp from Taylor’s direction. Amy frowned and glanced back at Taylor’s focused and lightly shaking form.
“Four, actually, and she’s okay, but whatever this is, it seems to do some serious damage to her body whenever it takes a hit. It’s solid though.” Amy glanced around, watching as Leviathan smashed through the capes that were harrying him, trying to make it’s way back toward them. “I’m not sure how many more of these she can do.” Amy’s voice was laced with subtle dread, her eyes drifting from Taylor toward her aunt and mother. The silence dragged out, and Amy watched as her mother and aunt studied each other and seemed to come to some sort of agreement without speaking.

She frowned when they moved around the barrier, and Sarah touched the neck of her costume, muttering something. Amy frowned, reaching up and shaking her head. She’d not brought her communicators because she’d thought that they’d be using the Endbringer communicators. Everyone else had theirs built into their suits, and she glanced up watching as Shielder and Laserdream landed outside the shield, and stared at it in awe.

“Taylor’s keeping the rest of the healers safe, but the shield she’s using is rough on her body. I figure that we can over-lay our shields over each other, and we should be able to take a few hits before Taylor has to take anymore.” Her aunt’s voice had a thin veneer of confidence, but Amy was pretty sure that if she could detect the worry under it, that Crystal and Eric would have no trouble. Despite that, she watched as her cousins spread out around the field and raised their hands. She watched as Crystal raised her hands first, and a thin, shimmering field of reddish light flickered in place, a purple field glimmering over it when Sarah raised her hands, and then Eric lifted his hands, and the shield turned almost white as the blue field snapped into place over the other two.

Amy stared outwards, blinking at the sight of one of Sabah’s creations clinging to Leviathan’s face, one of the monster’s eyes now nothing more than a gaping hole that was leaking black ichor. She stared in wonder at the creature as Leviathan grabbed it in hand and ripped it free, watching as the monster’s claws left great big rents in the Endbringers face. She watched in horror as the Endbringer spun in place and suddenly zeroed back in on them.

Most of the capes had been shocked by the damage that Sabah’s doll had been doing to the creature and were caught too flat-footed to respond. Amy watched in horror as Leviathan crashed through them, a wave of water blasting out from his form and sending several people flying every which way as the Endbringer careened into the shields. She heard the screams from her cousins and aunt as the barrier collapsed once more, Eric and Crystal going down in her periphery. Amy watched in horror as her mother caught her aunt in her arms, barely managing to keep Lady Photon on her feet.

Amy glanced up with her mother and aunt, staring in terror at the massive form of Leviathan as it readied an attack that would almost certainly end her mother and aunt. The relief that Amy felt when Alexandria came along, nearly shattering the sound barrier as she sent Leviathan flying, nearly brought her to her knees. The healer stared up, watching the battle as Alexandria and the rest of the front line defenders piled up on the Endbringer.

“...your breaker state.” The hushed conversation drew Amy’s focus, and she looked back at her aunt and mother. She watched as her aunt Sarah managed to get her feet back under her finally and pushed up quietly, raising a hand. Above them, a field flickered into view, a dull purple that shimmered in and out of existence for a moment before solidifying.

“Sarah, no.” The words from her mother were laced with an almost profound amount of pain, and Amy found herself frowning quietly as she shifted closer, listening carefully.

“Yes, Carol. If it comes at us again, you need to survive. Someone has to look after Mark and the kids, and everyone else. If it attacks the shield again, you need to go into your breaker state.” The words were quiet, and Amy watched as her aunt stared at her mother. She couldn’t see the
expression Sarah’s face, but the look in her mother’s eyes was so vulnerable that Amy was tempted to look away, the interaction seeming almost violently private.

The sight of the approaching blue-green blur was what drew her focus. And Amy stared in horror at the approaching water-echo of the Endbringer, watching as the barrier around her aunt and mother flickered ominously. She saw Victoria’s wild dash, the rest of the capes even further behind then her. Amy flinched back quietly and turned, closing her eyes.

Amy was expecting a crash, more screams almost certainly. She braced herself, holding steady but the only sound she heard was a thready crackling sound and the sound of something wooshing over them. It took Amy a minute to slowly shift around, glancing outwards to see a mist enveloping the barrier. As it started to clear, Amy was shocked by Taylor’s voice crying out suddenly.

“What?!” Amy spun and stared at Taylor quietly as the girl suddenly gripped her head and staggered, the field around them flickering twice before collapsing suddenly. The rain suddenly crashing down on them was a shock and Amy moved through the wisps of the steam around her feet, approaching Taylor. She’d keep an eye on the familiar figure that stood between them and Leviathan, facing down the Endbringer. “No! That’s not- You have to stop him!” Amy stared at Taylor as she seemed to be shouting at the empty space next to her.

“Taylor.” Amy moved closer, frowning as the rest of the healers backed away from Taylor worriedly. The girl’s voice had taken on an almost frantic tone as she shouted at the empty space next to her.

“I don’t care, that’s not fair. You have to-” Taylor suddenly staggered, savagely gripping her head and crying out. Amy dashed toward Taylor, barely catching Taylor before she crashed to the ground. The sound of a crash saw her turning and looking toward the standoff. The vaguely-familiar figure had leapt upwards and was approaching Leviathan, a glowing spear held in his hands. Amy watched in awe as the man dodged the strike from the Endbringer, a wave of crackling lightning emerging from one hand shattering the echo that accompanied the attack. Amy felt her mouth opening as the man crashed into Leviathan’s ‘face’ and drove that spear into its scaly flesh dragging the weapon down into and through the other three eyes, reducing them to ichor before kicking off.

It was only when he landed facing them that Amy felt the connection click in her head. Danny Hebert was standing there in all of his paunched bellied glory, carefully pushing his glasses up his nose with one hand as he flicked the ichor off of a glowing golden spear with the other. Amy flinched when he glanced at her, stepping back when Taylor suddenly lurched out of her arms toward him. Observing as the other girl staggered toward her father, Amy frowned and moved after when Taylor barely made it a foot and a half before another tremor smashed through her and she collapsed onto the cracked floor of the building, laying there on her side entirely still.

Amy charged over, ducking down and checking over Taylor quietly, her hands touching the girl’s face shifting it around and lightly slapping her cheek. When that did nothing, she gently pried open one of Taylor’s eyelids, peering in at her eyes, observing the girl’s irises dilating. When the other girl still didn’t react, the healer finally reached out and let her power map out Taylor’s biology.

The power was quick, spreading through Taylor, ghosting over the unhealed strain form the shield, looking for other issues. Finding nothing else wrong with the other healer was a shock, though Amy’s power did find something unsettling. Her power was detecting something odd going on with Taylor’s brain, neurons pulsing oddly and a flicker of… something there that her power couldn’t quite make heads or tails of. It didn’t seem to be hurting her, but her power was telling her that this was probably what had knocked Taylor out.
“Is she alright?” The concerned words saw her glancing up, and she flinched back at the oddly intense look in Danny’s eyes. She stared at him quietly and frowned, glancing down at Taylor and shrugging up a shoulder.

“Nothing’s...broken or damaged. But, something is going on, and I think that’s what knocked her out, but I can’t be sure.” She stared at Danny as he seemed to glance up, considering it for a moment before letting out a weary sigh.

“Keep an eye on her; my powers might be interfering with hers.” He studied her for a moment, and Amy found herself nodding quickly at the command, blinking at the sight of Alexandria touching down a few feet away and approaching them quietly.

“Daniel Hebert.” The words ghosted through the rain and Amy watched as Danny turned toward Alexandria, and Amy watched as Taylor’s father sized up Alexandria before casually stepping forward and speaking to the second in command of the Protectorate.

“Alexandria. A pleasure, though I do wish it had been under better circumstances.”

Part of Danny hated that he couldn’t rush over to Taylor’s side, but the Force was screaming at him as he stood there, telling him every time that a cape was struck down or killed as they attempted to contain Leviathan. He stared at his daughter for a moment longer, watching as she lay there, his connection to the Noetikon informing him that his own issues with the device were to blame for his daughter’s current state, his connection was causing feedback that was disrupting Taylor’s personal link. Bastila and Jolee were quick to inform him that they were working on a correction, but that it would take time.

“Daniel Hebert.” The words drew his attention, and Danny turned around, curiously taking in the powerful looking figure before him. Even before Taylor’s brief stint as a Cape-fangirl in her youth, Danny’d have recognized the woman before him, but part of him was still star struck. Rather than reacting as he might have before, Danny felt his back straightening and his shoulders squaring as he studied the woman’s pose. The Force shifted, and he could tell that she was unsettled despite her nearly perfect body language.

“Alexandria. A pleasure, though I do wish it had been under better circumstances.” The words were spoken with his gruff voice, and he watched the woman relax a bit, a fraction of the tension in her body melting away. Danny adjusted his glasses carefully as he glanced toward the fleeing Endbringer, frowning. Marr’s tactical knowledge swam up around his mind.

“What’s he trying to reach.” His voice was quiet, and he could tell by the way the capes were staying between the Endbringer and the city, the way they were attempting to herd him back toward the ocean, and mostly failing. Leviathan wanted something in the city, and they very much didn’t want him to reach it.

“The Aquifer. Under the city. Leviathan’s trying to get to it and sink the entire city, much like
Newfoundland.” The words came not from Alexandria but from the familiar voice of Carol. Danny blinked and glanced over, flinching at the severe look on the woman’s face. It was hard to match the tiny Lawyer he’d known with the superhero standing before him, but the expressions were undoubtedly there. Danny allowed the woman to study him for a moment before speaking.

“Danny… What are you doing here? How can you…” She trailed off glancing in Leviathan’s wake. She seemed to study him for a moment before speaking. “How do you have powers? How do you have Taylor’s powers? Also, Taylor said that the lightning wasn’t a power that was good for her to use. That it was damaging to her body.” When Carol paused and glanced at his face meaningfully, Danny waved a hand nodding.

Part of him wanted to level with Carol, tell her what Taylor had been concealing, but Alexandria continued to observe, and the Force gently brushed against his mind, encouraging him to keep Taylor’s secrets. He shifted and paused, feeling a sensation of a hand touching his shoulder and an odd feeling in his mind. He felt Marr lurking seemingly at his shoulder and the most unusual sensation of the Sith Lord’s fingers dragging gently over strings.

Unsure of what was going on, Danny followed the sensation with Marr, following the strings until he felt the lines intersecting with other lines, his fingers ghosting over them. ‘Shatterpoints’ The ghostly voice of the Sith Lord whispered in his mind. ‘Points where you can place a small amount of… pressure and affect the flow of the future: the right action, the right words. Speak the words and the Force ensures that things go well. Say what the Force whispers into your mind.’

“I’m already dying.” The words were spoken with blunt simplicity, and Danny frowned in his mind. He’d have tried to dress it up differently, coach it somehow, Marr, it seemed, or perhaps the Force, lacked such tact. Danny turned his head and looked meaningfully at Carol. “My powers were once like Taylor’s, more refined and controlled. There was an incident.” Danny paused when the Force told him, and it took him a moment to realize that he was allowing the others to fill in the blanks. Danny was confused until the Noetikon chimed in, a flicker of pain washing through him as information on second triggers and their dangers filtered through his mind.

“They became unstable. I was forced to give them up. Drawing on them damages my brain. Unfortunately, considering the situation that Taylor had found herself in, I didn’t exactly have much choice.” Danny glanced over at Carol and watched her paling quietly. He rubbed at his face. He saw her opening her mouth, and Marr pushed, and Danny followed, speaking softly. “It’s already too late. Even if I stopped now, I’d have maybe two or three hours left. This way I can do some good.” He glanced at Alexandria, watching as she straightened her back.

“Can you keep fighting?” The words were spoken coolly, and Danny saw a flicker of irritation wash over Carol’s face. Apparently, Alexandria saw it too cause she chimed in again. “His powers are formidable; he could turn the tide on Leviathan, save the city.” Danny offered a thankful smile to Carol that stilled her rejoinder before glancing over at Alexandria and nodding quietly. When she moved to speak, Danny shifted back and held up a hand. He turned a bit and spoke back quickly.

“In a moment. I need to deal with a few things.” He saw something flicker over the woman’s face behind the visor and then Alexandria stepped away. Danny watched her go quietly, before turning to stare at Carol. The woman’s expression was shell shocked, and Danny let out a sigh as he regained control of his body.

“Carol.” The words jarred her, and she glanced at him with a pained expression. She moved to speak, and Danny shook his head. “I know. I wish it was different too. Just. Look out for her?” He glanced from Carol to Taylor and back watching as the woman nodded. “There’s a deposit box at
the branch near my house. It has my will and everything in it, but it all goes to Taylor.” He nodded quietly and then turned toward where Alexandria waited.

He saw Victoria standing near Amy and Taylor’s collapsed form. He smiled a touch, seeing that Amy had doffed her robe and wrapped Taylor’s form in it, leaving the poor girl shivering. Moving closer, Danny waved the blonde girl over. He saw the tears in her eyes as she approached and he knew that she’d heard what he had said to her mother and Alexandria. He offered her a quick smile before gently gripping her shoulder.

“Danny, I’m-” Danny found himself chuckling when she let out a loud sniffle, clearly on the verge of tears.

“Hey. Hey. It’s fine Vicky. It’s fine.” He spoke, gently gripping her chin, drawing her up to meet his gaze. “I promise you. It’s fine. I’ve got to go, but I want you to promise me three things.” He saw as she stared at him before nodding resolutely and a chuckle emerged from his chest against his will.

“I appreciate your trust in me Victoria, but you should always wait to hear what you agree to before agreeing to it. In any case, I want you to promise me that you’ll look after Taylor.” He saw her expression soften and she nodded, and Danny smiled quietly.

“This isn’t going to make sense but,” Danny lowered his voice and stared into Victoria’s eyes. “When this is all over, you need to sit Taylor down and ask her who Bastila and Jolee are, and you can’t let her get away with not answering you. Do you understand?” Danny watched her eyes filling with confusion, but after a moment Victoria nodded. He let out a soft smile and stepped back, glancing at Alexandria.

“What’s the third thing?” The voice drew his gaze back, and Danny smiled quietly at the younger girl, studying her quietly.

“Never let that guitar go to waste. Keep playing it, or make sure someone else who will play it gets it.” He offered her a warm smile and chuckled at the quick nod that she offered him. He studied her quietly, tempted to continue talking, to tell her that he was sorry for making her cry, but the words failed him, and he stepped away. He glanced at Carol as she helped Sarah to her feet, watching as Amy dragged her sister back to Taylor’s form.

Danny took a moment to take them all in before turning and striding over toward Alexandria, moving up to her quietly. He saw as she straightened up and looked at him, and Danny shifted back when Marr moved back in once more, filling his body and walking toward Alexandria as a warrior.

“What do you need?” The words were spoken softly, and Danny felt as Marr curled his expression into a frown and glanced around the wreck of the hospital. Danny wondered what the Sith Lord would do to counter Leviathan, and he frowned a bit. Information flowed into his brain, and Danny took a step back, gripping his head quietly. As the pain cleared techniques and strategies filled his mind, battlefield tactics, and combat strategy slotting itself into his growing headache.

“Get me close. I’ve got a few tricks that I’ve been saving for a rainy day that might hurt it, and it doesn’t seem like we’ll get a better chance.” Danny felt his arms gesturing up, and he paused at the tiny smile that ghosted over the capes face. Alexandria nodded and moved around behind him, gently grasping him around the middle. Danny flinched as they lifted off, but a touch of the Force and a shield flickered over him and protected him from the wind.

“We have researched you, Daniel Hebert.” The words ghosted over his ear and Danny shifted in her
hands a bit, chuckling when they tightened their grip.

“Call me Danny.” The words were flippant, and he felt a flicker of warning from the spirit in his mind, and he stilled, becoming more serious. Once the cape behind him had gotten a better grip on him, she rocketed along faster, following the wake of Leviathan’s destruction, the low drone of her band to faint for Danny to hear, though each word was uttered matched a flicker in the Force that hinted at the grievous injury or death nearby. Danny stared ahead at the rapidly growing figure.

“We have researched you, Danny, we were curious about your daughter’s gifts, and near as we can tell, you were not a parahuman. Furthermore, I think if you’d been a parahuman with as versatile of a skillset as your daughter, we’d have heard of you before now. Just who are you?” Danny reached out for that sensation again, tracing his fingers along the lines, keeping his goal in mind, he wanted Taylor safe, he wanted to preserve her sense of normalcy. Following the sensations Danny felt the thread that he wanted, a pulse of warmth and words whispered into his mind.

“Ares.” The words slipped from his lips, and Danny let the Force speak through him. “I was once called Ares, and I was also once called Danny Hebert. And at one time the world I came from knew both those names.” The words that slipped from Danny’s lips were fantastical but something drifted through him, and Danny felt his voice coalescing with earnest conviction. Cold fury gripped him, and he clenched his fists as he stared at the destruction continuing softly. “People I loved died, because of it, and Ares had to die, and Danny Hebert had to go with him. After it all, I just wanted to be anywhere else. My powers acquiesced.” Danny trailed off, and he watched as they drifted closer to Leviathan. The figure above him was shocked, Danny could tell that much with the Force. It took her a few moments to respond.

“Unexpected. We’ve been curious. Your powers, and your daughters, they’re...different. Is she as powerful as you?” Danny frowned and considered the threads, dragging mental fingers over them. It took him a few minutes to find the right thread, and he slowly let out a sigh before speaking softly.

“If she can survive long enough? She’ll easily surpass me.” He frowned as Leviathan came into view as they slippd around the side of a building. He watched as a group of capes were clustered around in front of him, spears of metal erupting around them and slamming into the Endbringer, doing little damage. Danny watched as the figure spun and lashed its tail out, an echo of water emerging from it and flying at the capes. With an errant thought, Danny reached out a hand, lightning vaporizing the echo before it could crush the capes into a thin paste. The Endbringer caught sight of him and charged off once more, heading along the coast toward the burned out ruins of the docks.

“Get us close.” Danny’s voice was cold and the figure gripping him nodded and increased speed.

Getting closer to the Endbringer had been easier said than done. Leviathan constantly charged away from them, and even flying at Alexandria’s full speed hadn’t allowed them to catch up with it since the Endbringer was regularly sending water echo’s that Danny and Alexandria had to slow to deal with. The more trying part was that, occasionally, if they got too far away from a straight path between the Endbringer and where Taylor had fallen it would try to turn back toward his daughter, and Alexandria and Danny would have to rocket past it to convince the Endbringer to focus on what
was apparently its secondary targets.

This meant that they were leading Leviathan on a merry chase and keeping much of the destruction confined to the parts of the city that Lung had wrecked. Time wasn’t on Danny’s side though; the pain in his mind was growing worse the longer the battle continued. The other capes had apparently been working on things though because a voice came over Alexandria’s bracer and after a few moments, the cape suddenly arced outwards toward the water, removing herself and Danny from between Leviathan and Taylor.

“Dragon has a plan. They’ve created a trap between here and where Taylor is, something to trap it in place long enough for you to do whatever you’re going to do.” Danny watched as Leviathan instantly span away from the capes that had been harrying it, shooting out a water echo that most of the fliers dodged and charged toward the south once more. It seemed almost single-minded in it’s dogged pursuit of Taylor and Danny frowned.

“Why is it so eager to kill Taylor? It’s completely ignoring me, and we’ve got nearly identical power sets. What makes Taylor so special.” Danny frowned quietly as Alexandria moved to follow Leviathan toward Taylor, Danny watching the beast bounding along.

“I'm unsure, the only thing that comes to mind is how Thinker powers work differently on you two.” The words were slow to come from Alexandria and Danny glanced up at her. When he didn’t respond, she continued as they flew along. “Most Thinker powers react...poorly, when they encounter your daughter. It causes most Thinkers pain when they try to use their powers on her, but you are seemingly invisible to them. No pain really, but they can't detect you at all.” The words were crisp, and following the suggestion of the Force, Danny didn’t bother to ask how she knew, quietly absorbing the words and frowning. Before he could really react to the revelation though, the trap they’d been waiting for was sprung.

A massive spike of metal erupted from the ground and speared Leviathan through the middle, lifting him completely off the ground, driving deep into his side and emerging from his back. Danny watched the creature flail on the attack and felt Alexandria rocketing quickly toward the beast. Danny held out a hand, five tiny glowing balls of dark violet light appearing at the tip of each finger. Danny focused on the Force, compressing his power into the balls as they zoomed in closer. Alexandria brought them close, and Danny dragged his hand along the wildly whipping tail, the fingers leaving glowing violet trails in their wake. Danny didn’t have to tell Alexandria to back off quickly, the cape moving quickly and zipping toward the nearest building.

In their wake, the five long glowing trails on Leviathan’s tail began to glow brighter and brighter. After five seconds, every bit of glowing matter on the Endbringer’s body detonated in an explosion that sheared the hyper-dense tail off entirely and sent it flopping around on the street below. Leviathan reacted, startling everyone by gripping the spike and ripping itself lengthwise off it, shearing off another long strip of its body off in the process. The writhing body of Leviathan ended up crashing into the next building over, crushing it entirely. It took the Endbringer a moment to get it’s feet under it before it rolled over and charged headlong through the next building, emerging onto an abandoned street and charging wildly toward downtown.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter went different than I was expecting. The combat is interesting. ALSO; CLIFFIE. Also Also, that last power was Marr’s, and by extension Danny’s, version of Flamusfracta. He basically reversed the Strong Nuclear Force in a big ol’ chunk of Leviathan’s Tail and detonated it like a bomb. Boom. Danny’s mostly talking out his ass in the second part, basically using the Shatterpoint Force Technique to say the right things to keep Cauldron from dissecting Taylor. The Force is helping him lie well.
Chapter Summary

[[This chapter took a few days to work out, so sorry about that. This one is a bit shorter
then most have been, I think it's the shortest non-interlude chapter since like 3.1? I cut it
off before the big final battle, and there was important stuff to cover, but it didn't stretch
out, figured you'd all prefer a shorter update now, rather than waiting for me to roll it
and the big fight in together. This should be an anomaly as I generally try to keep all my
updates above 5k (Excluding Interludes) Anyway, the next chapter should be quicker
since I’ve got a bunch of short shifts between now and the weekend, and it'll be a bit
longer since it's the final bout between BB and Leviathan.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 15th, 2011
Downtown, Brockton Bay

Alexandria had always known on some level that Leviathan was holding back during their
encounters, that all of the Endbringers weren’t fighting with their actual skills, but to see it in action
finally was humbling, especially since it wasn’t her efforts that had prompted the reaction. Her
passenger was what was genuinely bringing out this ferocity in Leviathan and part of that stung at
her pride. Danny lacked her mobility, but he made up for it with a truly devastating array of power
that had, for a few minutes, managed to keep the Endbringer on the backfoot.

Danny had truly let loose among the ruins of what had once been the docks of the city, unleashing
devastating waves of lightning that had left bright spots in her eyes, countless blasts of eldritch power
scouring chunks out of the rampaging monster. Waves of force had smashed the beast into the
buildings, pinning him in place to let the blasters unload on him, or hoisting the creature up into the
air to allow the melee ranged capes to unleash on him. All of this had proven to be for naught, the
damage cosmetic, and the interruptions fleeting. Nothing that they could do, even with Danny’s not-
inconsiderate power at their disposal was enough. One Parahuman, no matter how overtly powerful,
could not counter the Endbringer on his own.

When Leviathan had finally managed to slip their noose moving into the more used sections of the
city, it’d further hampered their assaults, Danny almost reluctant to use his abilities to damage the
livelihoods of innocent bystanders, though he had utterly destroyed a school with the Endbringers
bulk. The reluctance had almost allowed Leviathan to lose them entirely. Honestly, if it hadn’t been
for Lung’s timely arrival, the Endbringer would have already escaped their net. Alexandria had been
surprised when the Parahuman had arrived and intercepted a fleeing Leviathan. He had exploded
from a ruined storefront, nearly fifteen feet tall and crashed into the fleeing Endbringer like a whirling
ball of devastating teeth and claws, rapidly growing as the Endbringer tried and failed to tear him
apart.

Now nearly forty feet long, the man-turned-dragon was keeping up with Leviathan only due to his
increased regeneration. Leviathan lacked the power to put him down entirely, and Lung possessed a tenacity that saw him harrying the Endbringer despite the constant damage he was taking. Alexandria knew that it was only a matter of time though. Lung lacked the damage potential to actually harm the Endbringer, and it was taking every cape in the city not actively involved in containing Leviathan’s destructive waves to keep the Endbringer from getting around Lung and wreaking devastation across the city.

Alexandria watched in worry as the battle continued, her form tense as she observed the escalating clash. In truth, they didn’t have time for a protracted struggle. Already the aquifer beneath the city was stirring, though the damage they were doing to Leviathan was certainly delaying the damage. At some unseen or heard signal, Lung suddenly lunged in, driving his claws into the Endbringer's chest and coiling his massive frame around Leviathan, pinning him in place as one of Dragons’ massive upright suits landed with a thunderous crash.

Alexandria watched in awe as the Tinker aimed a heavy underslung weapon at the Endbringer and activated it, releasing a wave of terrifying golden light that seemed to sear through the outer layers of Leviathan’s body. The weapon was horrifyingly destructive like this, scouring equally huge swathes of flesh from the Chinese Warlord that was holding Leviathan in place, though unlike the Endbringer, Lung was regenerating from the damage that had been done to his form.

This was the first time that the Tinker had turned her newest weapon on the Endbringer, as up to now, Dragon had been using that weapon to take up the slack when Danny’s lightning had slowed its efforts to contain the damage that Leviathan’s water echoes could do. The golden light had been more effective, destroying most of the water, and robbing the rest of its momentum.

Alexandria frowned when Leviathan suddenly shook off Lung’s elongated form and lunged at Dragon’s suit, the Endbringer seemingly shaking impotently when Dragon rocketed away before he could strike, no doubt to let her weapon recharge. When Leviathan spun savagely outward, lashing his tail toward the fleeing suit, Danny lifted a hand and gestured. An intense wave of violet lightning erupted from Danny's fingers, crashing into the echo and saving the suit from the attack. The effort staggered Danny though, and the man went slack once more, seemingly conserving his strength. Alexandria couldn’t be sure, her powers having little effect on the man, but she was reasonably certain that Danny’s time was rapidly growing short, and he had begun to become more and more worried about Leviathan’s ongoing temerity.

In truth, Alexandria was even more worried about Leviathan’s actions. The Endbringers, all of them, usually backed off when they took too much damage, but Leviathan was stepping up his game, breaking out every trick he had to keep himself in the game and refusing to give up ground. Worse still, the Endbringer was actually slowing his efforts, taking on a more defensive role and doing his best to minimize the damage that he was taking, almost as if he was biding his time.

“Why hasn’t he retreated yet.” It took her a few moments to realize that it wasn’t her voice speaking but Danny’s and she studied the man quietly. He had grown quieter and quieter as the battle drew on, and the conversation was startling. When she glanced at him, he gestured weakly at the Endbringer. “Why is he still fighting. Most of the time after he’d taken a quarter of this damage he’d retreat. It’s almost like he’s waiting for something. It could be the aquifer, but it doesn’t seem right. They’d have told us if it was that close to sinking the city, and with the way that Dragon and Lung are synching up, Leviathan might not have that long.” Danny frowned as he stared at the monster, watching as it continued to lash out, viciously trying to get around or through Lung to softer targets.

Alexandria couldn’t understand it either. As far as she could tell, this was one of the biggest failures that the Endbringers had faced to date. Between the advanced warning, and Danny and Dragon’s
efforts, the collateral damage was at an all-time low, both in terms of real estate and loss of life. As it was this attack had been less devastating than some of the more powerful hurricanes of recent years. She watched as Danny stared coldly at the abomination, a hand raising to intercept another well-aimed water echo, keeping the Endbringer from toppling a building that held nearly a dozen of the long ranged capes that couldn’t fly. Lung kept the actual Endbringer from slamming into the building, his massive jaw slammed down into the creatures neck and biting savagely, using it to pin him in place once more.

“It’s waiting for something.” The words drifted from Danny, and Alexandria glanced at him as they were illuminated by the glowing golden light of Dragon’s weapon, the ‘tseer’ sound of it discharging washing over them. “It’s biding it’s time, cause it needs to be here for...something.” He frowned quietly before flinching suddenly. He stared in horror back toward the Endbringer.

“...Taylor messes with Thinkers. She causes their powers to screw up.” His words were cold, and Alexandria felt a chill down her spine, as the man turned to look at her. “What does she do to precogs?” The second in command of the Triumvirate frowned deeply. With the exception of Contessa, Taylor interfered with them too.

“In the short term, she introduces instability in predictions, makes them less likely, as the range stretches out though, the instability grows worse until the powers break down like other thinker powers. What does this–” Alexandria found herself pausing suddenly as her mind caught up with Danny’s train of thought. A feeling of dread washing over her as she turned toward the Endbringer, watching as it suddenly stillled, looming up and ignoring Lung’s attacks on it, it’s head turning to face her, those gaping gore-stained sockets focused directly on her. She knew, viscerally, that the moment that Danny no longer stood between her and the Endbringer she would die, and that Taylor would follow almost immediately. “It’s the Simurgh. She’s sacrificing him, or at least putting him at risk to counter Taylor’s effects on her powers. Her precognition.”

“We need to move.” Danny’s voice was quiet. “They need to keep him contained for a bit, but I’ve got a plan. If that’s why he’s dead-set on Taylor, I’ve got a plan that might shift his focus to me.” It took Alexandria a moment to draw her eyes from Leviathan’s empty sockets, and she glanced at Danny with a worried expression, prompting the man to let out a chuckle. “I’m already dead, but, If I can get him to come to me, instead of running, I might be able to take that son-of-a-bitch with me.”

Alexandria watched Danny quietly for a few moments before lifting the arm that held him and muttering into his bracer.

“Alexandria to Dragon and Legend. Ares has a plan that might actually pull Leviathan’s focus to him. He needs time to get it in motion; we’ll have to pull back. Expect Leviathan to attempt to get away from you toward the staging point once we’re no longer between it and Vigil. Leviathan needs to be contained until Ares can enact his plan. If he can pull its focus, Ares is convinced that he can put down Leviathan.” The band beeped, and Alexandria waited.

“Confirmed.” The words came back in dual echos, and she lifted off, rocketing away from Leviathan. As they moved, Danny glanced up at her quietly. He seemed to study her for a few moments, and Alexandria felt oddly naked before that gaze, shifting nervously. She let out a sigh of relief when he spoke.

“You should warn the Protectorate and anyone else you can. If this works, it’ll almost certainly disrupt any precognition in Brockton Bay.” Alexandria stared at Danny in horror as that implication hit her.
“Like, disrupt the powers of precognitives here in the bay? Or disrupt precognition of any sort that points toward the Bay?” Danny seemed to study her for a moment before gesturing toward a wide flat lot that stood around a tall burned out building. As they drifted in, Danny’s voice cut gently through the rain back toward her ears.

“Both.”

Danny was rather proud of himself, that between him, the two Jedi Masters, and the Sith Lord he had been the one that finally deciphered why the Endbringer had been so utterly focused on destroying Taylor. Danny knew that it was likely more of a quirk of what the Noetikon was doing to his brain; Taylor’s research was typically kept within the Jedi Archive, and thus it was separate from the other spirits. This was what had given him the leg up necessary to puzzle it out first, but he took what victories he could at this point. Considering his current state, he doubted that he’d have many more to look forward to.

That being said, his current plan wasn’t actually his, but something that Marr had come up with. If the Simurgh was pushing Leviathan to the point of sacrificing itself so that she could clear Taylor’s influence from her scope, the Sith knew of a technique that would create a distortion in the Force that would make the future impossible to see, and the effect would actually spread the longer that Danny channelled the technique. If Taylor’s influence on the Simurgh’s precognition was the driving force behind this single-minded assault, then he wouldn’t have to wait long for that focus to turn to him.

Listening as Alexandria spoke to the increasingly concerned voices on her bracer, Danny felt the tension thrumming in her body. Marr had wanted him to avoid giving off that warning, but the force itself had prompted him to issue it. He wasn’t sure why, but he suspected that someone besides the Simurgh might have ended up reacting… poorly to his attempt at subterfuge, but the Force seemed content with the plan otherwise. And, at this point, the options were apparently limited to utterly wiping Brockton Bay out of the scope of any sort of Precognition for the foreseeable future, or to let Leviathan destroy the city anyway, after murdering his daughter and any Cape that didn’t make their escape.

Danny watched as they floated in towards the parking lot of the old Dockworkers Association. Much like most of the ruins of the docks at this point, the lot itself was under nearly two inches of water, the shielders doing their best to protect the city further south, and the uninhabited docks had been left to suffer under the brunt of the assault. Danny was impressed that the building itself had survived so much of the onslaught, though it hadn’t come through everything unscathed. Whenever lightning flashed Danny could see that whatever had remained of the windows was gone now, and water still poured out of the upper-stories, dead fish and sea creatures scattered around the lot.

The fences and tents that had once protected Uber and his time-stop field were long gone, and Danny wasn’t sure if it was the PRT that had removed them or the waves, and at the moment he didn’t really have the time to contemplate the issue. Alexandria was approaching the building itself, and Danny found himself thankful that he wouldn’t have to stand in the water, even though he wasn’t even sure if he’d feel the cold at this point.

The pain had long since faded, and that was concerning, most sensations were fading from his body, and at this point, only the constant reassurance of the force was keeping him stable. He briefly
wondered just how much of him was him, as opposed to a duplicate of his mind being maintained by the dynamic memory of the Noetikon. The fact that he could even conceptualize that concept was disconcerting, as was the instant feedback from the Noetikon that informed him that at this point most of his nervous system had been replaced by his Gemma and that his body was serving more as a resource node then an actual repository for his consciousness.

The levels of the power reserves for the Noetikon and what it could detect of the Shard were also concerning. The Noetikon and the Shard didn’t seem to be able to cut him off as he was drawing so heavily on both of their resources, and if this lasted much longer, he’d almost certainly take both of them with him when he went. So caught up in his thoughts was he that he didn’t even notice that Alexandria had set him back on his feet until the word suddenly tilted when said legs gave out under him. Before the cape could lunge out and catch him, Danny reached out with the Force and caught himself. He manipulated his body into a standing position and frowned over at Alexandria.

She was staring at the increasingly frantic comments from the bracer she wore, and Danny glanced toward the fighting, wondering if it was his declaration or Leviathan’s battle that was drawing such ardent comments. Shaking off the curiosity, Danny resolutely turned his focus back to Alexandria who was looking at him in worry.

“I’ve got to get into the right mindset. I know that I can do this, but I’ve never actually used my power in this way. I wish that I could explain what I’m going to do, but I don’t have the time. If it works, Leviathan will break what he’s doing and come for me because I will be a blip on the Endbringer's radar that completely washes out what Taylor is doing. If that happens, you need to get out of the way fast. Like you’ll see the effect, and you need to be on the outside when it closes.”

Danny stared at Alexandria, waiting till that opaque mask nodded in his direction.

Once he’d gotten confirmation from Alexandria, Danny moved over and settled himself into a Lotus position on the middle of the roof. He felt Marr’s presence drifting closer to his mind, and he absorbed the information that the spirit was sharing. Danny shifted down and settled, reaching deep into the Force.

‘There is a well-known technique where you flood the Force around you with darkness to obscure the future, Danny. That technique requires you to taint the Living Force so that the Jedi cannot pierce that veil and see what is to come or use their gifts to divine your secrets. Few Sith have the power to affect more than one planet or system, but the technique isn’t that difficult.’ The voice was casual, explaining as Marr directed Danny to draw heavily on the Force, the energy flowing into him, wiping away his concern, his disconnection and connecting him intrinsically to the world around him, Marr’s voice soon becoming the only thing he perceived beyond his own mind.

‘Unfortunately for us, near as I can tell these beings don’t use the Force to get their predictions, they’re basically computers that extrapolate things with vast amounts of processing power. Luckily for us, we know where the powers come from, and almost certainly what powers the precognition of those creatures. They are computers of a sort, and that extrapolation can be a weakness. Even now, the architect of this massacre is using her power to plot, and we’re about to give her a headache.’ Danny felt information flowing into his mind as Marr spoke and he reached out with the Force, letting his influence spread outwards, through the air itself, and the stones, propagating the connection through the very matter and twisting it. Not enough to change it, but enough to start emitting junk information that the extrapolation would pick up. Tiny bits of background data that would quickly accumulate creating a mess of static centred on Danny and rapidly expanding in the perception of any Precog.

It took almost five minutes, Danny’s influence covering over two-thirds of the city before he felt the
shock and fear flashing through Alexandria. Danny slowed the technique, glancing upwards to see Alexandria’s cape fluttering as she shattered the sound barrier in her haste to escape. Danny glanced up and saw Leviathan stampeding toward him on all fours, ignoring the few capes that tried to give chase. Danny let out a sigh of relief when most of the capes peeled off, and he let out a wry chuckle at the idea of being relieved that Lung of all people was getting out of the line of fire.

Instead, Danny found himself watching Leviathan’s wild almost suicidal charge, remaining sat almost placidly on the roof of the Dockworkers Association building. Danny released his restraints on his connection to the Force, fully opening himself to it and feeling the energy flow into him, spreading through him and up into the Noetikon. Danny felt the spirits as they followed the connection back and he centred himself as they started to prepare.

Releasing his fear at a time like this was hard, it was natural to be afraid, but fear wasn’t what he needed and with an amount of self-control that startled him, Danny managed to clear his mind enough to draw fully on the Light Side of the Force. He felt the other spirits’ minds touching his and move to work in concert. He checked to see that Alexandria had cleared the area before the Force suddenly reached out, driving downwards and through the building, into the ground.

He felt the moment that Leviathan realized what he was doing and slowed to a halt, preparing to try and dodge, to try and escape but it was already too late. The Force expanded outwards with insane speed, the ground itself glowing almost blindingly as it danced outwards, exploding out to nearly twice the distance between him and the Endbringer. When Leviathan turned and tried to flee, putting on speeds that made it’s earlier escapes seem almost stationary, Danny activated the technique. A wall of dazzling glowing light erupted upwards, shooting violently into the sky just in time to utterly cut Leviathan off from the rest of the city. Danny felt it all the way into his core when the super-massive Endbringer smashed into the barrier at full speed and bouncing backwards.

Danny felt it, even more, when the Endbringer rose again and smashed it’s overly dense form into the barrier over and over seeking any escape. Turning his mind from the pain, Danny pushed himself into the Light Side of the Force, and he and the walls began to glow bright, light spilling from them to fill the sealed barrier. Danny drew on the Force more and more intensely; his entire form lit from within by a coruscating light. As Leviathan’s attempts at escape grew more and more desperate, the three spirits worked in concert to fill the area with light. Soon it was too bright to see anything but the pervasive light that seemed to scorch the Endbringer's form, and Leviathan turned its focus from escape back to Danny, charging for him once more.

It was already too late, Danny knew, the Force Light had grown too strong, and it was melting Leviathan's form like glass as he charged for Danny. Sensing the technique approaching completion, Danny prepared to release himself entirely into the Force, to ensure that everything within this sealed off part of the city was utterly atomized. Danny’s senses reached out toward the approaching shadow that was Leviathan, but before he could complete the technique every ounce of Danny’s focus and control shattered as something did the impossible and broke the barrier.

The light exploded outwards and upwards, turning the rainy night to a bright summer day, for a brief moment before dispersing harmlessly, its effects too spread out to do anything but mildly discomfort the genuinely evil. Danny stared in horror at Leviathan as the smoking, and scorched form charged for the building her rode on, and he glanced up, looking around to see what’d sealed his demise. He stared in confusion at the shape of Alexandria’s form as she rocketed toward him and intercepted Leviathan, smashing into the single-minded brute and lifting him clean off his feet and sending him careening through the air.

As Leviathan rolled away, Alexandria’s visor turned, and Danny blinked at the glowing blue eyes
that peered down at him from behind it, and he swallowed at the words that issued from the woman’s lips.

“I’m sorry Dad. You don’t get to die like this.” The words were quick and furious, and Danny found himself staring in awe as Alexandria turned in the air, placing herself between him and the rapidly recovering Endbringer. Danny stared in confusion as whip-cracks issued up and down the parking lot, capes suddenly emerging from nowhere ferried by teleporters and speedsters, every cape that appeared, sporting the same glowing azure eyes.

Chapter End Notes

[[DUN DUN DUN. More Cliffies, cause I’m evil. Danny was attempting to use the Noetikon to help him use Wall of Light, a technique that usually requires four Jedi. It would have almost certainly killed him a la Obi-wan evaporating out of his clothes on the Death Star, but it would have taken everything else with him. Oh, the Precog breaker is a Technological Forecast scrambler that Marr knows. It essentially tricks forecasting systems by feeding them endless amounts of junk data from endless sources that they can't filter out fast enough. Since the Shard's 'precognition' is actually extrapolation, this sort of works on them. It pissed of Simurgh, anyway.

Ten points to whoever guesses what's going on with all the capes, and what’s about to precipitate Leviathan getting beaten like a second-hand drum. With this chapter, we’re now down to just two more chapters left in this arc. It's a short one, I know, but I think it makes sense thematically. It’s been a problematic arc to write over-all as well, and I’m looking forward to chapters with more interaction to deal with.]]
Chapter Summary

[[Alright, Let’s see how this final battle goes down. Let me know what you think, as always. There’ll be one more chapter after this one, and that’ll be the aftermath, and then I’ll be taking a short break as always before the interludes start. More details on those below the story!]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 15th, 2011
Docks, Brockton Bay

“...Ares has a plan. He and Alexandria will be withdrawing from the active battle.” Amy almost didn’t hear the murmuring of Dragon’s voice emerging from her bracer over the crash of the pouring rain on plastic. The sound was a constant companion due to the Tent-canopy had been erected to keep the wounded and medics both dry. Currently, more of a covered pavilion then a tent, the covered area held nearly four dozen beds, of which three quarters were full. As Amy looked around at the injured, she found it difficult to reconcile the concept that this had been one of the most successful Endbringer battles to date. Half again as many had been killed in the clashes, and even then, people were speaking in awe at the reduced scope of the damage done in terms of loss of life and property.

This didn’t mean that they were without victims to heal and care for. While Taylor may have been the only person resting on the cots around them when the pavilion went up, this changed quite rapidly as the battle continued. As the length of the encounter dragged into hours, the number of injured in the beds had climbed. Amy’s skills were in high demand, and she tended to deal with the most critical of the patients, stabilizing them and then moving on, allowing the rest of the healers and medics to take care of keeping the patients comfortable or handling the less challenging cases.

“They will require that you attempt to contain Leviathan until he can enact it. Leviathan will attempt to escape the cordon to head toward the injured; it is imperative that he be kept from reaching them. If Ares’ plan is successful, Leviathan will orient on the burned-out section of the city. If that happens, it is of ‘utmost’ importance that you disengage.” Amy carefully listened to the words, as she continued to heal the patient before her. The man had been smashed into a building by a Water Echo, and his legs were both little more than limp fleshy socks containing the fine dust of what had once been nerves and bones. There was little that Amy could do to help the man now, but she stabilized him, stopping all internal bleeding. She nodded at the nurse and moved on, well aware that she’d probably be called upon to regrow the limbs later.

“Ares has informed the PRT that there will be a visual effect when he enacts his plan. If you are within the visual effect when the power activates, Ares says that you will die. This is your only warning. Further, in order to lure Leviathan, Ares technique might have the side effect of disrupting predictive thinker powers, this is normal, do not panic. I repeat, predictive thinker powers might be
disrupted shortly, if this would impact your combat ability, you are recommended to remove yourself from the fray. Dragon out.” They kept referring to him as Ares, but Amy had gleaned that they were speaking of Taylor’s father. Amy had been just as shocked as the rest when Danny had arrived and saved her family from Leviathan, that shock had turned to awe when the man had seemingly turned the tide of the battle on his own, suddenly standing shoulder to shoulder with the Triumvirate. Thoughts of her father turned Amy’s focus toward Taylor, peering across the sea of beds to where the girl currently rested, that familiar white and red cloak still draped over her.

Amy was surprised to see Taylor sitting up, her body ramrod straight as she stared through the nurse that was trying and failing to get Taylor to lay back down. Amy glanced off, watching as her mother and aunt started to make their way across the pavilion. New Wave had taken over protection of the medical point, Leviathan’s interest meaning that the powerful shields would be helpful in the case of an emergency. After quickly checking that her skills weren’t immediately needed, Amy moved to duck past a frowning Tincture to follow after her family.

She wasn’t surprised when she ducked around her aunt that her sister had managed to beat all of them to Taylor’s side. Victoria was perched on the side of Taylor’s bed, gently shaking her, though Taylor continued to stare in horror toward the north, her entire body completely rigid. Amy saw Taylor’s lips moving, but the sound of the rain easily drowned out the words until the healer had reached Taylor’s bedside.

“No, no, no, no.” Taylor continued to mutter the words in a voice laced with horror, as Victoria gently shook her shoulder and glanced up worried. Amy reached out, lightly ghosting a hand over Taylor’s pale skin, frowning as she examined the data. Taylor’s bizarre interference had faded. As far as Amy could tell, Taylor was operating normally. She shrugged a shoulder at her sister, watching as Victoria’s visible worry deepened, her sister turning back to Taylor and leaning closer to mutter something quietly.

Part of Amy, deep in her chest, flickered with a hint of jealousy at the intimate nature of the action, but that was quickly washed away with concern when Taylor didn’t seem to react to the words. Instead, she remained stock still, before shrieking out a much louder ‘No’ and leaping to her feet, taking three steps before she lifted a hand and shielded her eyes. This was the only warning that the rest of them had before a massive pillar of blue-white light suddenly erupted into the sky. The effect was enormous, several blocks across and it seemed to be rocketing up into the upper atmosphere, the sheer scale staggering.

The light was so bright that it left Amy blinking spots from her eyes a few moments later, and it almost stopped her from noticing Taylor as the girl tried to run into the night. Amy lunged after Taylor, grabbing the girl’s sodden uniform sleeve and pulling.

“Taylor! You can’t go out there. There’s nothing you could do alone against that.” Amy’s voice was quiet, laced with concern and she thought that she’d made it through to Taylor when the girl had paused, standing still, her entire body shaking as she stared at the glowing pillar in the distance. The words that Taylor uttered though were terrifying.

“You’re right.” The words were quiet and laced with anger and pain and Taylor clenched the hand of the arm that Amy held, and Amy glanced at Taylor when she continued after a moment. “At least not alone.” Amy shivered, feeling a wave of something washing out from Taylor’s form, watched a visible ripple seem to erupt from the girl, spreading outwards and crashing through everyone present.

Amy released Taylor and backed up, her eyes widening as she glanced around, turning toward the tent. She shivered as every cape suddenly shifted in place. The injured continued to lay there quietly,
their whimpers of pain and complaints suddenly silent, but their heads turned with the standing, every head orienting on her and Taylor. Amy shivered softly as, except for Victoria’s wide blue eyes, every other cape was instead suddenly looking sightlessly in her direction, their eyes glowing a brilliant blue.

Everyone present, parahuman or otherwise, stared back at her in steady, stoic silence before something seemed to pass through the crowd. Most of them nodded and slipped off; others relaxed where they stood, the glowing of their eyes fading. These capes glanced around in confusion, shaking off the effect as they resumed what they’d been doing.

Victoria and Amy shared a look before Victoria leaped to her feet. Amy followed her gaze, watching as Taylor quickly stomped off into the night, Amy moving to follow quickly. She ignored the calls from the rest of the medics, joining her sister at Taylor’s side. When the collected capes had formed a loose knot, Amy found herself watching Taylor and the rest of the capes with their glowing eyes. Victoria seemed as nervous as her, fidgeting as she stood amongst the rest of the utterly still capes. Amy had begun to wonder what they were waiting for when above their heads, a sharp crack was heard, and Amy glanced up in time to see Alexandria’s form rip past them aimed at the pillar.

Amy paled as she watched the second in command of the Protectorate slamming her form into the barrier and utterly shattering it, a massive explosion of light turning the sky blue and vaporizing most of Leviathan’s storm. Unfortunately for her poor sensitive eyes, Amy had been following Alexandria’s path with her eyes, and if Victoria’s scream of pain was anything to go by, she had been as well. The healer swore quite viciously while rubbing her eyes to try and clear the bright spots from her vision, and this meant that when a loud crack erupted to her left, there was nothing she could before something wrapped around her and, with another sharp crack, she suddenly found herself somewhere much windier.

When her eyes finally stopped watering, Amy glanced up to find herself perched on the roof of a rather battered building. She was standing with Taylor, Victoria, and the rest of New Wave, almost all of who stood silent and cold, watching the battle with a placid almost implacable expressions on their faces. Victoria was still exempt from the effect, already moved over to the side, checking on Danny. Amy nearly moved to follow, but the scrape of something moving nearby drew her attention. Amy slid up to the edge of the roof and glanced down to watch in horror as Leviathan’s smoking form slowly raised itself from the scorched landscape that surrounded the building they were stood on.

Amy approached the edge of the roof, staring in awe at the sight of Alexandria floating in the air between Leviathan and them, her long cape fluttering in the wind behind her. A soft gasp drew her attention to Danny and Victoria, taking in how they were also watching Alexandria. The lack of rain this close to the explosion was unsettling, the battle almost entirely silent. The low rustles of Leviathan getting his feet under him, and the oddly loud sounding whipping sounds of Alexandria’s cape floating in the wind were devastatingly loud to the healer for some reason.

Amy watched in horror as Leviathan got his feet on the ground and seemed to almost blur, advancing on Alexandria. She blinked in shock when the woman seemed to nearly flicker to one side before casually backhanding the Endbringer, sending him backpedalling away. Amy watched as the Endbringer recovered and lunged out another hand Amy looked up startled as it was intercepted
by a powerfully built cape being held by a flying cape. Before Leviathan could turn his attention on them, a teleporter deposited a striker on his shoulder, and energy washed into the Endbringer.

Amy continued to watch in awe as this continued, split-second attacks and perfect timed defences. No one in place long enough for Leviathan to counter, the most potent capes being perfectly placed and moved to avoid anyone taking a hit. Amy wondered what the endgame was though. Every attack pushed Leviathan back toward the ocean, each strike and block keeping the creature from approaching any closer to Danny or Taylor. Alexandria floated between them and watched the conflict silently as Leviathan was slowly and inexorably pushed back toward the water.

Despite this, the Endbringer was almost feral in his attempts to get past the attack, consistently and relentlessly trying to get around attacks, the forces practically blurring into and out of place at the speeds necessary to get the capes in place to keep him contained. Leviathan tried every trick in his playbook. Waves were summoned by the Endbringer that were instantly subsumed by blasters, and the water echo constantly being washed away by a golden weapon that Dragon used. Lung’s massive form kept him from using his increased strength or speed to overpower the defenders.

This devastating assault continued unabated as Leviathan was pushed back until the water had reached his ankles. Leviathan became almost desperate at this point, savagely conjuring entire walls of geyser and massive, devastating waves, turning his full focus onto the group keeping him penned out of the docks.

Amy realized the mistake that the Endbringer had made the moment that Leviathan did. The waves he’d summoned were almost casually broken by the sole intent of the forces around him, but it did nothing to detract from the view as a stream of explosive emerald light washed out from the sky above and behind as Leviathan’s form. The Endbringer shifting his focus away from battering the city in waves had allowed every cape that had been protecting the city from the waves to join the fray, Eidolon’s glowing form right in the middle, his eyes glowing a brilliant blue behind the softly glowing mask he still wore.

Before Amy’s eyes the only S-class hero reached out, almost casually, and a ship seemed to rip itself free of the water, lifting and rocketing itself towards Eidolon, it’s entire shape compressing and ripping apart as it flew directly at the third member of the Triumvirate. The ship, now reduced to a mass of violently swirling silver bands of metal simply passed through the space Eidolon had been floating in, the hero having drifted to the side. The flailing mass of metal continued on its arc, smoothly crashing into Leviathan’s back and spreading over his form.

Amy watched in confusion as Leviathan’s hands reached out, trying in vain to rip the metal-free as it spread over his flesh, his claws scrabbling weakly at the metal, dragging through the long thin bands, trying and failing to get purchase. The metal easily spread over most of Leviathan’s torso, covering his arms and Eidolon moved, holding out a hand and the bands suddenly contracted, brutally clamping down and pinning his arms to his body. Other capes suddenly reached out, the metal growing and digging into Leviathan’s flesh, and one hero was swung past by a flier, and when she touched the metal, it suddenly stopped bending or buckling under Leviathan’s strength becoming rather suddenly more solid.

Amy watched in confusion as The Endbringer stood on two legs, flailing its torso around as it tried to escape. On the parking lot before them, Amy frowned when Kaiser of all people advanced and held out a hand, the metal bands expanding and thickening, gleaming steel spreading up over Leviathan’s neck forming a thick collar. Amy figured out what was going as chains began to grow, massive thick links growing from the smooth metal and then connecting into other links as they grew out. It took minutes before four chains heavy enough to moor an Oil Tanker were visible dragging down
Leviathan’s form as he tried to flail his way free of his bonds.

Lung was the first to grab a chan and then a second, savagely gripping both and pulling Leviathan off balance. Eidolon then moved, waving a hand and glowing green energy suffused another two chains pulling them down as well. The bindings were pulled taut, and Amy watched in awe as Leviathan was savagely dragged to his knees. Only then did Alexandria leave her post between the building and the Endbringer.

The capes on the street moved up, forming a full circle around the pinned Endbringer, staring up at him with that sea of glowing azure eyes. The flying brick landed within the open space, and Amy watched as two more figures emerged from the circle, Kaiser once more stepped into the fore and held out a hand. A massive thick bladed sword simply grew from the concrete before him. He gestured, stepping back, and Alexandria took the weapon in hand, carefully swinging it about and then held it out toward the third figure. The young girl in violet costume with the silver accents quickly reached out a hand, touching the weapon and something glimmered over it.

Amy listened as the woman’s voice seemed to ring out across the lot as she stared up at Leviathan, the creatures massive head and gaping eye-sockets turned toward her.

“Shall we see how many cuts it takes before you stop getting up?” Amy watched as Leviathan began to strain against his bonds once more, even more desperately trying to fight his way free as Alexandria advanced on him, holding out the sword that was longer than she was tall. She’d nearly reached his pinned form when something pierced the pervasive silence around them.

The sound of something whistling grew from the faintest hints to significantly louder, and Amy frowned. The healer watched as all the head turned to glance up and to the west, a sea of glowing eyes peering past her, even Leviathan’s gaping eyes turned in that direction. After a moment Amy turned to follow their gazes, looking up in horror just in time to see a golden blur emerging from the western sky. The gleaming light in the vague shape of a man rocketed along, skimming the rooftops, his massive form crashing into the bound Leviathan.

A wave of golden light exploded from Leviathan’s body when Scion struck him, the visible glow radiating from the Endbringer, lifting the gathered capes off the ground and sending them flying backwards. Scion didn’t stop when he hit the trapped form of Leviathan though, the golden shape lifted the bound Endbringer, and carried his trapped form out to sea, barely slowing his movement. Amy let her gaze follow the glow, watching the most powerful parahuman on the planet taking the blue-green shape out to sea almost casually. Her stare lingered on the distant horizon for several moments before the sound of something falling caught her attention, and she turned to see Taylor on her knees.

“No…” The words were spoken slowly, and Amy spun to glance down at the crowd, watching as they got their feet back under them, all their eyes had lost their glow. She stared in confusion at the crowd, as they all turned as one to stare out over the water, watching the glowing of Scion’s form dragging the shrinking shape of Leviathan from the city. She heard the faint mutters beginning at the street level, though the sound of gravel being scattered quickly drew her attention back to Taylor as the girl scrabbled toward her father.

“Amy!” Taylor’s frantic voice got her moving, and Amy ran after her, heading toward where Victoria was cradling Danny’s pale form. Part of her was shocked, despite having seen him already, her mind had painted a different impression of Ares then Taylor’s father. The man didn’t have the flowing red locks or the beard, no suit of terrifying red armour, or glowing sword.
Danny Hebert seemed almost normal despite his pale skin, his torso clad in a wet plaid shirt, and his legs covered in jeans tucked into worn out work boots. Amy approached, frowning when the man’s pale features settled on her and he offered her an understanding smile that she’d seen all too often of the faces of people whose families were asking her to make exceptions to her rules.

Taylor’s voice drew Amy’s gaze before the healer could spend too long dwelling on the odd acceptance in the older man’s gaze. “Amy, heal him. Please!” The words were laced with desperation, and Amy frowned before gently lowering herself to her knees at Danny’s side. The man raised a hand and Amy reached out, taking it, shivering when the thin blonde hairs that had once covered the limbs seemed to vanish into dust as she gripped his arm. Amy shuddered as her power began to scream at her. Typically she had to actually will her powers to examine a host, but whatever was affecting Danny was so grievous that her powers were going wild.

“I…” Amy paused, doing her best to decipher the confusing mess of signals she was getting off the man, and she stared down at Danny’s pale face in consternation. “I...I have no idea where to even start Taylor. His body…” She glanced at her friend and swallowed quietly. “He’s dying but it’s like the energy in his body is being drained away somehow. I have no idea what’s even going on, never mind trying to fix it.” Amy stared remorsefully at Taylor, flinching back at the look of anger thatghosted over the girls face but before she could speak Danny’s voice easily cut across them both.

“Taylor. Taylor. C’mere.” The words snapped Taylor’s gaze from her and Amy gently shifted back, moving away and allowing Taylor slip around closer to her father, replacing Amy’s place at his side and taking his arm in hers.

“D-Dad. Please don’t go.” Taylor spoke quietly, and the raw emotion in her voice made Amy feel almost trapped. The moment felt fiercely private, and Amy knew on some level that she shouldn’t be here for this, that she shouldn’t be witnessing Taylor’s greatest tragedy like she was, but her legs wouldn’t let her move away, to back off.

Instead, the healer glanced as she rubbed at her suddenly wet cheeks. Amy quietly took in her mother and aunt as they stood off to one side, holding each other. Neil had Crystal hiding under his arm; his massive bulk stood next to Mark who looked on with shock, Eric beside them both, the entire group watching in sadness as the scene unfolded.

“D-Dad. Please don’t go.” Danny felt Taylor’s pain washing down into him through the Noetikon, the stabbing sadness and desperation hurting him more then even the constant gnawing aches that he’d felt since he’d triggered. The voices of the Noetikon had long since fallen eerily silent, and even the feedback from the shard had tapered off, Danny knew that things were dire, though the connection with Taylor helped him understand that there was still some time left. Even if he hadn’t had that connection, the tone with which his daughter uttered those words would have painted her emotions across them plainly. Danny tried to shift in place, but his body had mostly stopped responding, and his arms only twitched. Victoria seemed to get the impression, and she moved him up and closer to Taylor, still cradling his much larger shape as if he weighed nothing.

Danny glanced over at the rest of New Wave, watching as they stared in horror, Amy sitting a few feet away with a shell-shocked look on her face, her family framed behind her. He knew that he didn’t have much time before the capes on the ground started to recover and came to investigate and he turned his attention back to his daughter, speaking softly.
“Taylor. If I could… I’d never leave. I’ve just gotten you back.” Danny tried to chuckle, but it came out as a weak cough. He focused on the Force, and his hand gently raised, grasping his daughter’s chin, turning her bloodshot eyes toward his own. Danny took a moment to soak in those dark eyes so similar to his own, watching her quietly. When he saw her gaze focusing on his own, he parted his lips and spoke, his voice raspy and low.

“Taylor. I’m so proud of you.” He spoke softly and saw the flicker of darkness through her eyes, felt the swell of guilt and self-recrimination that she felt and he shook his head. He lowered his voice so that only Taylor could hear him and spoke. “I knew you were keeping secrets, Taylor. Even before all of this, but I didn’t think they’d be quite like this.” Danny manipulated his arm up to rub at his face, letting out a wry chuckle as he felt his scruffy beard dissolving under his hand. When he moved his hand, he saw Taylor staring at him strangely with that tear-stained face, and he smiled at her.

“I’ve seen everything now, Taylor and I want you to know something. Knowing everything else, I still love you dearly. I’ve never been more proud of you for what you’ve accomplished.” He watched as those eyes filled with tears and then let out a weak grunt when she crashed into his chest. His arm came up with some difficulty, wrapping around Taylor’s back and gently holding her close, slowly dragging his fingers over her back as she shook nearly silently. Danny stared toward the darkened sky, letting out a soft chuckle.

“I had hoped it wasn’t a secret like this, you know.” His words were so soft, a gentle rasp past his lips as he brushed at Taylor’s wild hair. “I had hoped for once that it was something good, or just normal. That you were secretly dating Crystal or you were sneaking off to get drunk with your friends… something normal, you deserved a chance to be normal.” The snort from behind him startled him, the man had almost forgotten Victoria’s presence, but the wet chuckle from Taylor drew his focus. Before anyone could comment on that particular joke though, a trio of shapes floated up and over the edge of the building, landing a short distance from the cluster that was Amy, Taylor, Victoria and himself.

“What...was that.” Legend’s voice was laced with concern, and the man glanced at all of them before gesturing toward the ocean. Danny watched as the man’s gaze focused on Taylor, and he reached out with the Force, pushing past the pain and the growing darkness around his perception and grasping for the strings, for the right words. Finding no purchase, and feeling Taylor’s form tensing as she prepared to speak, Danny shifted as best he could and spoke instead.

“It was me.” He coughed, and everyone glanced at him in shock. Legend moved to speak, but Danny let out a racking cough that silenced him. Once he’d gotten his breath under control once more, he moved to speak. “I’m linked with Taylor because of our powers. That connection grew stronger as my powers were killing me, and I used Taylor as a beacon to draw the rest of you in. It took time to familiarize myself with your gifts, but when my last gambit failed, I was desperate to try anything.” Danny’s voice was weak, and he saw Taylor staring down at him in confusion and guilt, and he gently brushed her cheek with his thumb.

He didn’t speak to Taylor though, glancing up to see Alexandria staring down at him silently. Legend’s features looked conflicted like he might say something, but Alexandria held up a hand quietly.

“When that imprint touched our minds, it gave us the option to back out. We all agreed to that link, and it nearly helped us put down an Endbringer. Ares was right to try it; if it hadn’t been for Scion, we would have almost certainly killed Leviathan down there.” The woman studied him quietly, and Danny flashed her a thankful smile, glancing at the other two who would nod minutely before
backing off. Alexandria seemed to consider Danny for a few moments before shooting the man a nod. She moved to speak into her bracer before she lifted off, the other two following her.

Danny relaxed quietly, letting out a soft gasp as his form seemed to melt into Victoria. He peered carefully up at Taylor, taking in her concerned look and letting out a weak smile.

“I’m sorry, Taylor. I… I’m not sure how much longer I’ve got.” His voice was soft, and he let out a weary sigh when Taylor gripped his shirt with those dark gloves she wore.

“No...Dad.” She stared at him quietly. “Dad. Please. There has to be another way, the Force…” Her voice was limned with an almost pervasive sadness that Danny felt stabbing into his heart. Danny felt his head shaking quietly despite the words though. He tried to speak but the words failed him, and he broached the connection they still shared.

“Taylor. I’m sorry. The Noetikon is nearly dead already. If I go like this, while still connected, I’ll take it with me. I love you more than anything, Taylor, but you need Bastila, Jolee, and Marr more then you need another five minutes with me. …I’m sorry.” Danny watched as her eyes widened, but he let his connection to the Force spread out throughout his body before she could try to talk him out of it.

Danny broke every limit on his connection to the Force, opening himself fully into it and then feeding the Force energy back into the Noetikon and the shard, funnelling the energy back into it as his body gave way under the wash of power. Danny felt the Light side welcoming him back into it, his mind slowly unravelling as his body seemed to almost dissolve in Victoria’s arms. The last thing he heard was his daughter’s final thoughts ghosting up the link in his wake.

‘...but, I had so much more to say to you…’

Chapter End Notes

[[215k words later, and Leviathan is finally mostly defeated, and the first big choke point in the fiction is done. I was almost tempted to have Danny’s last word be ‘Kiddo’ cause...Well, it made me laugh, but I didn’t want to mess with the scene like that. Killing off Danny was pretty hard, and I’m still not sure how happy I am with how it all played out. I might come back after I put up the next chapter and tweak it a bit more, but uh, I figured you guys would enjoy having something to read.

Next Chapter will be a Victoria/Taylor Chapter, and it’ll be the aftermath, and it’ll be on the 16th instead of the 15th, so that’s a thing. After I post that, there’ll be a Leet/Uber Interlude, as well as a Coil interlude, and I might do one or two more, I haven’t settled on it yet. After the interludes, there’s going to be a 1.5 week in story time skip before Arc 6 starts, and Arc 6 will be a typically sized arc, so you’ve got that to look forward to.

This has been a very difficult section to write, mainly because it's felt more like a hurdle that I had to get past. This is probably the last big station of canon that we’ll be hitting, and it’ll be nice to be able to spread out a bit more, up to this point the Leviathan fight has sort of been hanging over the creative process, keeping everything heavily constrained, it'll be nice to branch out some, experiment more. Anyway. I look forward
to your comments, and as always, I shall be around in the forum here. Lemme know what you all think.]]
Chapter Summary

[[This is probably the part of the arc that I have been most looking forward to. The best of my work, I think, is related to the interpersonal stuff, and while there was inter-character Drama in this last arc, most of it was the action which while fun, doesn’t really feel as satisfying to write. We finally get to see the personal reactions to stuff. This is also why I think the Interludes we’ll be doing will be particularly effective coming up. The Leet and Uber Interlude will be rather poignant, and I’ve already got it half written in my head.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 16th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

“...electricity is going fine, and there’s water too, mom.” Victoria could tell that the exhaustion that she felt was plainly visible in her voice. The young blonde hero, still wearing her filthy uniform, was reclined in one of the scuffed chairs that were arrayed around the Hebert family’s kitchen. She’d just watched the clock tick its way into the sixteenth, ending the shittiest day of her best friend’s life with neither a whimper nor a bang, just another series of evenly timed clicks, and the tired sigh of her mother on the other end of the line.

“...Victoria.” The words were uttered softly, and Victoria found herself surprised by the almost lost tone in her Mother’s voice. She stared down at the cup of cooling tea sat on the table before her. She studied the ceramic and waited, almost hoping that her mother would insist on coming out there to take control of the situation and save her from the weight that had settled around her. When the older woman merely let out a conflicted noise, Victoria squared herself and started to speak softly.

“I tried to take us back to Aunt Sarah’s, Mom. Taylor… She doesn’t really want to be around people right now. We came in, and she barely managed to find me something to wear before she ended up in bed.” Victoria frowned quietly as she down at the clothes in question, gently fingering the soft fabric of the pyjama pants. Taylor had seemed to barely see her, merely asking if she’d intended to stay before rifling through the drawers and offering her some clothes before pushing Victoria from her room.

Gently tapping her fingers on the grainy wood of the table, Victoria turned her attention to the porcelain cup before her, studying the murky brown drink. The deep almost pervasive silence of the room was only broken by the ticking of the clock and the faint breathing of her mother emerging from the phone. When neither seemed inclined to interrupt her thoughts Victoria sighed and continued to speak.

“I...I don’t want to say that I owe her, because I know if that got back to Taylor she’d kick my ass out of here so fast that my head would spin. Despite that… She’s... my friend, Mom. And she needs me. She refused to go back to Aunt Sarah’s place, refused to let me call any of you here, but she
didn’t kick me out either. Someone has to stay with her and even if I were to go and end up on Aunt Sarah’s couch, I’d just be constantly worried about her.” She wasn’t sure she’d be able to finish the thought, and she’d rushed through the comment, hoping to get it all out before her mother responded. She needn’t have bothered if the nearly two minutes of dead air she got back in response were an indication. Eventually, the silence ended, and her mother responded.

“Your aunt’s place is rather crowded at the moment. You might be right that it’s not the best for Taylor at the moment.” The words were resigned, and Victoria felt her shoulders relaxing. She hadn’t intended to leave the house no matter what her mother said, but getting her permission had undoubtedly made things easier. When her mother continued speaking, she perked up and leant forward, listening quietly.

“There are conditions, though, Victoria. I’ll be coming out tomorrow to check on things there since I’ve got to discuss some things with Taylor. And someone will be checking in on you two every day. Luckily most of the city is currently in shelters, and things should be quiet for the duration of the truce. I imagine that PRT will have Taylor’s handler back in place in short order as well. I expect you to keep me appraised of how Taylor is doing as well Victoria. And once school resumes, you’ll be attending. We’ll be revisiting this arrangement once the house is fixed.” Victoria flinched at that last one, letting out a tired sigh.

“How are things with the house? I uh. I saw the damage to the neighbourhood as we were flying past.” Victoria’s voice was soft, and she frowned at her mother’s equally weary sigh before responding.

“It’s not as bad as it looks from the outside. We’ll still be out of the house for a few weeks at least. We’ve lost most of the south wall, but the structure isn’t too badly damaged. Your Father and Uncle checked it over while grabbing things, and they said that there wasn’t too much water damage, and they managed to seal the hole up with a tarp before the rain resumed. I’ve got a bag for you that I suppose I’ll be dropping off tomorrow.” Victoria felt the icy fear that’d been wrapped around her middle uncoiling at the news that she wouldn’t be losing her home. The sight of the scorched walls of her house had been devastating as she flew past, though Taylor’s barely restrained shaking had kept her from stopping to check on anything.

“With you settled there, that’s all of us put up. Luckily for us, Amy is already settled in at Sarah’s, so that’s one less thing to worry about. Your father and I will be taking up the Protectorate on their offer of interim housing, and we’ll be staying here on the Rig while we assist with the recovery efforts.” Victoria shifted back and listened quietly as her mother explained what New Wave would be doing with the PRT in the wake of the attack.

Danny’s efforts had kept the worst of the damage from the city, but most of the coastal areas of the docks and downtown had been heavily damaged, it’d take weeks to clear the streets, and entire swathes of the city were without power. Luckily much of the city’s resource infrastructure had been to the Northern parts of the city past the Docks and the Trainyards, and this meant that the only barrier to restoring power to the rest of the city was replacing all the downed lines and destroyed transformers.

Even Victoria had noticed the destruction though as she’d carried Taylor home. The worst of the damage had been confined to the southern parts of the city, and downtown would take the longest to recover. Danny had been rather intent on keeping the Endbringer away from residential areas, and few people would lose their homes to the rampage itself, though water damage would be an ongoing issue Victoria imagined. The commercial parts of the city had been hit harder, but those were things not as immediately concerning, though Victoria didn’t doubt that the Chamber of Commerce would
be up in arms quite quickly after they escaped the shelters.

New Wave, or at least the Older Members, would be kept busy over the next two weeks. Starting in the morning the Protectorate and any Volunteers from the Endbringer forces that remained would be surveying the city, figuring out who could be released from the shelters first, who could return home. Rebuilding would follow. For the duration of the truce, the younger members of New Wave were to be benched along with the Wards to allow the older members to focus on repairs. Though, once the things had settled a bit, there would be duties for all of them. Carol had brought up the subject of training in the evenings, but Victoria had merely hummed in a non-committal manner, unsure of what she’d be able to drag Taylor to at this point.

Eventually, the words dried up and after listening to each other breathe quietly for a few minutes, Victoria had gently extricated herself from the call. She’d taken the time to assure her mother that she loved her, her memories of Danny’s final moments fresh in her mind, and Victoria hadn’t been surprised to hear her mom’s voice shaking as she’d returned the sentiment. When she set her phone down, she’d returned her gaze to the tea on the table, staring at the still untouched beverage until that ominous ticking finally got to her and she pushed the chair back and got to her feet leaving the drink in her wake.

She moved with precise focus, carefully entering each room on the ground floor, checking every window, ensuring that they were locked, locking the front and back doors, checking the windows in the basement before carefully collecting the pile of clothes from the kitchen table and ascending the stairs. She checked the windows in every bedroom, locking her window, and glancing in to see Taylor sleeping fitfully in her darkened room. She silently closed the door, leaving the girl to try and rest, moving nervously to check on Danny’s window, though something had stopped her at the entrance to the room.

She stood silently in the door of Danny’s room the scent of the man’s aftershave wafting out of the room, and she stood there silently as the aroma wafted up around her. The bedroom itself reminded her of Taylor’s father, with its battered decor, open layout, and slightly unkempt nature. She found herself leaning on the door frame and staring into the room unable to actually enter. Eventually, she wiped the tears from her cheeks and carefully shut the door once more, making her way toward the bathroom focusing on anything else but what she’d witnessed.

The warm water on her bruises had been so pleasant that Victoria had remained in the tiny shower until the water had run cold, and she’d been shocked when she emerged to see the dark splotches that covered her body. She hadn’t thought that Leviathan had done that much damage to her, but her entire body ached when she moved, and she moved slowly, taking great care to not hurt herself as she gently slid on the clothes that Taylor had loaned to her.

Her stiff muscles made the buttons of the loose shirt that Taylor had gifted her a challenge, but the soft fabric was flowy enough that it didn’t make her bruises feel any worse. The blue and gold Armsmaster pyjamas were equally comfortable and loose on her hips that they didn’t prove to be a challenge to wear, though Victoria did feel a bit silly with those crests visible on her legs. Trying not to dwell on it she set to work taming the tangled straw coloured mess that the storm and extended shower had both turned her hair into, and she’d been halfway toward making it all sit flat and straight when the sound of Taylor suddenly crying out had pierced the second story of the house.
Victoria had moved before she even realized, her bare feet slapping on the cool wood of the upstairs corridor and she was in the doorway of Taylor’s room before the girl’s cry’s had faded. Part of her had frozen up then, and she’d stood there in the doorway as Taylor’s form sat up in her bed, barely illuminated by the scant moonlight that pierced the fading clouds outside the window. When Taylor’s head turned her wear Victoria swallowed at the clearly wet eyes that were turned her way, flinching when the other girl spoke.

“Tell me it was a dream...” Taylor’s voice was soft and broken, and Victoria stood in place for a few moments before slipping into the room, climbing up onto the other girl’s bed and moving closer, pulling Taylor’s larger frame into her arms and hugging the girl quietly. She felt Taylor tense, and she softly spoke.

“I’m so sorry, Taylor.” The words seemed to crash into Taylor, and the other girl’s form shuddered before her arms came up and around Victoria’s back, and the tears finally started. Victoria didn’t flinch back or say anything else, merely keeping her arms around Taylor while the other girl clung to her like a bit of flotsam at sea as she quietly sobbed. The tears continued for a time, and then they dried, but Taylor continued to cling, her form shaking, even if the only thing that emerged from it were broken gasps.

Eventually, when even the shaking stopped, Victoria carefully glanced down, watching Taylor for a moment, observing the silent way that the other girl stared out the window at the darkened sky. She sat there and wondered what she should say, what words she could offer that might make this better. Eventually, her mind turned to the malaise that she’d suffered when her grandfather died and how everyone had tried to cheer her up, how she’d continuously been terrified to get too upset for fear of crushing anyone that got too close. She studied Taylor quietly as a memory of Amy washed into her mind.

When she moved to pry the girl back gently, she was surprised when Taylor’s arms tightened around her, and her form tensed, and she spoke softly.

“Shh. I’m not going anywhere, just. Lay down.” The words soothed Taylor, and the girl followed her commands, rolling down onto her side and moving to face away, laying under the blankets on her bed. Victoria gently shifted, slipping under the covers and sliding up close to Taylor’s back before slowly reaching out her hands. She ever so carefully moved her fingers into Taylor’s still-damp hair, gently dragging the tips of her fingers over Taylor’s scalp and through the girl’s thick curly hair like a silent Amy had once done to her.

She tensed as she felt the tension in Taylor’s form, waiting for the other girl to tell her that this was stupid, or to stop, or just to leave but after a few moments of this Taylor let out a long slow breath and her entire body seemed to relax. Victoria slid closer and resumed the gentle dragging of her fingers through Taylor’s hair, watching the other girl’s form shifting up and down as she breathed quietly in the darkness. She didn’t say anything else, merely letting the fingers tell Taylor that she was there.

---

The sound of glass breaking was the first thing that drew Taylor’s up and out of her doze. She was too relaxed to really move, laying there silently and feeling those hands caressing over the back of
her head, though the motions stilling had shown that she wasn’t the only one that had heard it. She almost groaned when Victoria gently dragged her hands back, the lack of warmth devastating. A small part of her was tempted to play at being asleep, the odd intimacy of the situation bringing a faint blush to her cheeks, especially when Victoria seemed to do everything in her power to extricate herself from the bed without ‘waking’ her, even letting out a soft curse when she apparently stubbed her toe on something.

Truthfully, she hadn’t managed to fall asleep again, but Taylor felt oddly at peace as she lay there. The feeling of Victoria’s hands in her hair and dragging over her scalp had lulled into an almost doze. Somehow, she’d let the sensations distract her from the pain in her chest and the aching silence in her head. Part of her ached for the warmth of the Noetikon, but after the loss of her father, she just needed to be alone in her mind. The hastily constructed filter that the spirits had placed to cut off the feedback from her father had allowed her to cut them off as well for the moment.

As Victoria rustled around, Taylor shifted over, turning to glance toward Victoria before the sound of something flopping onto the ground caused her to immediately roll back over, face the wall, close her eyes, and drag the blankets over her head. The sound of muffled cursing though saw her lowering the blankets from her head and coughing softly before speaking.

“Uh. Victoria.” The muffled cursing and rustling stopped, and Taylor lay silently for a few moments before Victoria spoke softly.

“Hey. Uh. Sorry if I woke you up. I’m having issues with my suit.” She spoke softly, and Taylor let out an amused chuckle.

“I… I wasn’t sleeping. Just dozing and uh, that’s probably cause I think you’re trying to get into - my- suit.” She listened in rapt silence as Victoria seemed to pause and then let out a long sigh. The sound of fabric hitting the ground was rather apparent once more.

“Oh. Right. I left mine in the bathroom.” Victoria padded across the floor, and when the door creaked open, Taylor watched the light dancing over the wall, a shadow in the shape of Victoria spread over it quietly. Taylor watched as the shadow paused in the doorway, glancing back toward her and she bit her lip. When Victoria didn’t say anything, turning away and moving to exit, Taylor spoke instead.

“Hey.” The words caused the shadow to pause, and Taylor took a deep breath before speaking again. “Be...safe. Yeah? Don’t do anything stupid. Take your cell, and call me if you need any help.” She blinked when Victoria seemed to consider her for a moment before nodding and then as if realizing that Taylor probably couldn’t see it moved to speak slowly.

“Yeah. Same to you. Try and get some sleep. I’ll check on you when I get back.” The words were quiet, and Taylor bit her lip as she watched the light on the wall shrink as the door closed. The sounds of Victoria moving around the house could easily be heard, and after nearly ten minutes, the front door slowly creaked open and slammed shut, leaving Taylor alone in the quiet house. Part of her was tempted to get up and move around, but the warmth of the blanket over her was pervasive, and she shut her eyes.

Dark thoughts reached for her, but she drew on the Force quietly, wrapping her mind in the memories of those warm fingers ghosting over her scalp and her body slowly relaxed, darkness claiming her. If any dreams reached out to her that night, Taylor didn’t remember them.
The sun ghosting over Taylor’s eyes inexorably dragged her from slumber, her sleep-addled mind confused at the pressure against her back and how stiff she felt. In the end, Taylor was somewhat embarrassed that it took her more than a moment to realize that she couldn’t stretch because someone was wrapped around her. The blonde hair that she was eating gave her a good idea who that someone might be.

For a brief moment, Taylor had thought that Victoria had crawled back into bed with her after her patrol, and she wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that at first blush. Shifting around in bed though saw that Victoria hadn’t been in bed with her, the girl was more draped awkwardly over the bed, clinging to her as she nearly fell out of the slightly uncomfortable chair she’d apparently been sleeping in. Now Taylor was left to ponder whether she was more bothered by the idea of Victoria crawling into bed with her, or just sitting and watching her sleep.

Rather than wasting any time considering that particular conundrum, Taylor carefully extracted herself from the other girl, and then the bed in that order, to keep things simple. Once she was free, she moved around the large bed and slipped up behind Victoria. Taking care, Taylor moved and gently pulled the blankets back before carefully lifting and rolling the insensate blonde into the bed and tucking her in. Glancing out the window and seeing that the sun was well above the horizon, Taylor silently made her way from the room.

Taylor knew it was ridiculous, but the house itself seemed emptier somehow, like the loss of her father had seemingly robbed it of some sort of energy, and her steps had slowed as she descended the stairs. Eventually, she came to a stop in the kitchen, artifacts of her Father’s last day on earth littered the place. The kitchen held half-finished dishes in the sink and the carefully wrapped leftovers in the fridge. Moving into the living room saw an empty coffee mug on the table next to the remote, her dad’s jacket slung over the couch almost lazily. The phone she’d tossed down after talking to her dad was laid over the coat. Taylor reached out, taking it in her hand and dragging her thumb over the cool plastic quietly as she considered the words she’s said when she last held it.

She considered the phone for a few moments, something welling up in her chest. She set the phone down on the charger and moved around the house more, taking in her father’s other shoes on the rack and his umbrella by the door, moving past the stairs and taking in his seldom-used office, and the ‘Shh!’ that he’d written on her clumsily made sign about her Jedi temple. The feeling spread through her chest, and her eyes started to burn softly, as she moved to the back door, opening it up and staring out as the wet ground and the battered remains of the lawn furniture and barbecue that had once been outside before the storm.

She wanted to cry and scream, to rail against the word, but every time something like that tried to emerge a warmth ghosted gently over her through the Force, echoes of the feelings that she’d felt through her link with her father as he’d told her that he was proud of her. She stared at the backyard for a few moments more before closing the glass door silently and ascending the steps. She glanced at his door, but it was her own that she opened and she slipped into her room, carefully watching Victoria sleep.

She wanted to cry or to rage against everyone about what’d happened, but that warmth washed through her, and she took a seat at her desk. She carefully opened one of the books that’d sat there untouched in the last few days, and she flipped to an open page and began to carefully draw a long wooden staff with a complicated device at the top. Parts were sketched out and detailed on the following pages as she split her attention between watching Victoria sleep and designing the
weapon.

Her father could have raged about the shitty hand that he’d been dealt. He’d died because of her and some tremendous cosmic accident, and it’d be entirely unfair. But he hadn’t. He’d come to save her despite everything she’d concealed from him. Her father had turned his curse into a blessing, and he’d saved the city, he’d saved so many lives; If he could do that Taylor could make sure that this day at least, she did something productive. That every day she did something useful with the gift he’d given her.

She doubted that her conviction would carry her through each day, and she wondered how bad the days would get, but she thought that her father would be proud of her. She wouldn’t let this happen again. She had so many people that she cared about now. She glanced at Victoria, images of Sabah, Crystal, Amy and Carol flickering through her mind. She had people to protect now, and nothing would ever come between them and her again.

Taylor turned her focus back to the diagrams, carefully finishing the design and scrawling ‘Lightsaber Pike’ across the top of the page as she moved to fill in the details. She carefully considered the list, her mind began formulating plans about how she might acquire the necessary parts. Kid Win seemed like one of the friendlier members of the Wards when dealing with New Wave, perhaps she could speak with him about the Motherboard and the Capacitor and Energy Cell.

As for the Crystal Extruder, that might require talking with Dragon. Luckily the Battle Meditation had given her an in with speaking with the world’s pre-eminent tinker. She stared at the page and let out a weary sigh. If only she had her damn phone to make any of these arrangements. Taylor silently glanced over at Victoria’s sleeping form with a sigh. She’d have to wait for the other girl to awaken so that she could make her way over to Sabah’s to hopefully acquire the device, assuming that Sabah’s shop had survived the destruction of downtown.

Chapter End Notes

[[And thus ends, Disintegration. I like where the arc left us. Taylor’s not in a great place, mentally, but she’s not as bad off as she would have been if we’d gone with the original 5.1 It’s a shame that I had rewrite basically 2/3rds of that chapter, but it seemed to come out better, and the story is on a better foot thanks to it. Yes, that was a Lightsaber Pike that Taylor was designing.

I had intended Taylor to use a Force Infused Spear or Halberd of some sort, and she may get something like it, to use until she can get the Pike built, but this all has convinced her of the need of a weapon that can actually protect her friends. She’s also going to be a bit more pro-active in battle. It was interesting exploring how Danny’s death affected Victoria since she’s also gotten rather close to Danny in this story. That was something that I wasn’t expecting when I first wrote this, and it was an interesting dynamic to go off of.

So. Now we’re moving into Arc 6, also known as; Reconstitution. Arc 6 is going to be interesting. The start of the arc will lead to the aftermath of the Endbringer Truce and the evolving topography of the Cape community. Mixed into this will be Taylor’s preparation of her AP program and dealing with her upcoming emancipation and difficulties with the Youth League because of it. Lily will be joining the Brockton Bay
Wards, and we’ll be seeing some of her as well more of the Wards as a group.

Our first Interlude will be between Leet and Uber, and I’ll be expanding on their backstory a bit, as well as dealing with some heartwrenching feels. I’m actually super proud of this, and I hope you lot enjoy it. I’m super eager to do this interlude so it might be quick, but I’m aiming to start 6.1 sometime around Monday probably, so I’ll have interludes scattered between now and then. Working on a set schedule just makes things messier, so we’ll see how this works.

Anyway, that’s it for me, as always, I’m looking forward to your reviews, lemme know what you think, it sustains me.]}
“C’mon. I promise that I’ll catch you.” Harper held out his arms and did his best to smile convincingly at the small girl. She seemed to stare at him in confusion for a few moments before finally giving in and slipping forward as far as she could on the tiny ledge that held her and her two siblings. She tentatively reached out toward him before leaping with a shriek. Harper gripped the pole next to him and leaned out over the gaping hole that had opened up between him and the kids. Timing his grab carefully, the mechanic snagged the girl around the middle, dragging the shrieking child up and out of the abyss, pulling her up and into the vent with him.

He pulled her back out of the narrow passage that he’d had to crawl through, passing her off to Uber once he’d escaped and then taking a deep breath. Already he could hear the two boys crying out, asking if he was coming back. He let out a weary sigh, glancing over at Beck and wishing not for the first time that the other boy hadn’t ended up so much larger than him. With a faint grumble, he climbed back up into the vent and crawled along the familiar dented path until he was close to the kids.

Luckily for Harper’s knees, the boys were bigger than their sister, and once he’d gotten the elder one up into the vent with him, the kid had been able to pull his brother up, allowing Seamus to guide them both back out. He was the first out of the vent again, and he helped the two small boys out, getting out of the way as their sister descended on them and began lecturing them in a rapid-fire Portuguese that was significantly over Leet’s head.

The building groaning ominously under them was disturbing, and the would-be villain turned to his partner. Uber clapped and began speaking in short precise Portuguese, the kids perking up and following along. Harper shook his head as he reached the edge of the building and climbed down in the wake of the others. He knew when the kids had seen the truck because there was a shriek of fear from the girl, and excited chattering from the boys. The sound of a deep man's voice calling up in Portuguese silenced it all, and for a few moments, the only sound Harper heard was the scrape of leather on metal and exertion.

Harper was the last man on the ground, and he let out a startled cry as a pair of powerful arms wrapped around him and lifted him clean off the ground. The man was speaking a breakneck version
of Portuguese that left him confused, and the blond mechanic looked at his chuckling friend, taking in the wry smirk on Beck’s face.

“He says; ‘Thank you for saving my children. I’ll never let anyone talk poorly about you ever again. You might not have been heroes, but you are good people. Thank you. Thank you, etcetera.’ The other boy’s grin grew as he spoke and Harper found himself running a hand through his hair. When the man finally dropped him and reached for his wallet, Harper held up his hands.

“No! No! It’s fine.” He glanced at Uber who smoothly chimed in, finally translating. “It’s fine. No money. I grew up in a tenement just like this; I couldn’t!” He paused, gesturing to the watching kids. “Use it on your kids; things are gonna be hard.” He smiled at the thankful man, reaching out and accepting the man’s hand, happily giving it a firm shake. The man repeated his thanks, and Harper began to pick out the words, smiling quietly. When the older man led the kids toward his extended family, the entire group turning to stare up at the heavily damaged apartment complex, Harper found himself frowning.

“Reminds you of home?” The words were laced with an almost mild reproach and Harper hunched up his shoulders running a hand through his hair quietly. “Harper, we can’t…”

“I know Beck. I know.” He sighed faintly and shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his pants, feeling the rain slowing as it pattered against his back. “It’s just. I remember when Mom was like that with you.” He gestured quietly to the young Hispanic woman that was smoothing down her daughter’s hair, chattering away happily. This place was a wreck, and it was just going to get worst. Harper rubbed at his face before glancing at Beck, pausing at seeing the boy had vanished off to the side and was rifling in the back of the truck. He moved over with a curious look as Beck began pulling crates out of the end.

“Beck?” He spoke quietly, and the blond head of his friend peered past the door at them. The confusion in his tone was apparent because the blond man rolled his eyes and spoke softly.

“You brought your Mom up Harper. Help me get these supplies out.” He moved back, and Harper moved over, quickly helping his partner with getting the three crates of MRE’s out of the truck, their own personal stash of emergency supplies for the apocalypse. When Beck started shouting in Portuguese, Harper moved around the truck. He’d had more than enough of the gratitude, and he climbed up and into the driver’s bay, closing the door behind him. The excited chattering of the family died down to a dull chatter, and Harper let out a relieved sigh as he relaxed into the chair.

“It’s a good thing you’re doing for that family. Things are going to get a bit rough, here in the bay, before they get better.” The words startled him to the point that Harper let out a shriek and leaped up in his chair as he grabbed his soaking shirt in one hand.

“Jesus, Tess!” He panted softly as he flopped back into his seat and turned the screen toward him, staring at the relieved face of the other Tinker on the screen. “Good news then?”

“Leviathan was defeated. We nearly killed him, but Scion interfered.” Harper blinked quietly and rubbed his face.

“Sorry did you say that Leviathan was ‘defeated,’ as opposed to just being fought off? How the hell did that happen.” Seamus stared at the screen and blinked as Dragon’s face became somewhat conflicted.

“A previously unknown parahuman joined the fray this evening. Ares, he was devastatingly
powerful, and he helped contain Leviathan for most of the fight. His powers seemed to be killing him though, that’s why we needed to deploy your weapon to lessen the damage he was doing to himself. Before he fell, he enacted a special ability he had that sort of...linked every parahuman present into a gestalt mind. We were able to perfect co-ordinate to counter, bind, and then nearly destroy Leviathan.” Dragon’s voice was oddly monotonous, and Harper frowned quietly as he leaned forward.

“Are you alright, Tess?” He spoke softly, tilting the screen up to look at her face, frowning when she flashed him a thankful smile. “It’s odd. There’s just a lingering sense of sadness about the loss of Ares. I didn’t even know him, but I feel genuinely sad about his loss. A side-effect of the gestalt perhaps. It was apparently funnelled through his daughter.” Harper blinked quietly at that, letting out a worn out sigh.

“Jesus. That sucks. Losing your parents is about as bad as it gets.” His voice was distant, and he took a moment to watch the slowing rain spraying over the windows, studying the water quietly for a few moments before leaning back and studying the screen. “Anyway. I’m glad that you survived Dragon. It was nice working with you.” He began fiddling with the controls on the screen, the sound of Dragon’s voice growing more urgent as he attempted to disconnect the feed.

“Seamus! I…” She paused and swallowed. “Seamus, you should take the deal. You’ll never get a chance like this and…” Seamus ignored the words, clenching his eyes shut as he fiddled with the wires, though the sound of a voice ghosting dangerously over him caused him to freeze in place.

“Deal? Harper, what’s this about a deal?” Harper glanced up, seeing Uber climbing up into the driver’s seat. Harper glanced from his old friend out the window, taking in the family as they dragged their crates of preserved food toward a mostly intact parking garage. He let out a soft sigh.

“Beck. It’s nothing—” Harper flinched when the muscular boy held up a hand in his direction, pushing him off the screen quickly and pulling Dragon’s feed around to face him. Beck stared into the screen for a few moments before speaking.

“Dragon, Right?” He paused, and Harper assumed that Dragon nodded because Beck leaned back, running a hand through his blond hair and studying the screen.

“You mentioned a deal, what’s up with that?” Harper sank back into his seat as Dragon’s voice filled the cockpit around them.

“Considering the synergy between Seamus’ powers and my own, and the sheer quality of the things we could build together, the Guild and the PRT came to an agreement. Parole and mandatory membership in the guild if—” Dragon’s voice was cut off when Beck casually cut in.

“Provides Testimony on me?” The words were cold, and Harper was the one that surged up, crying out.

“No! I’d never turn on you, Beck. I swear, I wasn’t even considering taking the deal, but they didn’t even bother to ask that I testify against you.” The words slipped from his lips, and he saw Beck glance his way before glancing back down at the screen, Dragon responding a moment later.

“Indeed, Seamus’ part was to provide tech to be shared between the PRT and the Guild. In exchange, we offer him a salary, housing, and ensure that he has everything he needs to build. Considering my gifts allow me to intercept and remove the traps he places in his work, and his versatility means that we can solve some huge issues.” Harper felt his cheeks heating at the earnest
tone that Dragon was speaking with. Harper watched as Beck studied the face on the screen quietly before glancing at him and raising an eyebrow.

“C’mon Beck. We’re in this together. You’ve stood by me through this all despite everything and—” Harper suddenly stopped speaking at the chittering sound of Beck’s stun pistol unfolding. He glanced at him in shock as a wave of blue light emerged from Beck’s hip and then he knew nothing more.

Beck watched as Harper’s body slumped bonelessly back into his chair as his stun pistol discharged. He let out a sigh, folding the weapon down once more and tucking it into his belt. He glanced over to see Dragon’s shocked face, and he shook his head, putting the truck into gear and backing out. Beck was rather pleased with himself; he’d managed to make one of the most well-known capes on the planet speechless. Quite an achievement. He turned the wheel and pulled out into the debris-littered streets, making his way toward the center of town.

“I can’t let you kidnap—” Beck rolled his eyes and glanced at the face on the screen quietly shifting it up to be able to see it better as he drove. His hands gripped the flat wheel carefully as he navigated the streets.

“I’m not kidnapping Harper. I knocked him out cause I couldn’t deal with trying to convince him to take a good thing when it fucking came along.” He ran a hand through his hair as he headed down the less damaged streets. “I’ll find a safe place to park this, and I figure you can come and get him in one of those suits once everything is quieted down.” He glanced over seeing Dragon nodding on her screen. He tried to focus on driving, but the bald curiosity in Dragon’s gaze was almost burning a hole in the side of his face. “What?”

“Why are you doing this? Harper’s going to be very upset with both of us when he wakes up. He seemed very against taking that deal.” Uber glanced at the screen quietly and frowned as his hands gripped the wheel tighter. When he didn’t immediately respond the woman on the screen continued. “He seems to think that he owes you, that it’s not fair for him to take this deal since the villain thing was his idea.” Beck shifted gears and let out a short bark of a laugh.

“That sounds like Harper.” His voice was quiet as he pulled out of the street and into the parking lot of an abandoned strip mall. He moved to park the truck in the open, slipping from the seat and heading into the back. “Truth is never as simple as that. The only reason that I agreed to that stupid plan was because of everything that I owed Harper. He’d never admit that I owe him, he still thinks he’s failed me, but I never thought that. As for his self-confidence issues about being a hero.” Beck leaned out and glanced at the screen. “Well, you’re going to help him with that, hrm.” Beck vanished into the back, and the screen was silent for a moment.

As he moved the crates around, making space so he could pop open the hidden compartment that contained two suitcases and a briefcase. He quickly grabbed a red bag and the heavy briefcase. Opening the suitcase saw several changes of clothes, and a tote of toiletries and other essentials, their emergency bags. Beck quickly checked everything before slowly sealing it back up. He produced a key from a chain on his neck and opened the briefcase, checking the documents, cash and other
essentials within. He was latching the case when the voice of Dragon finally emerged from the front.

“Just who are you Uber.” The words brought a smile to his face and Uber smoothly slipped through the small door that separated the front of the truck from the rear, peering at the screen quietly.

“Harper told you his name yeah? That means that you know all about the shit that happened before he became a villain.” The boy’s expression hardened as he saw the guilty look ghost over Dragon’s face and he sighed. “Let me guess. A big part of his sentence is because of all that shit in Boston, right? Most cases of rogues that go legit, even if they’ve been a bit violent just get rebranded. There’s none of that parole shit.” Beck rubbed his face.

“Uber...he killed someone.” The woman’s voice was soft, and Uber snorted softly as he stared at Dragon’s face in the screen. “He has to be held accountable for that, even if he’s turned over a new leaf.” Uber rolled his eyes.

“Yeah? You’ve got the case files right? You’ve got all that information on Harper, and you know all about his life, but I doubt you went to talk to people. Just got the paper. Lemme guess what you found.” Uber spoke quietly, his voice almost as monotonous as Dragons had been.

“Seamus Zelazny Harper was an anti-social youth with delusions of adequacy. Born to an out of work fisherman and lifetime waitress. Was the unimpressive middle child in an entire brood of troubled children. Lived a dull, uneventful life until he got involved with the wrong man’s daughter and couldn’t handle the rejection.

Lost his parents and brother to tragedies, and broke in the head and triggered and went after the girl, and he ‘accidentally’ killed her and her bodyguards. Nobody was found, but the amount of blood heavily implied that she had died, especially since no matching girls were found in area hospitals. Investigations into the Harper family turned up numerous connections to organized crime. Harper disappears into the ether.” Uber glanced up and stared at Dragon’s image on the monitor. “How does that sound?” He stared at the image as Dragon’s avatar seemed to swallow before speaking back.

“Uh. Close. Pretty close. Did-” Uber didn’t let her continue, moving to touch the release on his chest plate, releasing the armour that he wore and stepping out in a pair of simple track pants and a singlet.

“No, Harper didn’t tell me. I imagine that he’s slipped at some point, called me Beck and you’ve done some digging, haven’t found a Beck in his past?” His voice was casual as he pulled up his shirt, dragging it over his head.

“Harper and I were friends for a few years before we triggered. He saved my life, you know? I had been on a date with this scumbag that worked for my father, and he saved me. Jumped in, and held up his fists like an idiot. Distracted the scumbag until I could crack him upside the head with a hammer.” Uber saw Dragon’s eyes dragging over his bare torso, focusing on the ugly device that had been slotted into his chest just below his left pectoral, with numerous unsightly raised lines emerging from it and spreading over his torso.

“We triggered at the same time. I had found out something bad about my father, and I ran away. I showed up on Harper’s step in the middle of the night soaked to the bone and shivering. His mom answered the door, saw me looking like a drowned poodle. She brought me in, dried me off, and sat down with me, Harper and his dad. They were good people; they listened to my story. They let me stay with them despite having no room. They fed me, cared for me. It was probably the most pleasant two weeks of my life. Then my dad came looking.”
“Do you see this? This was the first thing that Harper built after triggering. It took parts from about two-thirds of a coffee bar. It’s also his only device that hasn’t broken.” Beck reached up and began fiddling with the device. He viciously pushed down the memories of laying on the floor of that coffee shop feeling so cold as Harper desperately ripped apart mechanics and shoved bits of metal into him, all the while begging him not to die, not leave him alone. He saw the recognition flickering in Dragon’s eyes, but he had to focus on the particular pattern necessary to get the device to do what he needed. He continued to speak though, his voice low and dangerous.

“Dad didn’t take well to me running, and he didn’t take well to them not letting him take me. He attacked them first, and in the aftermath, they came for me. Harper tried to protect me, but even triggering didn’t stop them. They were beating him when I triggered. They weren’t expecting it when I suddenly knew jiu-jitsu. I wasn’t expecting them to actually shoot me. Harper built this to save my life. As he was doing it, I begged him to never let him find me again, and he put some other...features in.” Beck finished entering the sequence and cried out as he fell back against the chair.

For nearly five minutes the only things that he could feel were agony and the audible sensation of his bones grinding against each other. Every inch of his body felt like it was on fire and then suddenly the feelings ended and she was feeling very cold. She collapsed against the chair, one hand reaching up to explore the familiar scraggly blonde hair.

She glanced up with her blue eyes, peering over at Dragon’s shocked face on the screens.

“Tess, right? A pleasure to meet you, I’m Rebeckah Valentine. Rumours of my death were greatly exaggerated.”

Becka had rifled through the contents of her old suitcase, things were a bit tight, but she managed to find something to wear that wouldn’t traumatize the poor Tinker anymore then she had. She carefully emerged through the hatch to the driving section, carrying the two chests as she ran a brush through her hair, blinking at Dragon’s concerned look, taking a few moments studying the earnest expression on the face.

“Where are you going to go?” The question startled her and Becka took a seat in the driver’s seat as she slid her jacket on, getting comfortable. She contemplated the question quietly.

“My dad’s still looking for me, despite what the police reports say. Once it becomes clear that Harper is alive as well, and has gone legit, they’ll start looking at his associates. I’ll probably head for LA. The Elite have been subtly jockeying for Uber’s services for a while; maybe I can get a job out there doing something fun.” The blonde woman dragged her hair back into a ponytail, tying it off quietly and glancing at the screen, seeing the conflicted look on the digitized face.

“Just. Use the footage, clear Harper’s name. And keep him safe? My Dad’s a scumbag even among the slime he works with. I wouldn’t put it past him to try and hurt Harper to lure me out. He’s a good friend. If you ever… If you ever need help, Harper knows how to get ahoald of me.” She studied the screen for a moment, glancing over at the still passed out form of her lanky blonde friend. Before
Dragon could say anything though she zipped up her jacket, pulling the hood over her head quietly.

“I should get going while the going is good.” She paused in the seat, leaning over and pressing a kiss to Harper’s temple. She glanced overtaking in the stern expression on Dragon’s face and smirking quietly. “He’s important to me, Tess. Keep an eye on him. And tell him that I kissed him. I want to hear his complaints. Let him know…” Becka frowned quietly and fingered her jacket. She studied Harper and tried to come up with something profound to say, some last sentence that would convey how much he meant to her, but a flicker of Harper’s goofy grin as he explained some concept so far above her told her all she knew. Harper knew how important he was to her. She shook her head.

“Tell him to keep in touch.” She flashed a smirk to Dragon. The woman’s’ voice followed her out of the ice cream truck.

“He’ll be a parolee; he shouldn’t be consorting with felons.” Becka grinned and leaned back in as the rain fell hard on the back of her jacket.

“I mean. That’d mean you have to prove that I’m Uber. And I’m a dainty little blonde girl, and he’s a big ol’ man.” She flashed a wink at Dragon. “Maybe I’ll go legit!” She called out before spinning and making her escape, dragging her waterproof luggage and briefcase. She glanced around as she paced away from the truck. She needed wheels. And half the city was in shelters. Maybe one last crime wouldn’t be too out of order.

She turned toward the nearest neighbourhood and began whistling as she disappeared into the pouring rain. It was nearly forty minutes later as she finished loading her gear into the back of a Bentley that she heard the roar of an engine, and paused in her work to watch a massive four-legged dragon suit heading toward Harper. She wasn’t sure why she smiled, but the expression remained on her face well past the point that she’d passed the city limits in her appropriated vehicle.

Chapter End Notes

[[SO THAT WAS A THING. The idea occurred to me as I was doing 5.3 and I just couldn’t resist making it canon. I guess if it’s super, super, super hated I could make it noncanon, I just sort of enjoy the idea of Beck actually being Becka. Neat references and all that. I think if I even did a side story, I’d do it on Becka. Focusing on her adventures out in LA with some like Flashback interludes to cover her history with Harper. With Lots of Dragon and Harper Cameo’s. Maybe make it a sort of fusion with Andromeda. I was tempted to do a detective style thing recently, that could work. Anyway, thoughts for when this one is done. As always, LEMME KNOW WHAT YEW THINK, NERDS.

This chapter has been bugging me for like a week, so I had to get it out fast, I work a long shift tomorrow so I probably won’t post another interlude till Friday. Saturday or Sunday will be the next after that, and then if I stop at 3 interludes, 6.1 will be on Monday. Tuesday if I manage to get up the nerve to try for a fourth Interlude. We’ll see how it goes.]]
Interlude 13

Chapter Summary

[[This chapter was a bit of a challenge to write, hence the late release, but it does move certain pieces into place that’ll assist things going forward.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 17th, 2011
Location Unknown

‘...if you’re just joining us, we’re still covering the astounding events that occurred in Brockton Bay over the weekend.” The camera was focused on a middle-aged Caucasian with a severe hairstyle and expertly made-up face. She carefully considered the papers on her desk before glancing up at the camera and moving to continue speaking.

“Now, as most of you are no doubt aware, Leviathan was sighted in the city, but the astounding thing was the Endbringer was turned away with the most conservative amount of collateral damage seen since the Endbringers first appeared.” The woman glanced off to the side, the view zooming outwards from the woman to show a younger man seated next to her. He lifted up his papers, nodding and speaking softly.

“That’s correct Lauren. It seems like the combination of the advanced warning that Dragon of the Guild and Armsmaster of the PRT allowed an unprecedented level of preparation, and then the surprise arrival of a previously unknown Parahuman turned the tide against Leviathan.” The man adjusted his glasses and glanced at the camera quietly.

“The PRT is crediting Dragon and Armsmaster with much of the lack of initial casualties during Leviathan’s rampage, but few could say that the later survival of the city was due to anything beyond this new cape.” The man gestured to the side, and the screen behind them shifted from a static image to footage.

The image had been captured expertly, and the camera, on some sort of drone, swooped dramatically away from Leviathan. As the Endbringer rounded on a group of Capes, his form erupting water that lashed towards the crowd. Alexandria quickly swung into the shot, her form supporting a man in what was clearly his civilian clothes. He lifted a hand and a veritable wall of jagged violet lightning smashed into the wall of water flash-vaporizing it and leaving the footage to show Leviathan visibly fleeing from the Parahuman.

“This Parahuman, known only to the public as Ares, was instrumental to the defeat of the Endbringers, and as you’ve seen, Leviathan seemed almost afraid of him, constantly retreating whenever he joined the fray. The power he demonstrated was on par with the Triumvirate, though apparently, this wasn’t without cost.” The man frowned quietly as he considered the papers before
him. When he didn’t continue the woman next to him quickly picked up, speaking softly toward the camera.

“Ares apparently informed the PRT that he would be able to assist in the battle, but that doing so would almost certainly cost him his life. Indeed, sources close to the situation informed us that he seemed to actually to evaporate once the battle was over.” The woman paused to consider the screen for a moment before smoothly transitioning.

“Before he fell, Ares was apparently able to facilitate an unprecedented level of cooperation between the capes on site, allowing them to nearly kill Leviathan before the untimely intervention of Scion.” The words were quick and casual, and the woman patently ignored the curious look from her co-anchor and then adjusted the papers in her hands, moving on casually.

“The PRT and Protectorate both have acknowledged what a great victory this is, and they’ve apparently learned a great deal about fighting the Endbringers going forward. They claim that they’ve learned a few lessons here that might make a noticeable difference in how they combat the Endbringers going forward. We here at CNN applaud the efforts of the PRT, the Protectorate and Ares as well.” The woman set her papers down and glanced toward her companion who smoothly lifted his papers.

“The local director of the PRT had this to say.” The man turned and gestured to the screen, and an image of a short, squat woman with severe features appeared on the screen, standing at a podium outside the ruins of the building that had served as the staging point for the defence of the city. She stared around at the various camera’s taking a breath before speaking, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“Ares made a great sacrifice this weekend. He was a hero, and he knew what his efforts would cost him and still, he gave his life and saved Brockton Bay. We here at the PRT can only pray that the recovery of the city is as swift as his defence of it was.” The woman turned and gestured out toward the sea where several ships were towing the Rig back into its rightful place. “The PRT and the Protectorate will be available to assist with rebuilding efforts, and the Red Cross and FEMA have both committed significant resources to the city, but the City of Brockton Bay is also accepting donations…” The words faded out and the attractive young man carefully arranged his papers before speaking softly.

“You’ll find the relevant URL’s and phone numbers for donations at the bottom of the screen, and hopefully we can help ensure that this won’t be one of the cities that Leviathan’s rampage cost us.” The young man smiled charmingly at the camera before glancing at his companion. She shifted up in her seat, moving to speak slowly as she glanced at the camera.

“I’ve already made my donation, Charles. Now, In other news, tensions in Syria continue to mount—"
though she could have been a sister.

He slowly shifted his macabre form, his feet clattering along the wooden floorboards, each foot scraping through the coagulating blood. Truthfully, he didn’t need to move like this; each limb possessed a tiny repulsor, as did his chest, and he could make them move as smoothly as a person. He also didn’t need the chains to tether the limbs to his body either but moving like a possessed puppet added a particular terrifying aesthetic to his person that drew the most delightful terror from his victim’s eyes.

He paced toward the woman, ignoring Jack’s comments about having called dibs, and he lowered his bare featureless face toward the woman’s own, moving close enough that if he were able to sweat, the woman would be able to smell nothing but his aroma. The horror that welled in her eyes was washed away by an almost intoxicating aura of desperation. She moved her lips and words washed out, but he was too distracted to hear them. His body recorded it all, and he could review it later, but for now, focusing on those eyes- Wait.

His body suddenly shifted, jerking to the right and upright, startling Jack who’d been trying to pull him from his toy, and causing the parahuman to topple onto the woman who began shrieking anew, but he didn’t care. His ‘eyes’ were locked on a nearby tv screen. Jack had left it on to serve as background noise, keep the victims screams from drawing too much attention just yet. They were just starting here in Spokane and while they could easily kill everyone in the city, rushing it like that didn’t suit their illustrious leader.

He moved in smooth motions, ignoring his pantomime, walking his nine-foot frame over to the television and crouching down. He stared at the image of the man standing before Leviathan and releasing torrents of Violet Lightning when the image flicked to show a devastating wall of light, the man shifted back, one of his macabre hands coming up and gently pressing the volume button, turning it up from an indistinct murmur. The images of the man fighting were gone. Instead, a short woman was on screen, talking.

“Ares sacrifice saved Brockton Bay. We can only pray that the recovery is as swift as his defence of the city was.” The blank face remained locked on the screen as the director. He watched as she discussed rebuilding the city in the wake of the destruction, but his mind was on other things, hazy memories of his past. He shifted quietly and stepped back, his body rising to his full height. He wasn’t surprised when Jack moved up to stand next to him, staring at the screen. The man considered the screen with a bemused grin on his demented features.

“Survived an Endbringer, huh? That’s rare. And they’re so eager to rebuild. I’m sure that they could use a few extra hands, right, Mannequin?” The man glanced up at him, and he reached up a hand, snapping his fingers in agreement. Jack wanted to sow destruction, and that suited him fine. He had business with Danny Hebert. He would find his home and ensure that the man didn’t leave any notes in his wake. Or students.

There was something deep in his mind, some tiny part of Alan Gramme that he hadn’t been able to completely excise that told him that if there were any other Jedi here, then they might finally be able to kill him. He wasn’t sure if it was relief or fear that washed through him at the thought, but whatever it was it pushed him toward the door. The others wouldn’t want to leave until their business was done. Blades ejected from his hands, and he heard Jack cackling in his wake.

“Mannequin’s getting in on the games! Better hurry up and pick your prizes; he’s always the most efficient of us.’
With a faint growl of irritation, Rebecca Costa-Brown flicked off the TV screen and moved to set the remote on her desk. She carefully checked the folders on her desk, double checking that she had everything even though her perfect memory meant that she didn’t need to. Leaving the documents on the table, the woman slipped from her chair and moved to grab her suit jacket off the peg by the door, wrapping it around her shoulders. She checked her watch, nodding carefully at the indicated time before grabbing the documents off of her desk and exiting her office.

The door to the elevator was opening, and Rebecca slipped in casually, offering polite nods to the two young men that were already in it. She checked the buttons, seeing that one was evidently getting off at six, and the other at four. Rebecca didn’t hit a button though, merely drawing a key card from her jacket and swiping it through the reader on the panel. The men looked at her strangely, but she ignored them both and waited as they both disembarked at their floors. Once the elevator was empty, the open and close door buttons lit up, and Rebecca pressed the closed one.

Rebecca watched the doors closing, and she knew that the elevator was now ignoring all calls as it descended to a floor beneath the lower parking garage. Their own version of an Endbringer shelter, though this one was also used during non-emergencies as a secure testing and communication site. When the elevator reached its destination, the director didn’t wait for the doors to open fully before emerging into the stark white corridor. She followed the violet line on the floor, her keycard being produced at the end of the hall and being used to gain access to a seemingly ordinary looking board room.

The room was empty, and the woman took a seat at the head of the table, setting her files before her. A device placed into the ceiling descended, and Rebecca carefully leaned back, watching as it directed a bright beam over the collected documents for a few seconds before orienting the beam on her and scanning her from head to waist before retracting. Rechecking her watch, the director hummed and tapped her fingers on the table, waiting until the lights dimmed.

The device set into the roof soon started to glow once more as the lights dimmed and with a flicker, the directors each appeared one by one in the chairs scattered around the table. Rebecca knew that she was the first to appear in every other conference room, and then in the seat to her left Tagg appeared, and in the place to her right Armstrong. Knox appeared to Tagg’s left, and Armstrong’s left hand was occupied by Piggot. On and on it went, Seneca, and Hearthrow taking up the last two chairs on either side, with Wilkin’s glowing form appearing opposite her. Each of the figures was accompanied by documents on the table before them, and as one they all reached out, took their folders and drew them to sit before their seats.

“I hereby bring this emergency meeting of the Directorship to order on the seventeenth day of May, in the year two thousand and eleven. This emergency session was called in order to discuss the exceptional circumstances of Leviathan’s assault on Brockton Bay. I take it by now that you’ve all either read the report or seen the news coverage and I won’t bore you all with a summary of what happened.” The chief director lazily crossed her arms, resting her elbows on the table and glancing at the other directors.

“This meeting was called by a vote with a majority of the Directorship, and I didn’t vote to do so, so I will turn this meeting over to the ranking director who did.” Rebecca glanced over at the stern face of Director Tagg and offered him a friendly smile before continuing. “Director Tagg, I understand
that you are also the director who initiated the vote, correct?” She waited till the man nodded before waving a hand. “Well then, inform us what this meeting was so desperately needed for.”

“Thank you Chief-Director Costa-Brown. I was indeed the one that called this meeting. I must admit that while I’ve read the initial reports and seen the news coverage, I find myself horrified at the level of power that this Ares displayed.” The man spoke brusquely, his face stony as he flipped open a document on his part of the table, reading from it casually. “Twos or higher in every rating except for Tinker, Breaker and Changer. Sevens or above in more than five different categories. There’s been the Parahuman equivalent of a nuclear warhead living in Brockton Bay for decades, and you expect us to believe that the ENE branch had no idea of it, especially when confronted with his daughter who exhibits similar powers.”

Piggot shot up in her chair, but Rebecca held up a hand and shot the enraged looking woman a stony look that silenced her and returned her to her seat. The woman turned her attention toward Tagg and tilted her head to the side. “Director Tagg, I remind you that despite your spot at my left, you are no more important than any other Director present, and you should speak to them with the same courtesy that you would expect them to speak with you. On the subject of Ares, I have spoken extensively with Alexandria about the man as she was the parahuman that spent the most time with him. You’ve got her report sitting in front of you, but I will paraphrase for those of us that are less prepared.” The woman nodded almost casually to Piggot; the woman was one of the staunchest in support of the Protectorate’s reintegration programs despite her rather public distaste for Parahumans in general.

“Ares, or Danny Hebert since we’re dispensing with such pageantry, was an extensively powerful parahuman that underwent a dangerously uncontrolled second trigger according to his testimony. That left his powers so unstable that use them would lead to his untimely demise, which they eventually did as he claimed. Mister Hebert apparently came to Brockton Bay to settle down, and settle down he did. Got married, had kids, and if Leviathan hadn’t come knocking that would be the end of it. Truthfully he’s a poster child for our re-integration programs.” The woman nodded almost casually to Piggot; the woman was one of the staunchest in support of the Protectorate’s reintegration programs despite her rather public distaste for Parahumans in general.

“You bring up a good point, Chief Director Costa-Brown,” This voice was from Tagg’s left the oily tones of Director Armstrong coming out casually. “Danny Hebert was a perfect example of how capes could retire to become productive members of their communities, but Tagg also brings up an interesting point. His daughter is at least partially affiliated with the Protectorate through New Wave, and her powers are...fascinating.” The man's tone was concerned, but his entire form seemed to ooze an almost disturbing fascination. “Grab bags are typically less potent in their execution, and Alexandria’s report points out that Taylor is expected to achieve or even surpass her father’s skills with time. It might be worth attempting to have her relocated someplace with a more...hands-on approach from the PRT and the Protectorate.”

The man's words sent a shiver down her spine, but Rebecca kept her face impassive as she laced her fingers before her and studied the faces at the table. She knew the way that this would go if it were put to the vote now, and Tagg’s self-satisfied smirk implied that he did as well. She glanced at Piggot who seemed as disgusted as she felt and she moved to speak quietly.

“It’s a fascinating point, and she could be a great asset to the PRT, but the question becomes who would oversee her training.” She saw the greed in their eyes as they all considered what a cape with Taylor’s powers could do in their hands. “And even more concerning, what sort of place could handle the threat she poses. Leviathan was clearly seeking her out, if we relocate her to one of your cities, that may paint a target on them. Considering the Behemoth is next up in the rotation.” The woman let the words linger, watching each of the directors as they paled and suddenly became less
enthused with the idea, though she saw with a wry smirk that Tagg’s jaw set once more and her teeth clenched.

“No, I think,” Rebecca moved to speak, leaning almost casually back in her chair and shaking her head. “I think that Taylor Hebert is where she needs to be for the moment. She’s currently working with New Wave, and stealing one of their members might cost us the assets on that team which have begun to prove quite useful.” She glanced at Piggot who nodded agreeably.

“No. On the subject of the Endbringer’s fascination, I would suggest considering apt locations to fight Behemoth, and we can see about using the girl as a lure to get the Endbringer there, perhaps to get an even more impressive victory under her plate.” She briefly considered informing them of her suspicions about the girl’s ability to do the gestalt mind technique that her father had claimed credit for, but she would rather not have them getting it into their heads to try and poach her before she’d explored the idea of attempting to fold her into Cauldron.

“Since we’re all gathered her though, we should discuss the situation in Brockton Bay. The subject of transfers has come up. Director Wilkins, one of your Wards has put in a request for transfer, naming schooling in the fall as the reason, and it’s been brought up that the ENE branch of the Wards is critically understaffed. Armstrong, one your boys, Weld, is rather outstanding in the field yes?” Rebecca didn’t let the smile show on her face, but she rapidly turned the instincts of the directors on preserving their own rosters and soon enough Taylor Hebert and her quirks were forgotten.

Kynigos Ena lowered his metallic hand, setting the remote aside. If he could frown, he would, but his eyes dimmed as he leaned forward in his desk, resting her elbow joints on the wood and crossing his arms, lacing his fingers. He studied the image frozen on the screen of the man in civilian clothes loosing lightning from his hands, and he shook his head quietly. One of his metallic hands reached out, and he depressed a button on his desk.

“Gloria. I require information on Brockton Bay. Everything you can put together from the Elite Databases. Contact the local Information Brokers; I want the PRT files as soon as possible as well. Capes, Gangs, all of it.” He released the button, not expecting a reply. His secretary knew that he wasn’t a being that enjoyed idle chatter. He pushed the chair back from his desk, pushing his battered metal frame to his feet, and walking around the desk. He studied the image of the lightning carefully and let out a mechanical hum.

It could be a coincidence, but something about it struck at him. This was what he’d been waiting for and more than that he knew that his creator wouldn’t be able to resist. They’d often spoke of the Jedi and the man that he’d once been had taken great inspiration from the philosophy of the Jedi Order of old. It’d inspired him to change the world in more profound ways. Part of Ena wondered if it was the stories of the Great Jedi and the Terrible Sith that had turned his old friend into the monster that he’d become.

After considering the image for a few moments he reached a hand out to the television, shutting off the screen and moving over toward his desk, and activating his computer. Quick keystrokes saw him logged into PHO and he moved the Brockton Bay subforum, casually clicking through a few different links as he waited for the information to be brought to him. The somewhat active page on
the cape known as Vigil drew his eye, and he began to read, his eyes brightening after a few moments.

“Well, isn’t that just...fascinating.” He leaned back into his chair and crossed his arms, indulging privately in an old habit that while no long necessary still made him feel better.

“Exultant Declaration: What an interesting adventure this will be.”

The ‘door’ closed in her wake, and she strode out of the dark room that she’d arrived in, casually heading down the corridor. She checked her watch quietly and frowned as she made her way through the winding halls. She didn’t count doors in her head or map out her place, but she quickly entered a door at seeming random and smiled faintly when she found a conference room before her holding a table around which most of her friends were sat. She moved over and dragged out one of the chairs, stalling the conversation in the room.

A few nods were tossed in her direction, and Rebecca returned them as she set the pile of papers in her hand down on the table. As she lowered herself into a seat and crossed her legs, she watched as Doctor Mother reached out, snagging the top-most official looking folder and moving to open it up, her eyes widening at the top page and she settled down to focus on reading. As the dark-skinned woman focused on her reading, Rebecca found her attention being drawn by Eidolon and Legend glancing at her. Legend was the first to speak; his lips quirking into a smirk.

“Rebecca, you certainly seem rather worn down. Been having fun with the rest of the Directors?” He studied her quietly and crossed his arms and grinned when she rolled her eyes instead of responding. He shifted closer, ignoring Eidolon’s sullen look as he glanced at her. “You do seem rather worn out; I guess they didn’t take the Brockton Bay situation well?” He studied her curiously, and Rebecca nodded.

“They were understandably concerned about Danny Hebert’s apparent arrival out of nowhere, and the fact that his daughter is almost certainly going to end up being at or above our level.” Rebecca waved a hand between them and ignored the look of distaste on Eidolon’s face, studying Legend’s pale features quietly. The man hummed as he tapped his arm, shaking his head and setting his blonde hair waving.

“They wanted to recruit her then? How’d you talk them out of it?” He spoke quietly, and Rebecca rubbed her face.

“I pointed out that Taylor Hebert is almost certainly an Endbringer Magnet and then suddenly all the directors were distinctly less interested in having her on their roster. Then I forced through two transfer that got them all up in arms about other things.” At his curious look, she waved a hand quietly.

“One of your Wards requested a transfer, Flechette, she’d been having issues with her team leader, and she was planning on attending school in Brockton Bay come the fall anyway, so I forced Wilkins to accept it. And then I moved Weld from Armstrongs’ team.” She rubbed her chin quietly. “He’s a powerful Parahuman, and I’d rather not leave Armstrong too long to taint his mind. Piggot would be better at moulding him into a public hero, which is what the Protectorate needs.” She
hummed and sighed quietly, only glancing up when Doctor Mother let out a polite cough.

“Interesting reading.” The woman gestured to the file before humming faintly and tapping the document. “It certainly brings up questions. He’s stronger than most of you except for Eidolon, and he lacks Eidolon’s problems with his powers. He’s had his powers for decades, and they don’t seem diminished if his words are right about his daughter following in his footsteps, that could change a lot.” She glanced at Contessa quietly, but the woman seemed distracted and was carefully tapping at the table in thought, her features stoic as ever but something about her pose hinting at concern.

“What I’m curious about is why we’d never heard of him.” Legend’s voice came out. “You don’t gain powers like that and learn to use them as he did without practice and a cape of his calibre would have been heard of before now. Do you think he’s from overseas? Russian or Chinese, he seemed American.” His voice was laced with curiousity and Alexandria leaned forward, speaking casually.

“He claimed that he was from another world.” The others glanced at her, and she offered up a shrug. “He said that he came from a world where he was a hero on our level, and his identity was compromised.” She spoke softly, frowning when Eidolon and Legend both shifted forward nervously. “He said that people he loved died because of it and that his powers allowed him to come here.” She shrugged. “My powers don’t work on him, so I don’t know if he was lying, but he seemed genuinely upset when he told the tale.” She glanced at the Doctor who shrugged.

“It’s possible, and it would explain why his powers are so...strong. There are well-known differences in power levels between different worlds; if he was from a distant world that we’ve yet to stumble over then, he could have had a more significant powerset. That his daughter inherited those powers is unsettling, because it implies that his powers are natural.” She rubbed her chin quietly and glanced at Contessa before looking at Alexandria.

“Have you considered bringing her under your wing? The PRT could offer her a scholarship in Los Angeles, and that would get her on Alexandria’s Ward or Protectorate team, it’s an idea worth-” The woman was cut off when Contessa finally cut in.

“No.” The others glanced at her, and she shook her head. “That won’t work. She’d pick you out in a minute.” Contessa glances at Alexandria. “You cannot approach her in your civilian identity unless you’re willing to compromise it to her. The best plans for all of us involve leaving her where she is and ensuring that everyone else does too. With every day that passes the odds grow in ever increasing numbers.” The woman’s voice was cold and steely as ever, but Rebecca leaned back quietly, disbelief washing through her at the implication that her secret identity was hanging by such a tentative wire. The emotions must have been showing on her face though since the woman chimed in after a moment.

“She’s already compromised Dragon.” The words were spoken bluntly, and everyone at the table stared at her in shock. She seemed to study them all for a moment before speaking quietly. “Danny Hebert died a fool’s death.” The words were monotonous, and Alexandria frowned at the sudden surge of fury washing through her, though her eyes were drawn to Eidolon's clenched fists and the look of anger on Legend’s face. She frowned as each of them frowned in turn. She glanced over to Contessa and shifted at the woman’s eyes locked coldly on her own.

“You’ve realized it.” The woman spoke coldly, and Alexandria nodded. “None of you knew Danny Hebert before that encounter, but you were all angry that I spoke of him that way. The Gestalt linked you together, and it bled through you all. The closer you were to the controlling mind, the more the bleed through.” Rebecca shuddered as Contessa glanced at her quietly. “You’re lucky that Dragon was there to shock her with her obviously alien mind. Otherwise, you’d already be compromised.”
Rebecca shuddered faintly and redoubled her intentions to keep Taylor right where she was and safely out of the way for the moment.

Chapter End Notes

[[Lauren Matthews is the first person that chooses not to out Taylor as the result of her Father’s actions, it doesn’t go well for her, and the person that replaces her is less concerned, and Taylor’s association with Danny comes out, but something about that lady made me think she’d refuse to comment on the family of a hero like that and she just moved on. Poor lady.

Hopefully, the perspective jumps weren’t too jarring. It’ll be rare that I include more than one perspective, but there was a lot of perspectives I wanted to include reacting to this particular news post.

NEXT INTERLUDE IS COIL MEBBE. OR UH. I'm unsure, we'll see. Might do a Sabah/Flechette one, depending on mood. Or Ralph. I've got one more to do so expect that tomorrow or Sunday.]]
Interlude 14

Chapter Summary

[[So, decided that the Coil interlude is a non-starter. Instead, I’m going to give you a somewhat Star Wars themed Interlude today, and then I’m going to do a Lily interlude tomorrow to get me ready to deal with the character once she gets on the scene.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Long Time Ago
A Galaxy Far Away

The aged man stood on the gravel beach, his long beard and heavy robes blowing in the faint breeze. He turned his gaze from the the gravel around his feet to the object in his hand, the small cuboid feeling far heavier in his grasp then it should. He gently tossed the device up and caught it in his hand, slowly considering it before turning his rheumy gray eyes out to the ocean before him. This late at night, the still water reflected the stars above, and it seemed as if he stood on a precipice before a sea of stars that stretched out into forever.

When he returned his gaze from the water to the object in his hand it’d changed into a stone and the old man was reminded of days long, long past. Warm summer afternoons on Tython spent with his fellow younglings playing in the sun and recovering from lessons. Evenings spent near the beach and playing with skipping stones. He considered the object quietly before he shifted his hand and tossed the object out toward the water, watching as it hit the surface and bounced, skipping along and leaving a number of ripples in it’s wake until it finally struck the water and sank a ripple echoing outwards.

Something distant reached out, grasping at him and the aged Jedi Master allowed the Force to take hold of him and it dragged him out, following the outward crest of that ripple as it skimmed across the surface of the water like an onrushing train. The world around him blurred and the old man felt the impression that time and distance were rushing past him as he followed the ripple along the darkened ocean, past swirls of light on every side. He had considered the notion that he’d follow it forever but eventually a distant light appeared far ahead, growing wide as they barreled down on it.

The Jedi descended smoothly on the swirl of colour, following as the ripple approached an island not so distant from the one he’d left, a barren battered bit of solid land among the water. He shifted and moved past the ripple, approaching the rock first and considering the image frozen upon it. The image was still, but impressions radiated out in the Force, and it told a tragic tale. At first glance, it was an image of the broken shell of a dying god falling, his torso shattered in so many ways beyond what the Jedi could see. Standing over him was the broken shell of a girl.
The Jedi shifted his focus, considering the god. A pale imitation of humanity seen through the eyes of something that would never be human. Flawed and destructive, and possessing more power than any Jedi or Sith could hope to garner, but the mind of a child. Petty, selfish and wholly amoral. He hadn’t lost to superior firepower, he’d lost because even the most powerful of enemies can be felled by taking enough small hits. The god was interesting on an intellectual level, but the Jedi had once traded barbs with Vitiate, and next to him, this creature was a simpleton playing at being a world eater.

The girl was fascinating, the Force practically sang her story to him. Abandoned by every person she’d ever loved, and betrayed by every person she’d ever asked for help. A girl that had lost everything she had and then clawed it all back only to lose it again. The Jedi felt the girls desperation and inadequacy buffeting him, but pushing past it all he felt the crippling loneliness and he frowned as he considered her. He could feel the Force weeping for her, for the things she’d done. Not because of the lives that’d been lost on the sidelines of her battles, or for the people she’d twisted in her war, but for the tragedy that she herself was.

The Force flowed through her even now, and it wept for the tragedy that was her life, and ends that she’d gone to seeking validation from the world around her. The things that had been asked of her to save the world had pruned away parts of her humanity, figuratively at first and then literally. The Jedi considered the image as he hovered and glanced over, watching the ripple washing out into the beach, the glowing energy ghosting over the scene and changing it all before his eyes.

The god stood once more his eyes filled with fire as he considered the figures opposite him. No longer alone, the girl stood tall and fierce, clad in a fitted suit and wielding an interesting looking Saber-staff. The girl’s eyes were lit by the power and the Jedi could sense the Force washing from her strong and exultant. Scattered around her he could see allies. A figure in white and gold with a flowing sash and radiating a glowing golden aura that sang an interesting counterpoint in the Force to the girls.

The Jedi drifted around the scene, taking in the girls that surrounded the two in the fore. The mousy girl with a cloak of darkness that remained a beacon of light despite it, the one with the Tarentaks protecting her, the boy wreathed in blue flames, back to back with the girl wreathed in red the joy on their faces apparent at the battle that was in progress around them.

Before long though, his eyes drifted onwards, focusing on the three figures visible behind the girl with the Lightsaber, taking in the two Jedi and the Sith Lord that were staring back at him. He considered them for a moment disturbed by the amused smiles on the two visible faces.

Before he could consider the implications though, the sound of a series of repeated chimes suddenly pierced the veil around him, the images evaporating into smoke as he jerked forward and took a deep breath, the entire Force Vision collapsing around him. He sat there, panting softly until the sound of the chimes intruded again and he reached out a hand, triggering the door release.

“Enter!” He called out and blinked at the young padawan that slipped into the room nervously and stared at him sitting on the floor. When the poor boy bowed so deeply, he nearly toppled the man once known as Barsen’thor pushed his creaking form to his feet and waved the boy over. The young man approached and spoke almost reverently.
“Grand Master, Master Oteg sent me to inform you that you missed the start of the Council meeting.”

The old man cursed, ignoring the young man’s shocked look. He hadn’t realized that he’d been meditating that long. He glanced at the clock and let out a long sigh. Barely fifteen minutes, they certainly hadn’t had time to commit any grievous mistakes without him yet. He nodded thankfully to the student.

“Tell your master when you see him that he has my thanks.” He glanced at the boy and then moved to the door, pausing at the doorway and reaching down. He hiked up the bottom of his robes revealing his spindly legs covered in a pair of simple pajama pants. He shifted and gently touching on the Force he charged rapidly through the corridors toward the meeting room.

The sound of the youngling class giggling in his wake did his old heart some good, and he entered the council room with a broad grin on his wrinkled face, one hand moving to drag over his beard. As he entered, the focus of the masters shifted to him bringing a pause to the debate. He walked around the wide table of the Jedi Council, taking his seat at the head of it with almost casual ease.

“Grand Master, glad to see that you’ve joined us.” The diminutive form of Master Oteg to his left was the first to speak, and the old Jedi flashed him a friendly grin. He and Oteg were the only fossils of the Jedi Order that remained from before the War with Zakuul. Every other master at the table was a student of Satele’s New Order or a student of a student of hers. Though, truthfully the Jedi Master was glad that Satele hadn’t lived to see how quickly her students had forgotten the lessons that she’d taught them. This was immediately apparent as one of the men at the table spoke up.

“Yes. Thank you for joining us, Grand Master. Before your entrance, we were speaking at length about the Noetikon of the Eclipse.” Master Hollis spoke, his voice was calm and serene, and the Barsen’thor studied him faintly, shaking his head.

“It would do well for the other masters to remember their training. Fear is something to be mastered.” He spoke casually and ignored the affronted looks from around the table before letting out a sigh. “But since so many of you are concerned I will admit that I have been informed of your intentions and I have been meditating on the issue. The Force has provided me with a solution.” His voice was patient and serene, and he blinked when Master Hollis chimed in.

“There is already a solution, we should destroy the Noetikon, it’s secrets are too great to fall into the wrong han-” He paused when the Kel’dor master to his left held up a hand. Master Runu was a moderate on the council, and his face turned to peer toward the Barsen’thor, tilting his head quietly.

“We are aware of your position, Master Hollis, but this news of a vision is interesting. Tell us more Grand Master.” The man gestured, and several heads nodded around the table. The old Jedi carefully forward, ignoring the creaking in his joints and speaking slowly and carefully, dragging a hand through his beard as he related the specifics of his vision.
As the words faded from his lips, he leaned carefully back in his chair, watching the other masters quietly. The expression on their faces ranged from confusion to shock, to Master Hollis who seemed rather condescending. He studied the other master quietly a soft frown ghosting over his lips. When the man stood, pressing his hand to the table, the Barsenthor felt his hand ghosting over his lightsaber, though he pushed the instinct aside and leaned back, watching the man carefully.

“This is insanity. That is a dark object, and we can’t actually be considering loading it up and shooting it off to some random distant planet in hopes that it saves a single person’s life.” The man glanced around at the other masters and Oteg would chime in.

“You must have misunderstood the Grand Master, Master Hollis. If the visions were to be believed, the device would save billions, and it would save the world.” The man quietly rested his tiny hands on the table, glancing over when Master Runu commented.

“It’d save this girl, that is true, but there’s no guarantee that it’d save the rest. The Grand Master said it himself. The vision shifted to show that the gold being still lived, that he’d healed the girl, but it’d cost her the instant victory. That is a concern, though considering what fate befell her…” The man paused, tracing a pattern on the table. Off to the left, Master Julius, a Nautoloan spoke quickly.

“Was she a Jedi?” the words were a surprise, and most of the masters glanced at him. The Barsenthor considered the question quietly and the feelings he’d received.

“She was firmly on the Light Side, and she inspired good in those around her. She wielded a Lightsaber, but from what I sense, I doubt we’d admit her to the order as it exists now.” He didn’t add that she’d have been taken in by Satele at least, but the other Master’s started to frown, so he moved to qualify.

“She’s emotional, but she masters the emotions. Considering that Jolee Bindo would have been one of her teachers, that would be expected. Truthfully, from what I scanned, I imagine that her and Master Bindo’s impression get along splendidly.” He hummed and shrugged waving a hand. Before anyone could ask, the impetuous voice of Master Hollis cut in.

“Enough of this! The matter has been debated enough. We have already voted to remove the Noetikon from the archive. I posit a vote. I vote that we destroy it immediately, the Grand Master votes that he be allowed to send it off. We vote.” The man’s curt almost desultory tone was concerning but one by one the other masters took their time before inputting their votes into the small consoles by each chair. The results promptly displayed on each screen.

The Barsenthor didn’t even have to glance down to see that he’d won. The cold look in Master Hollis’ eyes was sign enough. As the conversation turned to other matters, he carefully tapped out a command on his console, sending off a message. His concerns were validated when the meeting came to an end, and one of the masters approached him with a question, and he watched as Master Hollis immediately vacated the hall and disappeared into the temple.

It took him nearly fifteen minutes to dispense with the eager questions of Master Shiiks, the Togruta was the youngest master on the council, and it showed with how easily she was drawn into debates. His suspicious about her being used to delay him were proven correct when he entered the Jedi
Archive to find Master Hollis being suspended by his neck, staring in horror at the rather large blaster resting against the middle of his forehead.

“Overjoyed Exclamation: Master! Look what I found. I was under the impression that Jedi Sages such as yourself, Master Hollis, were against the use of stealth techniques.” The Droid’s voice was almost bored as it held the struggling Master and the Barsen’thor chuckled when the Master’s hand issued even more electrical shocks that passed harmlessly through HK’s hardened form and into the ground. After a moment, the droid tossed the over-weight Jedi almost casually onto the ground, letting him roll to a stop right before the grand master.

The Barsen’thor crouched low and studied the puce face of Master Hollis as he gasped for breath and mouthed words that came out as hoarse whispers too garbled to understand. Eventually, though the rotund man finally got his voice under control, sputtering out a series of half-formed threats.

“I’ve said it numerous times, that machine is a menace with no place in a Jedi Temple. It should be melted down for scrap. It has no right attacking and threatening a master on the Jedi Council.” The Barsen’thor considered the man for a few moments before speaking slowly, his aged voice cracking.

“When the vote went against you, Master Hollis, I instructed HK to come down here and guard this particular door. If you hadn’t attempted to go through it, you wouldn’t have known he was here. The Noetikons are beyond that door and considering you lost the vote; I question what you were doing here.” As he spoke he watched the man’s face slowly paling as the trouble he was in occurred to him. “That’s what I thought. We’ll be discussing your perfidy before the council shortly. Begone.”

The Barsen’thor watched the man stagger to his feet and flee. He’d slip to his own feet glancing at HK quietly. The Droid seemed to perk up, putting his gun away and speaking.

“Excited Commentary: That was fun Master, it’s been ages since we’ve had a good fight. I think I shall enjoy serving as a warden for the Noetikon.” The Barsen’thor frowned and sighed at the comment. Of the many friends that he’d made on the adventures of his youth, HK had been the only constant in all his years. When he’d first acquired the droid, he hadn’t honestly expected to dread the idea of parting with him like this.

“I take it, HK-51, that you’ve decided to accept the mission?” He spoke softly, staring at the droid who seemed to lower his shoulders in an almost apologetic pose.

“Concerned Admission: The mission is important Master, and the best of our adventures are behind us. You said you needed the best to safeguard this legacy, and that is me, Master. I’ll ensure that this object reaches its destination, and once we’re there, I’ll liquidate any undesirables necessary to see it safe.” The Barsen’thor chuckled and turned, moving his aching bones down the hall, smiling as HK joined him after sealing the door with his personal codes.

It would take time to build the ship and the interface needed to slot the Noetikon and HK into it. He had time to say his goodbyes, but HK was right. This mission was more important than either of them.

Chapter End Notes
[May the Fourth be with you. =] An interlude in the Starwars universe, origins of the Droid and the ship itself. Neat stuff. Also, we get to see the man that ensured that Taylor had the means to change her future. Let me know what you think as always.

I’ll be around, and as I’ve said, the next interlude will be either Lily/Sabah or just Lily. Depends on what my muse does, expect that sometime tomorrow.]]
Canon Omake - Plucking Strings

Chapter Summary

[[So. Enjoyed my day off, played some games, laid down to listen to music and read before crashing into unconsciousness and then my fucking muse slammed me up the side of the head with a baseball bat. I wrote out this. A bit too short for an Interlude, and I’m trying to avoid over-saturating Vicky/Taylor shit, but I could see it being canon. Since I had planned not to bother covering the week and a half, this can serve as a window at what’s been going on.

Also, this will definitely be after all the interludes, cause reasons, so don’t get too confused about working with a timeline. In any case, I give you Plucking Strings. ALSO, ALSO, This will include song lyrics to this song, it’s from the future, and I am shamelessly plagiarising it, but I am the author, and what I say goes. Also, it’s a neat song that kind of suits Vicky. ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 21st, 2011

Brockton Bay

Taylor’s heart thundered in her chest, the sound of her blood pounding in her ears barely overpowering the crash of the water on the stones, she skidded to a halt at an intersection, wishing not for the first time that the street lights were working. In every direction, all she could see was the pouring rain and the darkened streets and the gaping empty buildings, the vague hissing in her wake making her quickly decide that going left was the best option. She charged down the broken streets, dodging wrecked cars and doing her best to not look too closely at the broken and battered bodies that littered every surface.

She had to keep going, to keep moving. Everyone here was already lost, but if she could make it to the others, if she could get to them before everything went wrong, then she could save them. She pushed her powers, cursing that they just weren’t enough as she leapt clean over cars, ducking under the wreckage that littered the road. She was moving so fast that she was nearly teleporting around broken bits of masonry as she charged onwards, unheeding of whatever was chasing her. The dangers that she was in didn’t matter; there were people that needed her, people that loved her and she couldn’t possibly fail them.

She’d lost so many people; she couldn’t stand to lose anymore. The tears pricking at her eyes were almost painful, and she felt the water gathering, the salt of her tears no doubt mixing with the wash of rain from above, but she just roughly brushed the water away as she charged on. In the distance flashes of light broke the darkness but she couldn’t tell if that was the battle she needed to intercept, or merely lightning. As she charged onwards, she drew more heavily on the Force, her entire body aching from the drain, but she couldn’t let this stop her, she couldn’t be just too late again, she couldn’t stand to lose-
A crash and a massive metallic shape had interposed itself between her and destination, its form odd and rounded, massive limbs hanging from ornate chains, the body vaguely humanoid and practically oozing malevolence. Taylor skidded to a halt, but it was too late, one of the chain-held limbs launched upwards of its own accord, a blade snapping out of the hand, the glimmering point aimed at Taylor’s face. Taylor didn’t have time to shriek, or feel pain, one moment she was staring at a rainy street, and the next everything flashed white, and she was suddenly sat up in bed, her heart racing.

Taylor sat quietly in bed, panting and gripping her sweat soaked tank top, one of her hands grasping desperately at the sheets around her. It took a moment for her to realize that the cold sheets meant that she was alone in bed. She sat there in silence, panting softly and staring blankly at the sheets and blankets pooled around her waist. It took her a few moments to still the savage beat of her heart and the get her breathing under control enough to actually focus. One hand slowly reached out and her glasses almost magically lifted from her desk, floating serenely to her hand. A casual, practice flick saw them snapping open, and Taylor quietly slid them onto her face, letting out a tired sigh as she glanced around.

No Victoria. That was unsettling. Taylor briefly entertained the thought that Victoria had made her escape at some point in the night to return to her own bed, but didn’t consider it likely. After the awkward morning after of their first night at the house, they’d attempted to sleep apart exactly once, and both had gotten so little sleep due to the nightmares that they’d ended up dozing on the couch the following day in its entirety. Since then, Victoria’s only absences in the middle of the night had been due to patrols, though each and everyone had resulted in a nightmare just like the one Taylor had just awoken from.

Taylor briefly considered going back to bed, but she doubted that she’d accomplish much, so instead, she slid her legs out of bed, getting her feet into her slippers and moving to head toward the doorway. As she was heading toward the bathroom, she didn’t notice Victoria’s uniform still draped over the desk-chair where the girl had left it the night before.

Taylor shut off the sink and grabbed a towel to dry her hands, blinking at the odd sound that pierced the darkness, and she tiptoed over to the door to the bathroom as she set the towel aside. Opening the door revealed the faint strings of music coming from down the hall and Taylor moved to creep down the hall quietly. She walked past the still closed door of her father’s room, and past her own open door, stopping at the mostly closed door of the guest room.

She reached out a hand and gently pushed the door inwards, blinking at the sound that emerged, smiling as she peered past the edge of the door. She had figured it was either Victoria or a very odd burglar that had broken in to play her friend’s guitar, but she was relieved to see that the blonde was perched on the edge of the bed in the guest room, Taylor’s father’s guitar strung over her lap as she strummed quietly. Taylor had been about to back away and leave the other girl to her practicing when the soft words ghosted out across the room, and Taylor paused, leaning on the doorframe and listening curiously.

“I guess it’s just one of those nights, where I can’t get out of my head. I guess I’ll be alright; I should probably just go to bed.” The girl paused, plucking the strings quietly, taking a deep breath before continuing. “But the future scares me; I’m not gonna lie. ‘Cause although I’m bright, I’m not smart
enough to try, for fear of failing when I’ve really done my best.” Taylor blinked, and a frown ghosted over her lips as she watched Victoria’s shoulders hunching down as she plucked along, taking a few moments before continuing once more.

“And I’ve come dangerously close to giving it all up. And I stare into my tea like the answer’s hidden in a fucking cup. So put that record on again, I’ll confess this to you like we’re old friends. But we’re not, yeah, I’m just playing guitar and trying to pretend.” The words stopped, and the girl hummed faintly as she continued to play the haunting tune. Taylor watched the girl quietly, studying the set of Victoria’s shoulders.

“I know that I’m still young, and I don’t believe in fate, but I’m not in control anymore, so my time is going to waste.” She paused and frowned, plucking carefully and trying to work over a part of the song, humming a few times before taking a sigh and starting over and humming along until she started singing once more, her voice resuming what Taylor assumed was the chorus. Taylor smiled as the volume picked up, Victoria apparently forgetting that it was just shy of three am.

“I’ve come dangerously close to giving this all up. I stare into my tea like the answer’s hidden in a fucking cup. So put that record on again, I’ll confess this to you like we’re old friends, but we’re not, I’m just playing guitar and trying to pretend.” She paused dragging the word out and strumming a second before continuing. “That I know who I am, and I’m not bored every day. That this city makes me feel alive, I’ve got music in veins. This place will always be my home, with its crappy weather, and pointless heroes. These were things that I thought used to love, but tonight I really don’t.” The girl stared at the wall quietly, strumming on the guitar. When the girl moved to strum a few more chords before singing a bit more, Taylor tried to silently back out.

“And I guess it’s just one of those nights, where I can’t get out of my head, and I know I’ll be alright, I should probably just go to bed-” The words cut off when Taylor smacked the door handle and sent the door creaking open further instead of closing it. Taylor froze in place as Victoria froze opposite her. The blonde was the first to move, slowly turning to stare in dawning horror in Taylor’s direction.

“Sorry!” Taylor wasn’t sure what caused the slowly growing redness on Victoria’s face, whether it was embarrassment or rage, but she let out a nervous squeak before pulling the door close and peeking around it. She studied the dark look in Victoria’s eyes, and she spoke quietly. “I uh… I woke up. And you weren’t there, I was going to the bathroom, and I heard music.” Taylor watched as something flickered in Victoria’s eyes, and she bit her lip quietly as the girl’s expression relaxed and she shifted in place.

“Another nightmare?” The words were soft, and Taylor let out a soft sigh, pushing the door open and slipping in with a nod. She saw the girl glancing down at the guitar and then back up at her. She saw the conflicted emotions in the other hero’s eyes, and she slid over, moving to plop onto the bed as the girl spoke. “Sorry, you looked like you were out for the count, but I couldn’t sleep I’ve uh.” Victoria trailed off, and Taylor flopped back onto the bed, sprawling out.

“Hey, I get it. Lots on your mind.” She gestured at the guitar and smirked when Victoria rolled her eyes. “I honestly figured that you’d headed off for a patrol, that occasionally happens too.” Taylor spoke softly, and studied the other girl, taking in Victoria’s stiff embarrassed pose, considering her for a few moments before flashing her a friendly smile. “You ever want to talk, you know I’m here right?” She studied Victoria until the other girl nodded before settling back and waving a hand imperiously. “Now then. Play me something happy.” She grinned at Victoria’s affronted look, though she barked out a laugh when the girl sullenly began to strum the strings.
It took her a few moments to get into a more upbeat tone, but soft words emerged after a few moments and Taylor closed her eyes soaking in the music with an amused grin on her face. Distant memories of laying in bed with her mother on one side, and her father on the other, singing her songs to silence the thunder during storms ghosted over her mind, but Taylor focused on the present, not letting the past colour this moment.

Chapter End Notes

[[SO THAT WAS A THING. Fun to write, actually. Lyrics and stuff are blatantly stolen and only slightly modified. The song that Victoria segues into at the end is Would you be so kind by Dodie Clark, and a link to that is here. This isn’t an actual interlude, we’ve still got two more of those coming out.

I’ll be releasing one tomorrow at some point that’s going be a single news broadcast, and then four small scenes that are inspired by people watching it at different locations, which should be neat. So that’s for tomorrow. Anyway, I’m gonna get back to my book, hope you lot enjoy the rest of your evening.]]
Interlude 15

Chapter Summary

[[A/N From this chapter were huuuuuuuge, so they're below the cut.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[[Alright. So, typically I don’t usually discuss changes I’m making to canon before doing them, but considering that this is a change that isn’t resultant of HK’s merry march of death across Earth Bet. (More Details on this later.) And more an issue with actual Canon I’m going to level with you all. I’ve made some alterations to Lily’s backstory; the details have very mild spoilers for Ward, but uh, shouldn’t be too bad. You can skip over stuff; if you want, the details aren’t terribly important, just wanted to avoid confusion and stuff later on.]]

So, onto Lily. Fun fact. Lily actually has two entirely different backstories depending on if you’re going from Worm, or from Ward. Near as I can tell, Wilbow rewrote her backstory when he started the March and her merry band of multi-trigger plotline without going back and fixing the old stuff, and now there are two different versions. In one she’s from a broken home where she’s passed around from one parent to the next, to a Surrogate Mother who apparently had her and reneged on the deal to give her away... whatever that means.

Worm - Cell 22.3 said:

“She came from a broken home,” Miss Militia supplied the information instead. “She bounced between her mother, her father and the surrogate mother who had attempted to renege on the deal they’d made and keep her. With the number of times she changed between them and moved, I can’t imagine she has strong ties to the idea of ‘home’. Even within the Wards… New York has five small teams, and she moved between them as she changed residences.”

In the Ward version, She was put into foster care when young, and she had older siblings who weren’t and she encounters one on the subway who’s now homeless and apparently crazy, and that’s who attacks her, nearly kills her by trying to push her in front of a train, leading to her trigger.

Ward - Blinding 11.10 said:
"I was fostered, entered into the system. I had older siblings who weren’t. Subway platform in New York, I get attacked from behind, and it was one of my sisters, homeless, and so-so angry. It was like she lived in a completely different, warped reality, where I was to blame for everything, I’d sold her out, I’d taken something she was owed. She tried to push me but I caught myself, and when she tried again, she pushed other people down onto the tracks while pushing me down to the ground, put my head in the way of any incoming trains."

“March was one of those people on the tracks?” I asked. “Her timing power… and an imminent train?”

Foil shrugged. “All I know is I triggered as the train hit my sister, convinced she’d killed me. March says our third was a friend of my sister, but I barely met the woman, and I didn’t realize why she was important or what she meant when I did.”

You might have noticed, that while not wholly mutually exclusive, these two narratives don’t mix together well. I’d briefly considered just using the ward version and ignoring the earlier worm version, but then I had a more amusing plan. In my continuity, I’m going to blend them. So we start by removing the Surrogate subplot entirely, change Miss Militia’s meaning to the other version of a surrogate mother (i.e; Someone that willingly takes on all or part of the role of mother to another person or animal. Basically Lily’s Foster Mother, who Lily views as a real parent.)

So basically, Lily’s Mother and Father have a trio of girls, Lily being the youngest. Lily’s mother is a drug addict; Lily’s father leaves. Lily’s mother is arrested; all three girls end up in the system. Lily goes through a number of foster homes before ending up in the home of Gertrude Horrocks. Gertie, despite being an older lady, likes Lily and decides to foster her more permanently. Lilly eventually learns to trust Gertie, and they get along well.

Fast forward to three years before canon; Lily is attacked by her sister, nearly dies, her Mother, now ‘clean’ and her Father hear about the death of Lily’s sister and both try to get their other two kids back. They both -hate- each other, and the fight is rough. Both parents and Gertie fight over Lily. Gertie gets primary custodianship, cause she’s not a deadbeat or an ex-con. But the other two get visitation and Lily’s sort of passed around between her parents in a game of tit for tat as they try to use her and her other sister to show them up. This is the Lily that we’ll be dealing with =] Though more details to be revealed below.[]

---

Interlude 15
May 17th, 2011
New York City, New York.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, JudgementOfSolomon
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

♦ Private Messages with Parian

JudgementOfSolomon (Wiki Warrior)
Posted On May 17th 2011:
Hey. Parian, sorry that I've been so quiet all weekend. I've got some good news though. I'm coming to Brockton Bay.

► Parian (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
Like... to visit? I would point out that we're not exactly tourist ready just yet.

JudgementOfSolomon (Wiki Warrior)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
No, I'm moving out there. The Wards were looking for volunteers to transfer onto the ENE team; they'll need a lot of help in the coming months. I volunteered.

► Parian (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
...That's rather big of you, Flechette, but what about your family? Won't you miss them? And what about school? It's only like, the beginning of May, don't you have classes?
Most of the schools here are going to be shut down for a few weeks.

JudgementOfSolomon (Wiki Warrior)
Posted On May 17th 2011:
I'm in a college preparatory school; the Wards pays for it. It uses a college trimester system, so I'm actually done classes now. I'll miss the prom and stuff, but I've not exactly got anyone to go with, so that's no big loss. I sort of implied to the PRT that I wanted to transfer immediately so that I could start college early. I'd already gotten accepted at BBU, but I called the registrar and asked about joining the summer semester. Despite everything, they were rather helpful with it all. It means that I'll be making the transition soon so that I'll be there for the start of the summer Trimester. I've got time thanks to the extension though; my start date isn't for nearly two weeks.

Parian (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
Yeah, they pushed it back a few weeks cause of everything. I've got some friends that'll be in the summer orientation. Still, Flechette, this is a really big commitment, isn't it? You'll be stuck here in the bay until you move up into the Protectorate, and maybe even longer than that. What'll you do about your family? Or your friends? We're not exactly close to New York, which is nothing to say about how dangerous Brockton Bay can be. Are you sure that you know what you're getting into?

‘New York isn’t my home. Not anymore.’ Lily had written the words, and she watched the cursor flashing to their right in the little box on the PHO private chat. She was tempted to send them along, though the inevitable questions from Parian would be… difficult. The young woman sat quietly at the desk, frowning softly at her laptop, idly tapping her fingers on the moulded plastic of the device.

Rather than deleting the message, or sending it, the young woman pushed back from the desk, feeling the wheels of her chair rattling against the wooden floorboards. She spun her chair quickly, using her feet to kick up the spin until the chair itself creaked, and the chair rattled ominously on the floor. Part of her still fell silent listening for that chastising comment from below, hoping that Gertie would tell her off for being reckless but as with every time she’d done it in the last three weeks, there was no reproach, the house sat silent and alone.

Sockled feet slipped free from under her, pushing down against the hardwood and she stood, walking away from the chair. She dodged around the few barely filled boxes that covered the floor and dresser in her room, walking past her open closet and out into the darkened remainder of the house. The young girl frowned and paused as she caught a familiar whiff of aftershave. Instead of continuing on to the kitchen, as she’d been intending, she slowly pushed open the door next to her own, staring in at the immaculately kept bedroom.

The scent was stronger here in the bedroom. Lily had once asked Gertie what it was; she’d been shocked to find out that it was the aftershave that Gertie's late husband Arthur had worn. The older
woman had spritzed it on her blankets after washing them because it made her feel safe and helped her sleep. Lily had pretended that she hadn’t seen the tears on the woman’s face as she told her this. Lily hadn’t understood then, why those same tears had always come to the woman’s eyes whenever she talked of Arthur. Now, staring at the perfectly made bed with the dark medical equipment around it, Lily felt her eyes burning, and she understood.

Moving away from the room, Lily took care, gently closing the door and walking down the hall past the guest rooms and to the stairs. She descended the stairs carefully, walking through the sitting room and past the small lounge, making her way into the kitchen. Lily carefully flipped on the lights and walked to the fridge. She’d filled it up herself, so there was nothing terribly filling in it, but she found a package of hot dogs and moved to set some cooking, turning on the toaster oven and heating up some buns as they cooked.

She did everything she could to avoid looking at the four documents neatly spaced on the counter. She didn’t need to look at them though to know what they were. She’d spent long enough agonizing over each that she could recite most of them from memory.

One was a letter that she had opened, it was from the PRT expressing their condolences for her loss, and thanking her for her interest in the transfer program. The letter basically told her everything that she needed to do, and where she needed to be to get on her flight and be brought out. They’d arranged everything for her from housing to transferring her accounts considering the desperate need.

The next was a letter from Gertrude’s Lawyer explaining that while he understood the nature of her loss, Gertie’s will had been straightforward about what was to be done with the house and the rest of her estate and that she needed to contact him immediately so that they could begin the matter of getting her affairs in order.

The third document was an unfolded document in a leather folio that started with the words; ‘I Gertrude Horrocks, of New York, New York, being of sound mind, do make, publish and declare this to be my Last Will and Testament, hereby revoking all previous Wills and Codicils…’ She’d never made it further into the document than that, and it sat open on the table. Even though she avoided looking she could almost feel the words drifting off the page and burning their way into her back. She did her best to ignore the sensation while she cooked the food.

Her mind drifted to the last document on the table. She glanced at the table out of the corner of her eye and saw it right where she’d left it. It sat next to the will where it’d been for the two long weeks since she’d returned from the funeral. A cream envelope with her name written on the face in Gertie’s handwriting, a letter that she’d not even been able to open as of yet. She studied it quietly for a few moments and let her shoulder slump quietly as she turned silently back to her food, watching until the hot dogs had started to split before removing them from the water and placing them into the toasted buns.

The sound of her buzzing accompanied her return to her room, and she let out a sigh as she carefully set her food down on her desk, walking over to the headboard of her bed. She carefully tugged the charger out of her phone before flipping it over and peering at the number of missed calls and messages. Both of her parents had been blowing the phone up in an attempt to convince her that she should come and stay with them.

Father played at being a dutiful dad, that he had her best interests in heart, but Lily understood that this was all about proving that he had been right about her mother all along. Proving to everyone, her mother included, that if given a choice no one else would have stayed with either. The messages from her mother were laced with concern about her being alone in that big dreary house with the
ghosts of that 'dreadful woman,' but Lily too understood that under it all it was about her mother proving to herself that she had recovered. To show that her incarceration had meant something good for her life. That it had been worth something.

Lily drooped down to sit on her bed, holding her phone with a loose hand, staring at the glowing screen as a message from her father came in, and then a minute later one from her mother. One, then the other, Lily had learned long ago that this meant that they were texting each other. Fighting with each other, and sending messages to her while they waited for the other to respond. She stared at the phone quietly and felt something welling up in her chest, her eyes burning quietly as she wished again that Gertie was here to tell her that it wasn’t all her fault.

But Gertie was gone. There was no one to tell Lily that this wasn’t her fault, that her parent’s hatred for each other didn’t hinge on her. There was no one to tell her that they loved her because they loved her, not because of what she could get them, or what she could prove for them. There was no one to ask her how her day was when she came home or to patch her up with soft curses after she had another encounter with March. There was no one to cook dinner with, or to sit around with when it rained to tell her stories.

As the tears started to run down her face once more, Lily wondered how long it would take before she could look at a cup of tea without hearing Gertie’s voice in her head, the woman complaining about how hard it was to find a good cup of tea outside of China Town despite Lily knowing without a doubt that the woman hated green tea and only drank it cause Lily herself loved it. She found herself laughing wetly at the ludicrous idea that she’d only understood her heritage because of the seventy-year-old Jewish lady that had taken her in.

Gertie had been there for her every step of the way. Like when she’d come home in tears at eleven, because the other students had mocked her when she hadn’t had anything to share when the teacher had been discussing each child’s heritage. Gertie had taught her how to fold origami after spending her days learning from the women at a local nail salon. Gertie had been the one to walk with her each weekend as she visited the Japanese culture center two miles from their home. Gertie had been the one that sat with her every weekend and learned about Lily’s culture with her.

Gertie had been at her left as she’d nearly vomited the first time that she’d eaten wasabi, and Gertie had shown her a few tricks for handling her kanji brush when she’d been learning to write Japanese. Gertie, the tiny Jewish lady, had spent four months speaking broken Japanese with her until they were both skilled enough to talk with proper grammar. So much of Lily’s life was tied up in the older woman, and everything she loved reminded her of what she’d lost. She reached over the grasped the sealed letter from beneath the plate and held it in her hands quietly, tracing her fingers over the letters in that familiar handwriting.

She considered the letter quietly, before slowly setting it on her bedside and standing. She walked over to the computer, telling herself that she couldn’t continue to wallow in the past like this, how she needed to move on. Filled with determination, she leaned down over the laptop and moved to gently tap a few keys, studying the words as they filled the box. She took a moment to consider the message before hitting enter and sending it careening out into cyberspace. She took her food over to the bed, perching on it pulling that letter into her lap and cracking open the ridiculous wax seal on the back.

Opening the letter, Lily carefully drew out several pages of cream coloured paper. She considered the writing, and after taking a breath to steady the rapid beat of her heart, she moved to read the words she’d been avoiding for weeks.
‘Lily, if you’re reading this, then I’ve passed on.

What a way to start a letter, morbid, I know, but considering my prognosis, this is certainly a possibility. I hope that I managed to last until you were eighteen, that I got to see you graduate, but if not, know that I’m proud of you. I love you with all my heart, Lily. You’re the daughter that me and Arthur were never blessed with, and you’ve made my final years warm with life and joy, and for that, I want to thank you.

I know that you miss me, love, and I’m sorry that I won’t be with you, but I’m with Arthur now, and I want you to know that I’ll always be with you in your heart. As you’re the only family that I’ve got left, I’ve instructed my lawyer to liquidate anything that you don’t want to ensure that you’ve got a proper nest egg to ensure your education with, if you’re frugal with it, you might even have a chance to get started in your career.

That’s right, I said career. I’ve been trying for months to have this chat with you about the cape business. You’re a beautiful young woman with a brilliant mind, and I’ve never seen you more depressed then you’ve been as you attempted to fit in with the various wards teams.

Every time you came home from a patrol or a meeting, you did so with a bit less of that light that I’ve come to know and love in you. You might have thought that I didn’t know about the tears you shed when they transferred you from team to team, my dove, but I always knew when you cried. Before all this, you used to have a life, you used to have friends and becoming a Ward seems to have robbed you of that.

You needn’t give up your future as a Hero, but that doesn’t have to be all that you are. You’re so much smarter than me, Lily, and you’ve got such a large heart. You could do so much good for the world, and you needn’t do it with that arbalest in your hands. As a teenager, I used to look forward to when you would come to me with a different career suddenly in your mind. Once when you were fourteen you spent four months convinced that you would be a environmental scientist. That you would figure out how to save the world from climate change.

Personally, though my legs hated it, I loved the time that you wanted to be a Social Worker. The volunteer work might have been quite the strain on my back and legs, but I’ve never been so proud of you as I was when I watched you tutoring those children. You had so many of them wrapped around your finger, and the tears in their eyes when you had transfer schools because of the Wards program nearly broke both of our hearts.

You’ve got a big heart Lily, and you deserve to share that with the world. There’s so much about you to love, and for some reason, the capes around you can’t see that. Take the chance that college provides you. Get away from New York, the Protectorate has offered to pay, and a new time might accept you better, Lily. You deserve to be accepted and appreciated for who you are. That it’d get you away from those two monsters the courts’ claimed were you parents is merely a pleasant side effect.

I wish that I could write for days, Lily. There are so many stories that I wish to share. Stories of myself and Arthur, or stories of you that you know but I want to tell you, but there’s not enough paper in the world. So I’ll just finish with this. Lily, I want you to understand that you’re not alone. You might not have been the daughter of my body,
but you are my daughter. You have family, and I’m so happy that my heritage lives on through you. I am so proud that you’re a part of me, and that I got to be a part of your life, no matter how brief that part was.

You’re going to do amazing things, Lily, if you can’t trust in that yourself, then I want you to trust in me because I have always, and will always believe in you, my daughter.

With you always,
Gertrude ‘Gertie’ Horrocks

Lily set the letter aside when the tears falling from her eyes made the words blurry, she curled up on her side, burying her face into the pillow on her bed and ignoring the pings from her phone, shutting out the world as she clutched the letter to her chest and wept for everything that she'd lost.

JudgementOfSolomon (Wiki Warrior)
Posted On May 17th 2011:
New York’s not my home, not anymore. I had family that I was living with, but they passed recently. And the Wards program made it hard to keep friends that weren’t capes, and I don’t get along well with the capes around here. There’s so many of the wards, five teams, and everyone is so focused on making it big. Being the next Legend, or Alexandria, they don’t understand how the fighting can get to you as time goes on. I think a fresh start could be helpful…

Chapter End Notes

[[I literally just invented Gertie for this chapter. And I feel bad about killing her off. She seemed like a nice lady. *Frowns* Anyway. Lily is on the board. It was interesting writing Parian’s comments here because she’s looking out for Lily, trying to protect her from getting in over her head, which is an odd difference from canon. Anyway. I am looking forward to the feedback. 6.1 will up tomorrow sometime, as it’s my day off.

It takes place on May 26th, ten days after Leviathan and near the end of the Truce. It’ll start off with an Amy perspective. She sneaks out to check on Taylor since Taylor hasn’t shown up to training and she’s worried, and she walks in on Taylor and Victoria about to settle down to a movie night. Should be fun. =]
ALSO: Lily's PHO Name is a reference to something. Sort of. I think she'd have chosen it cause of how her BioParents fought over her.]

EDIT: MISSED A PARAGRAPH AFTER THE LETTER FROM GERTIE. PUT THAT BACK IN. ]}
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Superior1
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

 In: Boards ► Capes ► America ► Brockton Bay
 Acree (Original Poster)
 Posted On May 10th 2011:
 Hey guys. Just want to be the first to announce that New Wave's very own Glory Girl is out patrolling with their newest member Vigil and is rocking a new outfit. Check it out, what do you guys think. [Photos]

(Showing page 3 of 5)

► bothad
Replied On May 12th 2011:
The new look looks sweet. Really makes her look mature.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On May 12th 2011:
But what about the under the skirt shots!?

► AverageAlexandros (Cape Husband)
Replied On May 12th 2011:
I think the new outfit is great just because people like Void can't take pictures like that anymore.

▶ Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On May 12th 2011:
Has anyone else got the feeling that something's changed about GG besides the new look?

▶ Vista (Wards ENE) (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 12th 2011:
It's not just you.

▶ GstringGirl
Replied On May 12th 2011:
You sure it's not just the costume? She looks the same to me otherwise.

▶ Ekul
Replied On May 12th 2011:
It's not just the look. It's like..something feels different when you see her in person compared to before.

▶ Glory Girl (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 12th 2011:
Just want to say, thanks to all your support about my new look. I have to thank Parian for making it for me and for designing it.

▶ Acree (Original Poster)
Replied On May 12th 2011:
It was designed and made by Parian? Awesome! I wish I had enough money to buy fancy clothes from her. Also, Glory Girl answered on my thread!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

■

♦ Topic: Leviathan in the Bay
In: Boards ► News ► America ► Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On May 15th 2011:
As everyone no doubt knows, Leviathan attacked Brockton Bay today. Unusually, the defenders got more prep time because they were able to learn of its imminent attack before hand. I think we are all hoping for the best for whatever happens.

(Showing page 1 of 15)
XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied On May 15th 2011:
I'm getting to the shelter as quickly as possible and hoping the city is still here and we
don't die.

Brocktonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On May 15th 2011:
Everyone is. Everyone except for the capes who'll fight of course.

Acree
Replied On May 15th 2011:

Laotsunn (Kyushu Survivor)
Replied On May 15th 2011:
I wish you the best of luck. And I also hope that damn lizard at least gets roughed up a bit.

ArchmageEin
Replied On May 15th 2011:
It might. Remember, Lung's there. We might see a rematch.

Chilldrizzle
Replied On May 15th 2011:
That might actually be more terrifying. Can you imagine what it must be like for the
defenders to have a front row seat to that fight?

Ekul
Replied On May 15th 2011:
That might make it worse. Last time they fought, Kyushu happened. I don't want BB to
sink to the bottom of the ocean. It's a shithole, but it's still home.

Antigone
Replied On May 15th 2011:
This is only speculation. It's entirely possible that Lung will sit this out. He did lose last
time.

Good Ship Morpheus
Replied On May 15th 2011:
I'm honestly not sure which is worse: Lung showing up or Lung not showing up.
In: Boards ► News ► America ► Brockton Bay

Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On May 15th 2011:
As everyone no doubt knows, Leviathan attacked Brockton Bay today. Unusually, the defenders got more prep time because they were able to learn of its imminent attack before hand. I think we are all hoping for the best for whatever happens.

(Showing page 27 of 30)

► Answer Key
Replied On May 15th 2011:
Does anyone from BB know what happened? The footage stopped just as Leviathan smashed that building.

► Laser Augment
Replied On May 15th 2011:
Dude, pretty sure that's where all the healers were. That's not good.

► Kriketz
Replied On May 15th 2011:
Oh man, oh man, oh man. Does this mean they're all screwed? No healers means all injured can only evacuate or die.

► Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On May 15th 2011:
All we can do is wait for news. It sucks, but it's an Endbringer. What can we do?

► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On May 15th 2011:
The battle is over. Details will be released at a later date.

► Aloha
Replied On May 15th 2011:
Don't leave us in suspense. TELL US WHAT HAPPENED!

► Feychick
Replied On May 15th 2011:
What do you guys think? How many did we lose and how many were people we actually care about?

► Lasersmile
Replied On May 15th 2011:
That's kinda callous Feychick. It was an Endbringer battle, everyone who died, died fighting a monster. No need to be cynical about it.

► Loyal
Replied On May 15th 2011:
Let's just wait for the official announcement. It should only take a few days.
Topic: Leviathan in the Bay
In: Boards ▶ News ▶ America ▶ Brockton Bay

Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On May 15th 2011:
As everyone no doubt knows, Leviathan attacked Brockton Bay today. Unusually, the defenders got more prep time because they were able to learn of its imminent attack before hand. I think we are all hoping for the best for whatever happens.

(Showing page 35 of 37)

► Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
Okay guys. Here it is. The PRT has released the details on what happened in the Endbringer battle in Brockton Bay. For the full video please watch [here].

Here are the highlights:
- Armsmaster and Dragon developed a program that can help predict future Endbringer attacks.
- Vigil was able to defend the healers by making a barrier around them all.
- Parian of all people got a few good hits on and even mauled an eye using some scary looking dolls.
- A mystery cape named Ares showed up and started wrecking Leviathan's shit.
- Leviathan pretty much tried to run away from Ares, with Ares displaying Triumvirate levels of power against it.
- Somehow, Ares made all the capes share minds and the defenders were able to almost kill Leviathan when Scion showed up and carried him away.
- Shortly afterwards, Ares died due to a side-effect of his powers.

► Mane Magenta
Replied On May 17th 2011:
That's crazy! Vigil defending against Leviathan, Parian getting a good one on Leviathan, Scion **saving** Leviathan.

► Thatdude
Replied On May 17th 2011:
He might have just been trying to get him away from the city. It's Scion, why else would he do it?

► Xyloloup
Replied On May 17th 2011:
They had that monster dead to rights when Scion showed up. I don't know why he did what he did, but I think we just lost a golden opportunity to finally kill one of these things.

► Aloha
Replied On May 17th 2011:
Has anyone ever heard of Ares before. I mean, he went farther against Leviathan than even Lung did. So how come he seems to be an unknown?

► Laotsunn (Kyushu Survivor)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
That was the greatest video I have ever seen. I am saving it because I love everything that happened to that monster. From shish kebab-ed, to getting melted alive, to its binding. I pray for Ares’ soul, for he has brought joy to all survivors of Kyushu.

► Dawgsmiles (Veteran Member)
Replied On May 17th 2011:
No, never. There has never been a cape named Ares, or at least none with that level of power. I wonder where the heck he came from.

► Deimos
Replied On May 17th 2011:
He died though. If he hadn't, I bet he would have been front and center for every following Endbringer battle.

► Forgotten Creator
Replied On May 17th 2011:
if anyone from BB can read this, pls. give us more info. We want everything that there is to know.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 33, 34, 35, 36, 37

♦ Topic: Leviathan in the Bay
In: Boards ► News ► America ► Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On May 15th 2011:
As everyone no doubt knows, Leviathan attacked Brockton Bay today. Unusually, the defenders got more prep time because they were able to learn of its imminent attack before hand. I think we are all hoping for the best for whatever happens.

(Showing page 42 of 46)
**Bagrat** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Replied On May 18th 2011:
Ares is now confirmed to be one Danny Hebert, father of Taylor Hebert aka Vigil. That's right, Vigil is a Second Gen cape and the daughter of the cape who kicked Leviathan's ass. Does this mean that she'll one day be able to do what he did?

**XxVoid_CowboyxX**
Replied On May 18th 2011:
I've seen him before, and he never gave off the impression of being an unstoppable badass. RIP Mr. Hebert.

**GstringGirl**
Replied On May 18th 2011:
That poor girl. What will happen to her now? Is she going to be taken in by New Wave?

**Divide**
Replied On May 18th 2011:
This is sad, yes, but I need to ask this to get it out of my mind. Ares was super powerful, and his daughter has powers similar to him. Are we going to see Vigil on the front lines of Endbringer battles any time soon?

**Whitecollar** (Cape Wife)
Replied On May 18th 2011:
Show some decency. The girl just lost her father. We shouldn’t be talking about her going out to fight, we should be giving our condolences.

**Deadman**
Replied On May 18th 2011:
You have to admit though, it is a valid question. Call me insensitive, but I want to know if the girl who has the same powers as the man who near single-handedly fought Leviathan is going to fight Endbringers. Everyone wants to see a victory against them. And I mean a decisive one, where the monster dies in the end.

**Glory Girl** (Verified Cape)
Replied On May 18th 2011:
Vigil is currently grieving. All we ask is that people leave her alone for now so that she can let the emotions take their course. Thank you.

**SuperTutor** (Moderator)
Replied On May 18th 2011:
You all heard Glory Girl. Give the girl some space and privacy please.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46
Chapter Summary

[[Alright folks, welcome to Reconstitution, we’ve finally thrown off the final shackles of the canon, and we’re making our merry way out into the wild unknown. This first chapter and 6.2 will be a bit of a palette cleanser, so there won’t be a lot of action, but have no fear that will indeed be coming, this is more about catching up with everyone, so I’ll stop here, and let you enjoy the ride.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 26th, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

Amy could admit to herself that this probably hadn’t been her best idea. She knew that she shouldn’t look behind her, but she was listening closely enough to hear the sounds of footsteps on the ground in her wake. She hadn’t expected to have any trouble getting to Taylor’s, but it hadn’t occurred to her that the buses might not be running all over the city. The ones near her aunt’s home had been up and running within three days, but she’d ended up at the main terminal, and the various notices had required that she take a circuitous path with several transfers to get close enough to the docks that it wouldn’t be a burden to walk the rest of the way.

Now, she could admit that she probably should have turned around then and gone home, but instead, she’d attempted to press on. The buses had dropped her reasonably close to the edge of downtown and where the Docks started, and the bus stop was actually one that Taylor’s running route typically crossed. Everything had seemed fine when she glanced out of the buses windows as they were pulling up.

Admittedly, when she had to assure the bus driver that she was safe to get off here, she probably should have reconsidered. Instead, she pressed on; after all, she was a girl on a mission. She hurried her steps a touch, not enough to show that she was worried, doing her best to seem that she was just in a hurry and unaware of her pursuit. She tucked her hands into the pockets of her jacket and frowned quietly at the road.

Not for the first time, Amy briefly wondered if this was the best idea that she’d had. She knew that she was probably overstepping some bounds, but she was deeply worried about Taylor. The other girl hadn’t been responding to her text messages; she hadn’t been attending any of the team building sessions, she hadn’t been sighted anywhere according to PHO. Near as Amy could tell the girl had holed herself up alone in her house, and she was shutting out the world.

Finding a reason for the visit had been easy, and sneaking out and getting on the bus even easier. It wasn’t until she was so close to the finish line that she’d begun to reconsider. Needing some time after a loss like that wasn’t unreasonable, and Mel had told her that people handled grief in different ways. She didn’t want to intrude on that, but Amy was concerned with how little concern the rest of
New Wave had. Everyone said that Taylor would be okay, and Amy wondered if no one else really understood that under that veneer of maturity that Taylor wore she was still human.

Everyone that she mentioned her concerns too implied that Taylor was safe at home with people around her that cared about her, but Amy couldn’t understand how that was. Amy knew that Taylor was close to her PRT handler, but that wasn’t the same as having friends and family around you when you suffered a loss like this.

Amy remembered how distraught Vicky had been when they’d lost their grandfather. Victoria had suffered greatly at his death, and it’d taken weeks before she could sleep without crying, and Amy remembered holding Victoria, consoling her sister. The man had been much closer to Victoria then her; Aunt Sarah once confessed that the man had seen something of himself in Victoria, and he’d taught her an outlet for her anger that he’d lacked in his youth. Aunt Sarah had imagined that he’d hope to help Victoria avoid the mistakes that he’d made when he was younger, and Amy saw a small glimmer of that in her sister since she’d begun training with Taylor.

Her ruminations were cut short as she hurried along the edge of a park. She had been hustling along the tall solid hedge when a figure emerged from a break in the foliage before her, his rotund frame wreathed in baggy clothing. The fake gold that he wore and the generally poor condition of his clothing hinted that he’d once been a merchant. His hands were in his pockets, but Amy could tell by the bulge within that there was something there. The fat man grinned stupidly at her, his eyes rheumy with something, and he didn’t speak. Instead, it was one of the figures at her back that moved to speak.

“Girlie! Where are you going in such a hurry?” The words were spoken with a thick regional accent, and Amy paused, glancing over her shoulder at the lean figure in the middle of the trio that had been following her. All of them were almost as filthy as the large man before her, dressed in equally baggy clothing and adorned in similar fake chains. They all approached, circling around her and forcing her back into the hedge, each of the men staring hungrily at her.

“You’re an awfully pretty young thing to be wandering these streets alone at night, why anything might happen. You’re lucky that me and my friends here decided to shadow you and keep you safe. You should be grateful.” The man stepped forward, leering at her and Amy stepped back, feeling the rough leaves against her jacket. She looked around at the encroaching figures and swallowed nervously.

“Well… It’s good to see that there are such civically minded people out in the city still, and thank you, but I can take care of myself.” The man’s eyes narrowed, and Amy bit her lip when his lips pulled back from his teeth with a snarl. The two figures behind him advanced quietly with him, and he spoke with a darker voice.

“Well, you see. Me and the boys here, we already went out of our way escorting you this far. Maybe you let us have whatever you got in your pockets, and we don’t try to take our payment in… other ways.” The man leered her up and down as he stepped into her personal bubble and Amy felt a flicker of rage flowing through her at the insinuation. The men chuckling behind him implied that this was a common tactic of theirs. Amy felt something flicker in her, and she flinched back. She felt the leaves and the branches of the bush behind her scraping over her hand and her power reached out.

She should have put them to sleep, she should have just touched each one and forced them into unconsciousness, but something in her wondered if she’d survive that. Flashes of the dark dreams she’d been having, the flickers of monsters and dark powers whispering through her mind and she
changed her intent. The thought prompted her powers, information ghosting into her mind, telling her what to do.

She pushed back and her power moved. She’d never seen it manipulate mass with such speed, the trees spread apart and shifted, allowing her to vanish into them before closing around in front of her. She heard the confused sounds and she touched the branches, reaching out along the trees. The roots were all connected and she felt her power spreading touching tree after tree. She began to adjust them, taking a bit of mass from each, focusing it in front of her. As she worked, she heard the men outside cursing and speaking.

“Wh-Where’d she fucking go?” The slim man was fast to respond, his voice thick with irritation. The sound of him slapping someone was heard then his voice cut in with nervous irritation. “She’s a fucking parahuman, or she’s got one around here protecting her. Find the bitch.” He growled quietly and the man charged off. Amy stood there, listening as he paced around, arguing with himself. She heard the men running on the other side of the hedge and she waited.

She waited till they’d met back up where she’d disappeared, and listened as they spoke to each other, taking in each word quietly.

“Fucking bitch must have run, couldn’t see any sign of her in the park, and there’s nothing around. We should just. Try again, Jason. Find another girl. Maybe one old enough to actually-” Amy didn’t let the goon finish, a vine lashed out of the bush, wrapping itself around the man and dragged him screaming into the hedge. She heard the gasps of fear and then the sound of rustling cloth.

“You fucking...freak! You let Diego fucking go or I’ll cap your fucking ass.” Amy couldn’t see the lanky man, Jason the others had called him, but she could hear the fear in his voice. The was a moment of silence and Amy listened as Jason nervously fidgeted a few feet from her, her focus on the writhing mass in front of her. She shaped it, and it wasn’t elegant but it was human-sized, if skinnier. Human-shaped if a bit out of proportion. It had a head and a simulacrum of a voice box, but it was mostly animated wood.

She studied the creature as she shaped amber into eyes in its head and coated its body in hanging moss. She gave it a face that was twisted in fury and then she heard the gunshot, glancing to the left as a bullet whizzed through the trees. She glanced toward the hole and felt her lips pressing into a line.

“Th-That was a fucking warning, bitch!” He snarled again and then Amy released her hold on her creation, watching as the shambler burst from the hedge in front of her. She heard the strangled scream of Jason as the creature smashed into him and lifted him off the stone. She emerged in its wake, watching as her creation stood to its full seven-foot height, and held Jason by his neck a further 3 feet off the ground. The monster ripped the gun from Jason’s hand and she heard the groan of metal as it was crushed.

The remaining two, armed with only knives turned and fled into the night and she stared after them. She considered sending her construct after them, hunting them down with the beast. She shook her head in irritation before waving at her construct and watching as it lowered the man it had captured into arms length of her. Amy stared up at the man as his face paled, and he stared at her.

Amy shifted on her feet and smiled innocently at the man, her dark eyes flashing as she stared at him.

“Sorry. Did you want that payment then?” She watched as he paled even further before struggling against the creature that bound him. Amy touched the hand that held him, causing the beast to release
him. She watched the man stumble as he was released, falling and rolling on the concrete. It took a moment for him to get his feet under him and he looked at her for a moment, staring in dawning horror at her monstrous creation before turning and running down the street, trailing after his fleeing friends.

Amy glanced and let out a sigh at the broken trail of bush and she reached out, touching her creation on the arm. She watched as it walked back whence it came and seemed to vanish into the dirt. The hedge slowly repaired itself before spitting out the shaking form of the oversized goon that the others had named Diego. Amy took a moment to consider the man, watching as he curled up in the fetal position, gripping himself in terror and she rolled her eyes.

She briefly considered calling in her assault and self-defence, but seeing as she was out without permission, she figured that the men would get a pass this time. She’d certainly scared them out of doing anything dangerous this night, and she could mention their hunting ground to someone come morning and see about catching them. With her decision made, she carefully walked around Diego’s shaking form, resuming her trek to Taylor’s.

Little danger was to be found on the rest of her trek, and Amy quickly moved up the street. Her eyes picked out the familiar PRT Van parked a few doors down, but they didn’t accost her as she crossed the street and approached the house. She walked up to the driveway before crossing along the path and ascending onto the steps. There was a dim light shining through the living room window, and Amy could see a brighter light from deeper in the house, through the frosted glass of the door.

Amy considered the door for a few moments, and for a brief second she considered just turning around and leaving, coming back tomorrow if Taylor didn’t show up to orientation, but as she glanced around the darkened street, she firmed her resolved and knocked. When nothing came of it, she stood in silence for a few moments before she admitted to herself that she could have knocked louder. Taking a breath, she raised a hand moving to do it again, rapping solidly on the door and blinking when the door creaked open of its own accord, having not been completely latched apparently.

She stood in the doorway the faint sounds of a microwave running in the kitchen reaching her. She considered the empty entrance for a moment before stepping in, though she halted in place as a familiar voice called out.

“If you’re here to rob a house, I have got some bad news for you-” The words cut off, and Amy glanced up the stairs. Her eyes ghosted over the bare feet, and over those damnable Armstrong pyjama’s moving up and over one of Taylor’s simple button-down shirts. When her eyes ghosted over blonde hair confusion washed through her, though that evaporated as she glanced past the toothbrush in her girl’s mouth found her eyes resting on the familiar blue orbs of her sister.

“Amy?” Vicky’s eyes widened as she stared down at her and she started descending the stairs.

“Amy, what’re you doing here?” Amy glanced from her sister, toward the kitchen, watching as Taylor emerged from the Kitchen staring at her in confusion. Something flickered in Amy, and she took a nervous step back at the swell of anger that washed through her, the feeling subsiding almost immediately to leave a bitter tang of jealousy in her mind. She didn’t speak, and she just turned and stepped out of the house, closing the door fully in her wake.
So, on an intellectual level, Amy could admit that she should have put this together before. Her mother had told her that Vicky was staying with a friend. Dean and her friends from school were sending her increasingly worried texts about Vicky’s ongoing absence, and Amy had known, from her aunt, that Vicky was actually doing patrols in the city, despite most of the Wards having been told to stand down. That being said, walking in on your sister wearing your crush’s clothing was a bit of a shock, she admitted to herself as she sat on the steps of the porch, staring out at the PRT Van that sat a short distance away.

It’d only been recently that she’d admitted that she’d had the crush, and it’d taken Mel to coax it out of her as they’d been talking about Amy’s experiences in the Endbringer attack. She’d been utterly terrified for Taylor every step of the way, and she had been so angry with Taylor after everything.

Taylor had constantly put herself in front of so much danger with nary a care in the world. Pushing her thoughts aside, Amy quietly tugged a loose thread from her sweater as she stared down at the tile path before her, letting out a long sigh. The sound of the door gently creaking open behind her and soft footsteps had her quietly muttering a prayer that Vicky wasn’t coming to talk to her.

The black pyjama pants and the work boots at the ends of them answered her prayers, and Amy glanced over to see Taylor taking a seat on the edge of the porch next to her, tucking her hands into a blazer that she was wearing and pulling it tight around her form to ward off a chill.

“Amy.” the words were curious, and Amy frowned rubbing at her neck quietly. Taylor took a breath, but before she could speak, Amy quickly charged in speaking softly.

“Sorry about just walking into your house like that. I knocked hard, and the door just swung open, I promise.” She noticed Taylor’s confused look before the girl chuckled. Rather than letting her respond, Amy quickly rushed on. “I came by cause I was worried. We’ve got orientation tomorrow, and I wanted to make sure that you were going to go. I figured I could swing past tonight and we could go together.” Amy said it all in one breath, and the other girl offered her an impressed look before speaking.

“Oh. Yeah, of course. I wouldn’t mind going with you. But you didn’t have to come over unannounced; you could have sent me a message. Victoria would have come and gotten you.” The girl’s words were soft, and Amy rolled her eyes before pulling out her phone, scrolling through her contacts and opening her conversation with Taylor. She scrolled to the end where nearly 15 unanswered messages were spanning the last week and a half; then she handed the phone to the other girl. She saw the sheepish look on her face as she read the final two messages which were both about that very thing. Taylor let out a sigh and handed the phone back.

“I suppose I could be a bit better about keeping up with my phone. Sorry about that. It’s been a difficult week.” She considered Amy for a moment before glancing around quietly. “How did you get here? Did Laserdream drop you off? She usually doesn’t miss a chance to comment on how ridiculous I look.” Amy coughed nervously and glanced off to the side. When she didn’t answer, Taylor let out a soft sigh, but rather than lecturing her over it, she changed the subject, slipping to her feet. “Well, come on in. We already had dinner, but there are leftovers if you’re hungry. We’re going to be watching a movie, apparently.”

Taylor moved over and opened the door, and Amy followed her in, taking a moment to push the door closed fully and pushing the lock into place before giving Taylor a look that prompted a roll of the eyes from the other girl. The sound of Victoria’s voice drew her focus and Amy headed toward the kitchen, rounding the corner to see Victoria holding a phone to her ear and speaking into it
calmly.

“...yeah. She just got here. Oh, her and Taylor have been discussing this for like a week, they want to be the cool kids at the orientation, come in on each other’s arms and all that. Yeah. I’m not sure, to be honest, she could have called me, and I’d have come given her a ride.” She spoke slowly at stared at her directly as she said it and Amy was tempted to point out that no one had actually told her that Victoria was here, but she remained silent with her arms crossed. Victoria tilted her head to one side, listening silently for a few moments before speaking again. “Yeah. Course. Thanks. Here she is.” The girl gave her a ‘look’ and handed her a phone.

Amy took the phone and rubbed her face, putting it to her ear and making her way out of the kitchen. The sound of faint whispering in her wake was concerning, but she made her way to the living room, glancing at the television, the paused commercial on it being the source of the glow that she’d seen from the street. She lifted the phone to her ear and spoke softly.

“Hello, Aunt Sarah.” The words were spoken quickly and Amy braced herself for shouting or screaming through the tired sigh was a bit of a surprise, and Amy felt her shoulders slumping as she waited for the woman to speak.

“Amy.” The word was laced with disappointment and Amy sighed as she took a seat on the couch. “You’re nearly 17 years old, and you’re not my daughter, Amy. Considering the kinds of things that you’ve dealt with, I’m happy to treat you like the adult that you will soon be, but that means that you need to act like one. If you want to go out and see your friends, that’s fine, but you should tell me where you’re going. As your current Guardian, I need to know that you’re safe so that your mom doesn’t kill me if something happens to you. As your team leader, I need to know where you are in case we get called into active duty.”

Amy continued to shrink as she listened to her aunt speak.

“That also means taking care of yourself and not doing anything stupid, like apparently taking the bus there? Amy if you’d just asked someone we’d have gotten you a lift.” She spoke quietly, and Amy flinched before speaking softly.

“I was worried about Taylor, she’s been really quiet and hasn’t been attending sessions, and no one else seemed worried that we haven’t heard from her,” Amy spoke, and she rubbed her face when her aunt cut back in.

“Amy, Taylor has been dealing with the rest of the team. Victoria’s staying there with her, and we’ve all been stopping in to check on them. Myself, your mother and father, and Neil have all been at that house at different points over the last two weeks; if you’d bothered to ask about this, we’d have told you.” Amy rubbed tiredly at her forehead before speaking softly.

“You’re right. Sorry. I just. I get in my head sometimes when I think that people don’t listen to me. I’m sorry that I worried you.” The words were soft, and Amy held her breath. Apologizing was always hard for her, admitting that she’d made a mistake, or needed help or just flat out didn’t know what she was doing was a challenge for the healer. Mel seemed to think it was related to her self-esteem, but Amy suspected it had more to do with how her previous accidents had been treated when she and Carol hadn’t been as close. Either way, the words seemed to shock her Aunt into silence for a few moments.

“I-” Her aunt took a moment before continuing. “That’s big of you Amy. I’m glad that you made it there safely. Victoria said that you’d be spending the night, and you’ve got your orientation at BBU tomorrow, right?” Amy hummed her assent, and her aunt continued. “Alright. Arcadia knows about
that, and you’ve got the day off, so enjoy the day. If you want to do something with Taylor and Vicky after just call here when you want to come home, I’ll have Crystal come get you when you want to come home.”

Amy nodded quietly and then realizing that her aunt couldn’t see her she spoke quickly. “Alright, Aunt Sarah, I’ll see you soon. Goodnight.” She waited until the sentiment had been returned before turning off the phone and heading back to the kitchen. She paused in the doorway, watching Victoria leaning against the counter near where Taylor was adding something to a bowl of popcorn and tossing it. The pair were speaking softly, and Amy was struck the tableau they painted.

The gentle concern on Vicky’s face was odd, as was just how normal she looked. Something about her sister struck a somewhat dissonant cord in her lately. Seeing her like this, dressed in Taylor’s over-sized clothes made it all the more profound. Her hair seemed duller, flatter, and her features were so very mundane. Amy couldn’t point out anything that was ‘different’ about Vicky, but she seemed so much less then she’d been. Her sister reached out a hand and gently touched Taylor’s shoulder, and Amy watched as the gentle sadness that still hung around Taylor’s form seemed to lessen for a moment as she flashed a smile at Amy’s sister.

Amy coughed, and the pair glanced over at her smiling. She was surprised when they didn’t jump apart, and she walked over, handing Vicky her phone back. She watched as the girl checked it before smoothly tucking it away and glancing back at her.

“The popcorn’s ready. The TV’s primed up, it’s time for movies!” Vicky’s eager tone was infectious, and Amy found herself grinning a bit as the older girl charged past her toward the Living room. The healer glanced at Taylor, seeing the bemused look on her face as Vicky vanished and she blinked when Taylor handed her the bowl of popcorn. She turned to follow the black haired girl toward the television ignoring Vicky’s moans about hurrying.

“What’re we watching?” She asked curiously and chuckled at Taylor’s playful eye roll.

“Your sister discovered that I’ve never seen Princess Bride. She’s decided that we must rectify this. It took her nearly three hours to find a convenience store near here that both rented movies and was open, and she was lucky to find it on the shelves, so apparently, that’s what we’re doing.” She vanished into the living room, and Amy followed, letting out a long groan.

“Hey!” Vicky’s voice cried out from the dark room. “No complaining Ames, it’s not my fault that you’re too blind to admit that Wesley’s amazing.” Amy rubbed her face and strode into the room.

“Wesley is a Pirate, and a jerk, and he literally only saved Buttercup so he could rub her face in how terrible she was, the rest of the movie was only on luck. I still say that Buttercup should have ended up with the Spaniard.” Amy spoke quietly, ignoring Taylor’s playful cries of ‘Spoilers.’

‘...Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die.’ The whispered words were accompanied by the sound of clattering metal, and the words continued, growing in volume, but Amy wasn’t watching the screen. She was watching Taylor as the girl watched the screen with rapt attention. Her hand held popcorn, though Amy had been confused when the popcorn itself had ended in her lap, though the reasoning behind that had been apparent when Victoria’s head had
ended up in Taylor’s as she sprawled over the sofa.

Amy watched curiously as Taylor’s free hand gently dragged through her sister’s hair as they both watched the Spaniard fighting the man with six fingers, their eyes glimmering in the reflected light of the TV.

Amy paused at that familiar flicker jealousy within her chest, though she kept quiet. The sound of Rugen dying drew her focus and Amy took some popcorn in her hand, moving to nibble on it quietly, watching as the scene shifted to show Westley and Buttercup.

As they talked, Amy listened, frowning as she heard Taylor’s amused chuckle as Westley bluffed Prince Humperdink. She listened until the scene shifted to show Inigio once more, and she spoke, affecting a tone of casualness.

“Dean stopped by the house on Monday.” She flicked her eyes to the side, taking some small amount of satisfaction as Taylor’s fingers stilled when Victoria’s head shifted up and to the side, staring at her. She glanced over after a moment and taking in Victoria’s expression she continued to speak with that affected casual tone as if reacting to the confusion on the girl’s face.

“He said that you’re not responding to his calls or messages, that you’re avoiding him, and as far as he can tell that you’re not going to school?” She blinked at the confused look on Taylor’s face and the mocking laughter that Vicky offered. She glanced at the pair quietly, but it was Taylor that chimed in.

“Since the schools have been back, Victoria’s went in every day.” Amy stared at Taylor before glancing at the amused look in Vicky’s eyes.

“It’s the aura,” Victoria spoke casually. “You’ve noticed by now, I bet. It’s harder to see when I’m in my old clothes, but dressed like this.” Victoria gestured to herself, and it finally clicked in Amy’s head. She stared at Victoria in confusion.

“I’ve been wearing stuff that Taylor leant me. Mom only had the time to grab essentials, and Taylor’s stuff is comfortable if a bit loose on me. Luckily before her wardrobe change, she was a fan of looser clothes. It’s surprising how many people miss me in jeans and a hoodie. I’ve been at school, and all of them just walk past me as I eat alone.” Victoria sat up, moving to perch on her knees, staring over at Amy quietly, and the healer leaned back, frowning.

“Why are you avoiding your friends then? Or Dean?” She spoke softly and watched as Victoria stared at her.

“They’ve seen me. If they were my friends they’d have approached me. I’m not hiding what I look like, Amy, they just don’t see me without my aura to draw their eyes. They’re not really my friends. As for Dean, we’ve broken up. I told him that we were done.” She spoke softly, and Amy saw the flicker of... something on Taylor’s face. She certainly didn’t seem surprised.

“He seemed to think that was just a typical break up like you guys typically have. On again, off again... right?” She spoke curiously and watched as Taylor glanced at her and studied her quietly. She expected Victoria to launch into a tirade about how badly Dean had fucked up, to shout or scream she didn’t expect her to lower herself back to her side, resting her head in Taylor's lap once more, glancing at the screen and speaking casually.

“After what he did? I can’t trust him anymore.” She closed her eyes and took a few steadying
breaths, and Amy watched the tension melting out of her frame as Taylor resumed the gently touches to her hair, Amy’s eyes glancing at the sympathetic look on Taylor’s face. A sinking feeling in her gut made her wish that she could drop it, but she had to know.

“W-what did he do?” She spoke softly and flinched when Victoria glanced over at her.

“You know what he did Amy.” Amy rubbed her face and leaned back.

“Vicky, I told him not to-” Amy actually slipped back off the couch, getting her feet under her as her sister surged up suddenly and stared at her.

“I don’t care what you told him, Amy! I don’t care what he thought was right. You were in agony, you were suffering, and he didn’t tell -anyone- at all. That wasn’t his fucking call to make.” Victoria stared at her quietly. “He knew that someone I loved was suffering and he didn’t say anything to help them.”

“I- I told him… He was respecting my privacy; I didn’t want you to know.” Amy spoke nervously as she took another step back and she frowned when Victoria stepped back, dropping to rest on the couch.

“He didn’t have to tell me, Amy! He could have told Mom. He could have told Aunt Sarah; he could have fucking told the PRT. You’ve got so much power, and you were in such a dark place, and he refused to compromise his fucking morals to protect you from yourself.” She clenched her fists as she glanced up.

“I talked about this with Taylor, you know. And she tried to explain his side, but I looked it up. Do you know what ‘Duty of Care’ is?” Amy blinked and frowned, before nodding. She understood the concept, as her own training with the PRT had covered it, considering her powers. “Not the legal definition but the moral one. He knew how upset you were, how dark you were feeling, and the powers at your fingers, and he decided that his own comfort was more important than ensuring that you didn’t hurt anyone else…” Victoria paused and continued in a soft voice. “…that you didn’t hurt yourself.” She glared at the floor, and Amy flinched quietly at the stark sadness in those words.

She stared at the silent scene for a few moments until Victoria surged to her feet and charged from the room. She watched as the wisps of the blonde girl’s hair vanished around the doorframe, and her steps thundered up the stairs. Amy shifted in place wondering if she should follow, but the hand on her shoulder stilled her, and she glanced over, taking in Taylor’s face.

“She needs to blow off some steam. She’s going to do a quick patrol. Better to let her go.” Amy glanced at Taylor for a few moments before nodding and glancing back at the stairs. Privately, Amy was impressed with the speed that Victoria descended the stairs and shot out the door, vanishing into the night. She stared quietly at the closed door that she’d left in her wake and let out a sigh as Taylor nudged her.

“C’mon there’s an extra pillow and a blanket in the closet here. Let’s get you set up.” Taylor moved over to the hall closet and popped it open. Amy followed, taking the linens that were passed to her.
She’d been laying on the couch in the dark for nearly an hour when the door creaked inwards once more the weary steps of what she assumed was her sister entered the house. She shifted up on the couch, glancing over at Victoria as she walked through the entrance hall and into the kitchen. She had to cover her eyes when her sister flicked the light on, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust, and once they had, she was surprised to see Victoria standing in the door of the kitchen, staring at her with a glass of water in hand.

“Ames?” She spoke softly, studying her quietly. “What’re you doing sleeping on the couch. You could sleep in the guest room.” The blonde girl spoke quietly, and Amy blinked as she sat there, staring at her sister in confusion for a few moments.

“Uh.” Amy paused and marvelled at her own eloquence before speaking softly. “Where would you sleep then?” Amy saw the moment that Victoria realized her mistake as the colour drained from her sister’s cheeks. Rather than responding, Victoria simply stared at her for a few moments before coughing lightly, finishing her water and then shutting off the kitchen light and ascending the stairs.

Amy lay there in the dark, listening as Victoria’s footsteps moved around the upper floor, the sound of water running hinting that she was in the bathroom and eventually the steps moved back toward the stairs before coming to a stop. She laid there in silence for a few moments, straining her ears for any other sounds but things were silent.

She continued to lay quietly in the dark for nearly an hour before she carefully slipped off the couch and up the stairs. She moved to the upper floor; the hallway lit by a faint light emerging from the bathroom illuminating the carpeted floor of the hall. She gently padded down the hall and opened the door that she’d had the argument with her sister behind, staring into the guest room. Hints of Victoria’s presence lingered around the space, the guitar on the bed, the desk holding her backpack, the bits of clothing strewn about, but the one thing it lacked was her sister.

She considered Taylor’s door for a minute before shaking her head and silently padding down the stairs and returning to the living room. It took her nearly an hour more to get comfortable on the couch, wrapping herself in the blankets and sinking into the plush piece of furniture as did her best to keep her mind focused on the here and now.

Taylor knew that it was going to be an awkward morning when she woke to find an arm curled around her middle, Victoria’s warm breath ghosting over the back of her neck. She’d grown used to this over the last week and a half, and she ignored the press of her bladder for the moment, from what she could see through her window Taylor suspected that their alarms weren’t far off and she preferred to let the blonde girl grasp at the last few moments of sleep.

Victoria wasn’t what Taylor would call a morning person. She got up when she had to, but the few times that Taylor had jarred her from sleep earlier than she strictly needed to, the other girl had been rather grumpy about it. Considering what they’d probably have to deal with during breakfast, Taylor decided that dealing with one grumpy girl was easier than two. Though, Taylor was surprised when she felt a gust of annoyance against the back of her neck as Victoria’s arm tightened around her in a stretch.

“You think too loud.” The words were muttered into her hair, and the arm slid free, Victoria rolling
away and sitting up in bed. Taylor lowered herself onto her back and stared curiously up at Victoria, taking in the mussed appearance of her hair as the girl rubbed tiredly at her eye and reached out grabbing her phone. A flick of her wrist activated the screen, and she considered the time before letting out a grunt that Taylor interpreted to mean something like; ‘Close enough’ before dropping the phone and glancing down at her. The pair stared at each other silently for a few moments before snorting and Taylor spoke.

“So. What’re the odds that your sister realizes that we spent all night in the same bed?” Taylor tilted her head quietly and tilted her head at the sudden sheepish look on Victoria’s face. “...What?” She asked quietly. Instead of answering immediately, Victoria slid out of bed and moved to collect her costume from where she’d scattered it around the room last night, hanging it up in the closet with Taylor’s, as of yet, untouched outfit. Taylor didn’t ask again waiting and watching until Victoria let out a sigh and spoke while still facing away.

“I might have… implied that the guest room would be empty when I came in. I was confused when I saw her sleeping on the couch.” Taylor peered at Victoria, watching as she tensed her shoulder as if waiting for something. It took her a moment to realize that Victoria seemed to expect her to get angry. Taylor merely snorted and slid to her feet.

“I only put her down there because I thought you might want to sleep in the other room since she was here.” She smoothly slid her feet into her slippers and grabbed a brush, quickly running it through her hair and tying the messy locks back as she headed toward the door. Taylor considered Victoria and the nervous tenseness to her form. She briefly wondered if this was the right time to actually discuss the ongoing sleep situation, but considering the way that Victoria was holding herself, and the faint hint of Dread radiating off her, Taylor chose instead to defuse the situation.

“You should get your shower; I’ll get breakfast going. We’ve all got to go to school for once, so try not to use up all the hot water.” Taylor smirked when the tension melted out of Victoria. The girl flashed her a playful dirty look before they both exited the room. Victoria paused nervously outside the door to the guest room, slowly opening the door and peering into the messy space. Taylor wasn’t sure if the lack of Amy within was a relief or a concern to Victoria who quickly vanished within to find clothes to wear after her shower.

Taylor left Victoria to her morning routine, disappearing down the stairs. She peered into the living room and let out a soft sigh at the sight of Amy’s messy mop of brown hair peeking out of the thick comforters. Taylor had wondered if the girl might flee in the night, but she seemed to have settled in. With a soft shrug, she disappeared into the kitchen, moving to check the cupboards and the fridge. They’d probably need to go shopping soon, but Taylor figured that they had enough bits and bobs to make some omelettes if she got a bit creative with the fillings.

The sounds of clattering pans and cutlery would no doubt see that Amy got a wake-up call, and if that failed Victoria tended to announce herself as she thundered up and down the stairs. For the moment the girl could grasp what scant few minutes of sleep she could while Taylor kept herself busy.

---

Breakfast had indeed been awkward, Amy had beaten Victoria to the kitchen, and the unasked questions in her eyes had been undeniable as she sat at the table and watched Taylor work. But the
questions had remained unvoiced as she accepted breakfast and ate. She hadn’t said anything when
Victoria had appeared freshly cleaned in the kitchen, receiving her own breakfast and the three had
eaten in awkward silence. Amy had been especially quiet, responding to the few questions that she
was asked but mostly just watching.

She’d watched as Taylor made sure that Victoria had everything she needed for school, quizzing the
girl as she vanished upstairs to take her own shower. When Taylor had bounded out the door,
heading to the van to speak with Maria and check on Ralph’s recovery, she had watched as Amy
observed Victoria taking out a set of keys with a personalized key chain and locked the door, double
checking it before they’d joined her by the jeep.

Amy had walked along with them both watching as Taylor quizzed Victoria on the subjects that
she’d be dealing with on her next English test, and Taylor had felt Amy’s eyes on her when Victoria
paused before getting on the bus and flashed her a grin. The subtle words wishing them both luck at
the college had made Taylor smile, and she'd watched Victoria putting her headphones on and
disappearing into the bus. Taylor'd stood still, watching the bus pull away as Amy’s eyes burned
twin holes into her back and she had waited for the girl to say something, or ask something.

Taylor wasn’t sure if the girls continuing silence was a good thing or a bad thing. She glanced at
Amy, finding the girl watching her quietly and she took a deep breath. If Amy wanted to pretend
everything was fine, then she could do that. She gestured the girl along and pointed toward
downtown.

“C’mon the college is this way, we should hurry if we want to make the orientation. Amy nodded,
and Taylor hurried along, humming faintly as she walked along. She dipped her hands into her
pockets and spoke softly.

“So, since the college had to push everything around, they’ve decided to merge the AP Orientation
into the regular one, so it’ll be a bit bigger.” She spoke, watching as Amy matched pace with her and
nodded quietly. Taylor took that as a good sign and continued on.

“Sabah’s got a friend that’ll be in the Regular one, and since it’s all together, she asked that we keep
an eye out. Her friend is a cape, but she might not want to out herself to us, so uh. We just got to put
on our name tags and be friendly if anyone comes up and wants to talk.” Taylor glanced at Amy
who gave her a raised eyebrow before snorting. “What? It’s not like she could tell us what to look
out for. She basically said that we’re cool and if she wanted someone to chat with, we’d be there. I
guess we’ll see how it goes.” Taylor snorted when Amy rolled her eyes but then she hummed as she
walked along.

“So. I kind of agree with Victoria. Westly pulled a dick move at the beginning, but I think if anyone
doesn’t deserve the other, it’s Buttercup not deserving Westley. She’s a bit…” Taylor waved a hand
ineffectively and grinned at the affronted look on Amy’s face.

“What? I mean Westley was clearly a murderous pirate…”

The debate had cut through some of the tension between them, but Amy had fallen a bit more quiet
as they’d arrived on campus and Taylor had led them toward the building mentioned in their
brochures. The AP students had been included in the regular orientation, but they’d been told to come later so as to avoid the sections about campus housing and the like, and she saw a few other students walking toward the administration building from the other side of campus.

Taylor flashed Amy a grin when the girl moved closer to her, and they entered the building behind a trio of bubbly boys that were eagerly debating the mechanics of some game. Registration had been quick and they’d each been handed a name tag on a lanyard. Taylor let herse hang from her neck over her tie, and Amy had tied hers to her belt, and they had spent almost an hour following the tour guide around campus as they were shown where their classes would be held.

The conversation had been light, and they’d mostly discussed their class load. Amy was taking two classes for the summer quarter, Parahuman Studies, and Bio-prep course for what Amy seemed to indicate was her attempt to figure out if she actually wanted to go in medicine. Taylor was taking four classes, though the only one she shared with Amy was the Parahuman Studies class. Taylor was also taking entry-level psychology, history, and English courses. The conversation and tour led them to the wide quad where they sat with the other students.

The college had provided a free lunch from several food trucks, and there was to be a speech at the end of the lunch before they went to have their student ID’s created. A small fair was to take up most of the afternoon, and Sabah and Victoria were to rejoin them there once their classes were out for the end of the day. Taylor was smirking at a red-faced Amy who was trying to politely excuse herself from the very exuberant chattering of three college-aged girls that were chatting her ear off, and if Taylor’s hearing was to be believed, trying to convince her to pledge. The girl’s stammering comments about being too young to join a sorority were being waved off.

“Excuse me.” The voice from the left shocked her and Taylor leaned back, taking in the other teenager that loomed nearby. The girl was attractive, with a mixed Asian-American heritage and she was dressed well, not expensively, but she chose her clothing with care. She stood in the warm May sunlight wrapped in a pair of black jeans, peeking out of which were some rather nice shoes. He torso was wreathed in a loose top well suited for the heat, and a jacket was tied around her waist. The girl ran a hand through her dark hair, coughing faintly as she checked Taylor’s name tag before speaking.

“I-H-Hey. My name is uh. Lily. I uh.” She paused, floundering for words and Taylor chuckled softly, taking pity on the poor girl.

“We’ve got a mutual friend, yeah? She mentioned you might seek us out.” Taylor patted the table to her left and smiled at the look of relief that washed over the girls face. She watched as the girl moved around and clambered up to sit next to her. Taylor handed her a bottle of water, nodding at her thankful look before taking a sip from her own bottle. Turning her focus back to Amy Taylor barked out a laugh.

Out of the corner her eye she watched as the young girl followed her gaze and let out a soft gasp. Amy’s group of admirers had grown and there now seemed to be three different groups of girls bandying for her attention, two sororities and if the one group singing was any indication, a band of some sort? In the midst of it all, Amy stood shocked and confused. Taylor prepared to hop up and save her, but she was surprised when the girl to her left beat her to it.

Taylor settled back and watched as the girl slipped over, and moved between the girls in the crowd, patently ignoring the indignant comments that followed in her wake. She leaned close and murmured something before offering Amy a bottle. Amy seemed to stammer out something in reply and Taylor smirked when Lily’s arm slid casually around Amy’s shoulder, and she spoke lazily to the girls who
quickly parted way before them both. Once the way was clear, Lily casually led Amy back. The girl’s face hadn’t lost any of it’s red tiny as she hunched down a bit under that arm.

When they reached the table, Taylor lazily clapped her hands and barked out another laugh at the irritated look from Amy.

“Thanks for the assist there, Taylor.” Taylor just smirked and sipped from her water.

“You were handling it at first, Amy, and when it got out of hand, our new friend Lily came and helped.” Lily, who seemed to catch on that she was still holding Amy suddenly, quickly slipped her arm away and blushed faintly.

“Sorry. I just-” She paused and took a breath, mouthing something before speaking more calmly. “You seemed like you could use a bit of help.” She flashed a smile and Taylor smirked quietly as Amy just stared in confusion at the other girl before snorting softly.

“Yeah.” She shook her head. “Thanks. Lily was it? I was a bit surprised, but you’re pretty good under pressure. Did you eat?” Taylor watched as Amy nodded before waving at her, and the Jedi in training hopped to her feet, following the pair off toward the nearest truck. Chinese food seemed like an odd choice to serve out of a truck, but Taylor was hungry enough not to care.

As they waited in line, Taylor grinned and listened to Amy and Lily introducing themselves to each other, chiming in whenever one of them glanced her way. The warm sunlight ghosted over her and Taylor quietly revelled in the feeling of being a normal teenage girl as she listened to Lily telling Amy in exacting detail about the origin of each kind of food on the menu.

Chapter End Notes

[[I LIED ABOUT THE ACTION. AND THEN I BURIED IT IN AWKWARD. =]
AIN’T NO ONE TALKING ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS UP IN THIS HOUSE.

Seriously though, this chapter was amusing to write. I figured you guys would enjoy a nice long one to get the Interludes out of the way and we’ve got some new things to deal with. Lily is in play, and being an awkward dork. Taylor and Victoria have their own complicated shit going on that’s getting even more complicated with Amy poking her nose in.

ALSO, AMY CAN MAKE RAKGHOULS. Well not really. They’re not infectious. Basically, this is an expression of the shard bleed over. Taylor, well I say Taylor, but it was Marr, but anyway, Taylor used Sith Alchemy to fix Amy’s DNA and that sort of affected Shaper a bit. Most of that was Amy’s power, but the shape came from the Alchemy as did the ability to direct her creation once it formed. Essentially Amy’s power transformed the guy into a Rakhgoul, but the Sith Alchemy let her turn him on his friends.

As for the rest, I used my own college memories to reference the orientation stuff, and everyone else was mostly made up on the spot. Lemme know what you think, and we’re gonna have a fun time going forward.]]
EDIT: I accidentally deleted a line in the middle, where Amy briefly considers calling in the crime, but decides not to due to being out of bounds and on a mission. Fixed.]

[[So! I’ve ninja updated this chapter. I'll put a timestamp in the A/N's to show the ones that I’ve edited, so you'll know why the writing suddenly takes a dive if you don't see one of the time stamps. If you're coming back cause someone (Probably me) Pointed out that I did updates, and you're trying to figure out what it is that was changed, then the TLDR for this chapter is;

Changed the first section so that instead of creating a horrifying zombie creature, she transformed a hedge into a seven-foot-tall shambler and used it to scare off the goons instead of nearly killing them all and not batting an eyelash. Fits better thematically that way.

UPDATE DATE: 05-18-2019]]
Perched on her bed, Lily let her eyes drift around the small room that she was in. The private dorm had been her most significant compromise with the PRT. Initially, they had wanted to put her up in an apartment with a few female troopers as ‘roommates,’ but she had wanted the ‘typical’ college experience, or as typical as it could be while moonlighting as a super-hero. The PRT had arranged a private room in the student dorms as a trade-off.

The Private dorms, on top of being more expensive then the shared dorms had been unfurnished, which meant that Lily had been able to bring most of her bedroom set with her. This had meant that she’d ended up having to bribe a few of the boys that had been lazing around outside, but they’d been surprisingly skilled, and they’d brought everything up and even re-assembled her bed, desk and dresser for her.

She’d been left to her own devices putting her computer together, but she’d eventually figured it out, and it now sat ready and issuing soft music on the desk, occasionally Lily glanced at it, checking the time. Between getting her things in and put together, and putting away her clothes, she only really had another hour before she had to decide if she wanted to hunt down Parian’s friends and unmask herself to them. As terrifying as that thought was, it wasn’t what was causing her heart to race.

Lily quietly turned her attention to the final box that was sat before her, gently turning it to trace her fingers over the hastily scrawled letters on the side that read ‘Gertie’s Things.’ Part of Lily thought that this wasn’t a suitable descriptor for the vessel that contained the only things that Gertie had left in this world besides Lily herself, but nothing else had seemed right to put on the box, and she moved to open it slowly.

Opening the flaps on top, Lily gently removed the first object from within. Unlike Lily’s things which had been wrapped in newspaper, Lily had gone to great care with these things, each object secured in bubble wrap and carefully secured in the box. Lily carefully removed the first few objects from the top of the pile, unwrapping them one at a time to reveal a series of Photographs in artistic silver frames.

These had once adorned the wall alongside the stairs, and the first showed a young Gertie and her late husband on their wedding night, the next showing the older couple on their thirtieth anniversary, the last they’d shared before Gertie had lost him to cancer. The third image showed an older Gertie
perched on an ornate chair, smoothing back a somewhat reluctant looking Lily’s hair. It had been a candid shot from a photo shoot, but Gertie had liked it more than the original prints and had put it with the rest.

The final two images were such a poignant contrast to each other. The first showed Gertie and Lily in kimono’s at a festival of some sort in Little Tokyo, the Jewish lady’s grin just as full as the younger Lily’s, as they posed together for the camera. They looked so full of life, and the next from a scant nine months later was from Gertie’s last birthday. The older woman in bed with a bit of machinery off to one side. She wore a sparkly hat and had the biggest smile on her face as Lily sprawled out next to her and flourished a smile at the camera.

Lily lifted this last photo and gently dragged her fingers over the glass and bit her lip. This had been a good day, one of the last good days, if she was honest and she gently set that image on her bedside table, moving to affix the others to her walls.

Other things were removed from the box, unwrapped and laid out. Some things were glanced at and set in place, a snow globe that she’d bought for Gertie in Toronto and had forgotten about until she’d been cleaning out the woman’s room was set next to her monitor. Gertie’s Torah was carefully placed in one of the desk drawers, and Lily moved to twist the chain of the woman’s Star of David over and over until she could wear it hanging from one wrist like a bracelet.

Gertie’s antique alarm clock was set on her headboard, along with a box that Lily had been surprised to find contained half a dozen carefully preserved Origami animals. Lily took a moment to sift through the folded paper shapes, inspecting each in turn. Lily couldn’t remember when she’d folded each animal, but the shapes were undoubtedly hers. Lily drew out what she had once told Gertie was a crocodile, though when she inspected it now, she imagined that it seemed more like a green cow than anything else.

The last few things in the box had been keepsakes of her adoptive Mother that had initially been from others, but it hadn’t seemed right to give them away. An antique image of Gertie and her mother joined the others on the wall and a small shadowbox containing a picture of the older woman’s late husband along with three blue and silver patches and a medal. Lily studied the young man in the image and gently tapped the glass, studying the face and silently hoping that he was keeping Gertie happy wherever they were.

The shadowbox was set on the headboard near the clock, and Lily took a moment to stand there and stare around the room. If not for the stark white of the walls, Lily might have imagined that she was still in her own bedroom at home, and the burning in her chest left her wondering if that was a good thing. When her phone began to buzz, she scooped it up, swiping off the alarm and frowning as she wondered if she should go to the orientation.

In the end, it was the sad smile on Gertie’s face in the last image that she’d taken with Lily that prompted her to grab a jacket and head for the door. She’d tried being alone, maybe this time it’d be worth taking a risk.

Carefully wrapping the sleeves of her jacket around her waist, Lily considered the sky as she tied it off. Overcast and warm, but not so warm as to make it that she wouldn’t need a jacket after the sun
had set. She shook her head as she pushed on toward the quad.

The crowds had grown thicker as she approached the area that the school had offered a complimentary lunch and the promise of an open Q&A session with family and students. Lily considered her map for a moment before blowing out a breath as she saw the extensive collection of picnic tables filled with hundreds of students and their families.

She had names to look for, but the only description that Parian had offered was that her friends would be rather difficult to miss, even among a crowd. Lily took a few moments at the edge of the crowd before a flash of black caught her eye. She glanced over, taking in the view of a young woman with wild black hair and glasses perched on a table by herself. It was too far to see the lanyard, but she certainly stood out.

Between the dress shirt, the vest and tie, and the black jeans she was a bit over-dressed compared to most. Lily carefully slipped over, suspecting that this might be who she was looking for. She caught sight of the Lanyard blowing in the faint breeze, and when it flipped her way, Lily saw the familiar name scrawled over it. She moved up closer and took in the girl’s form.

She seemed completely at ease, seemingly watching her friend flounder among a crowd, but something about the set of her jaw was familiar to Lily. The casual smile didn’t quite meet the girl’s eyes, and her knee occasionally started to twitch before she caught herself and stilled it. Lily stepped closer and bit her lip, contemplating the wiseness of this move before a sudden flash of irritation washed through her. She was a superhero; she could introduce herself to a teenager.

Screwing up her courage she stepped forward and spoke quickly.

“Excuse me.” The comment seemed to shock the other girl who’d been watching her friend flounder in what appeared to be amusement. Lily considered Taylor as the girl jerked back and checked her up and down nervously for a few seconds. A brief flicker of nervous fear seemed to glimmer behind those eyes and Lily took a step back, rechecking that Name-tag. The girl caught her gaze flicking down, and something seemed to click, and the girl’s stony expression softened. Taking heart from that, Lily moved to speak as she ran a hand through her dark hair.

“H-Hey. My name is uh. Lily. I uh.” Lily cursed silently at the stutter and scrabbled for words, but Taylor seemed to react first, speaking up before Lily could put together a sentence that was more than a series of barely connected consonants.

“We’ve got a mutual friend, yeah? She mentioned you might seek us out.” The words were spoken with a rather sincere amusement, and Lily felt a wash of relief through her as she let her shoulders drop. When the girl patted the table next to her, Lily moved around and clambered up to perch on the table, bracing her legs on the bench. She glanced over to ask Taylor a question and blinking at the water bottle that was held out.

Muttering a quick thanks, Lily scrutinized the bottle before glancing back at Taylor. The girl's attention had shifted from her back to the girl she’d been watching, and Lily followed the gaze curiously. When she’d walked up the mousy brunette had been fending off a trio of excited socialites in training, but during her chat with Taylor, the number of eager girls vying for the young woman’s attention had quadrupled. Lily studied the girl’s face, frowning at the look and panic that was starting to grow.

She was tempted to speak with Taylor, but when one of the girls moved to touch the brunette’s shoulder, Lily slid to her feet and strode across to the group. As she approached, she caught sight of
‘Amy’s’ nametag hanging from her belt and moved over. Lily wasn’t gentle when she pushed through the crowd, and she ignored the comments of irritation from behind her, and within a few seconds she’d pushed out into the middle of the crowd.

The girls, excepting Amy who seemed to be shrinking back from the eager women around her, all stared at her in confusion and Lily casually walked across the scant foot of space that separated her and the other girl, moving to lazily hook an arm around Amy’s shoulders like it was the most common thing ever.

“Amy!” She spoke with a low casual burr, and she ignored the subtle shiver that washed through Amy as she held out the bottle she’d just gotten from Taylor, flashing the girl her best wolf-like smile. “I managed to find a truck with water. Sorry I was gone so long. Taylor’s arrived though.” She spoke, nodding toward the nearby table. When the girls followed her gaze, Lily leaned down murmuring quickly to the rapidly tensing girl under her arm.

“I’m Parian’s friend, play along, and we’ll get you out of here.” She felt the relax, marginally under her arm and let out a sigh of relief before glancing up when the girls glanced back at her quietly.

“Ladies, I’m sure that Amy’ll grant your various offers the amount of consideration that they’re due, but I’m afraid that we’ve got a rather pressing engagement. If you don’t mind?” She glanced at the women around her, waiting as they took a moment to peer at each other before slowly parting. Lily moved to steer Amy along by the shoulders, leading the girl along, smirking at the muttered words that came from the brunette.

“I had everything handled.” The words were subtle, and Lily doubt that anyone else had heard it, but she waited until they were halfway to Taylor before responding.

“Somehow, I doubt that Panacea giving half of the co-eds on campus ‘the clap’ would go over well, no matter how they reworded that title in the papers.” She felt Amy tense under her arm before her cheeks suddenly became even redder. Lily smoothly lead them back to Taylor who was clapping in amusement.

Amy snapping out a sarcastic comment saw her grinning, though Taylor pointing the focus back at her saw her cheeks darkening when she realized that she hadn’t released the other superhero and she quickly pulled her arm free. She took a moment to get her blush under control, blinking at both girls staring at her.

“Sorry I just-” She heard her voice squeak as she spoke, and paused, taking a moment to subtly remind herself to be less of a dork before trying again in a more normal tone of voice. “Sorry, you just… it seemed like you could use some help.” She smirked a bit when Amy rolled her eyes before finally relaxing and letting out a snort.

“Yeah,” Amy spoke, shaking her head before continuing. “Thanks. Lily was it? I was a bit surprised, but you’re pretty good under pressure. Did you eat?” The other girl nodded toward the nearby trucks, and Lily shook her head. She grinned when the younger girl gestured her along toward the food, waving toward Taylor as the tugged Lily along.

Lily glanced back at the other girl, watching as Taylor’s smile shifted to something a bit more genuine as she dipped her hands in her pockets, glancing over at the trucks. The sound of Amy speaking drew her attention and Lily glanced down at the shorter girl.

“Chinese?” She hummed pointing, and Lily smirked as she sidled up beside her.
“Sure. Though it’s not really Chinese food.” She grinned when Amy rolled her eyes. Most people were aware of that. “Well. That’s not really true either. People love to say that when they’re being pedantic, but it’s more accurate to say that it’s all like. Foods that were adapted from traditional Chinese cuisine by Chinese immigrants.” She paused talking and glanced over, watching as Amy stared at her curiously, gesturing her on, and she blushed before waving at the board.

“Well.” She paused and took a breath before continuing. “So. American-Chinese food is actually adapted from like, cooking styles and habits from Toisan, which is this city in southern China. It’s where most of the Chinese immigrants that came to America before World War II were from. It’s in the Guangdong province of China, and uh Cantonese-style cuisine also comes from there.”

The conversation about the regional origins of Chinese food had lasted through most of lunch, Amy curiously asking about each dish, and Lily had taken the time to explain where each meal came from, and how it was different from the traditional cuisine in China. Taylor had watched with rapt attention but had kept her commentary to herself as she ate, seemingly happy to soak up the conversation.

“So, are your parents from China then?” The question came as the conversation died off, and Lily perked up glancing at Amy curiously, shaking her head.

“Oh. Uh. No. My Mother’s parents were from Japan actually.” At the confusion of Amy’s face, she shrugged up a shoulder quietly. “I just spent a lot of time at the Asian-American Community Centers in New York when I was younger.” At Amy’s confused look she waved a hand quietly.

“After uh. The Yangban and what happened with Kyushu a lot of the Asian communities outside of China ended up drawing together. We tended to learn a lot of things from each other's cultures, as a way of keeping the traditions alive in the wake of… well, everything.” Lily spoke softly and picked at the remaining chow mein on her plate, picking out a bean sprout and nibbling on it quietly. The awkward silence dragged out, and Lily considered the pair for a few moments as they glanced at each other.

Luckily before the awkward silence could drag out any longer, an older woman ascended the stage off to one side, and people grew quiet. The woman took a few moments to get a mic hooked up and then she stepped out onto the stage offering a wave to the crowd before speaking.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the Brockton Bay University this morning. I wish to congratulate each of you, first on having secured your university place and second, for having the good sense to choose to study at the Brockton Bay University. Brockton Bay University puts the student at the centre of everything it does; your experience here at BBU and your successes are important to each and every member of staff who works here.” The woman spoke quietly but her voice carried through the speakers and Lily listened with rapt attention, glancing over to see Amy and Taylor following her gaze with curious looks. The woman took a breath, letting the words soak in quietly before continuing in that firm tone of voice.

“Your arrival at university marks a new chapter in the story of your life. But this chapter is a bit different. The preceding chapters were largely written by others – your parents, guardians, families, teachers and the like. Now you will be the principal author of the next chapter – you have the
opportunity to determine the direction, the plot and the tempo of your story. This can seem as daunting as it is exciting, as challenging as it is empowering.” The older woman quietly paced around the stage; her arms crossed behind her back as she considered the bulk of the student body. After taking a few moments to glance at them all, she continued in that warm tone of voice.

“But the great thing is that you are doing something that you have chosen to do, not something that was chosen for you by others. And while you are here at BBU, you will have the opportunity to learn new things, acquire new knowledge, develop new skills, and enhance your personal attributes in profound ways that will equip for life after University. At the same time, you will make new friends who will become your friends for life, with whom you will share memories of your Brockton Bay University days for many years to come.” The woman walked toward the center of the stage and moved to lace her arms in front of her as she took on a more sombre tone.

“For the next few weeks you are likely to be bombarded with information, and I am conscious of the danger of adding to information overload. Nevertheless, as your Dean, I wish to share three pieces of advice with you. If you’ll let me.” She paused, smirking and one student in the middle of the crowd yelled out a soft ‘Go on then!’ And she smirked in his direction before continuing.

“My first piece of advice is;” The woman took a breath before speaking firmly now. “Take responsibility for your learning.” The older lady considered them all quietly as she shifted in place allowing them to consider the sentiment before elaborating. “Up to now, most of your learning, and indeed your life, has been very structured. The objective was clear – to secure sufficient points to get your place in a university. Most of you here today followed a quite precisely defined curriculum, and your approach to how you learned was dictated by the demands of the Great Diploma. But now you are entering the less structured environment of the University where you will have greater freedom and the responsibility that comes with that…”

Lily listened quietly to the long speech, finding herself getting lost in the idea of being able to write her own future at this point. She ended up getting so lost in the thoughts as she listened in, that Amy had to actually nudge her to get her up and moving when the speech ended, and the student engagement activities started.

It had been an enjoyable afternoon; Lily had to admit as she stood in line with Amy at a concession stand, lazily fishing her wallet out her jacket pocket. Amy and Taylor had dragged her to the Student Union organized scavenger hunt that was intended to serve as a sort of campus tour, and the three of them had cheated mercilessly with their cellphones to navigate the increasingly wild campus.

Not counting the hairy encounter with the Alchemy Club, and stumbling through what Lily was reasonably sure was a staged goat sacrifice, they’d eventually gotten to the end of the scavenger hunt to claim their prize of a twenty dollar gift certificate for the campus store. Lily had chuckled when Amy and Taylor had immediately given her theirs, and they’d spent the rest of the afternoon peeking in at the various campus amenities with Lily and discussing school. She was surprised to learn that Taylor was wholly doing school online due to her powers.

Amy had indicated that she’d been doing something similar up to this point because of personal reasons, but that she was heading back to regular school, and Lily hadn’t pressed any further. As the day dragged on though, families began to leave, and new students got distracted getting settled.
Taylor had indicated that people were waiting at the quad, and she’d started to head that way. Amy had said she needed something from the concession and she’d meet Taylor there, and something welled up in Lily that prompted her to offer to escort Amy.

She’d gotten a strange look, but the brunette had ended up nodding, and they were currently crammed into the store as a bored girl with giant headphones, and violently blue hair sat to one side, mostly ignoring them while Lily and Amy picked over the various chocolate bars. As she picked up a Clark Bar, Lily tried to figure out the sudden knot of apprehension in her stomach. She flipped the candy over, inspecting the ingredients quietly. The soft sound of Amy’s voice caused her to glance over, studying the girl as she idly checked the various brands of gum on display.

“How do you… tell someone off without like… yelling at them?” The question was softly, and Lily frowned as she shifted in place, considering the candy silently before shrugging.

“I guess it depends on what you want to tell them off for? Like, if it’s something small you could just shoot them a text. Be like; ‘Hey, I didn’t want to get into a confrontation, but I just wanted you to know that I was hurt when…”’ Lily waved a hand quietly, rubbing her neck. “I guess you could just try that in person, ask to speak with them and clarify beforehand that you don’t want to fight?” She glanced at Amy, tilting her head when the girl let out a soft snort. She studied the look on the girl’s face. “Something bigger?”

“Yeah.” Amy’s voice remained soft as she plucked up a pack of gum and checked the back. She stared at it quietly and then sighed, placing it back. “It’s a bit big.” She huffed as she moved along, picking up a pack of mentos and considering them quietly.

“Well, you could just… write a letter or something? That’s a good way of expressing yourself, but I mean… If it’s something big, there might end up being a fight.” Lily floundered quietly as she considered the candy, settling on the Clark bar and moving over to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of chilled green tea and humming. She blinked when Amy slipped over and leaned on the nearby fridge, staring at her quietly.

“What about you? What’re you doing here avoiding? I’m avoiding my sister, but you seemed pretty eager not to follow Taylor over there.” Lily glanced at Amy and flushed before shrugging. She briefly entertained the thought of lying, or just refusing to answer but the curiosity in those eyes pulled at her, and she found herself frowning as she gripped the bottle in her hand.

“I just. I’ve only ever talked to Parian online. I uh. I’m a bit less cool out of the costume you know. My cape friends never really transition well to real life friends.” Lily spoke softly and glanced at Amy who seemed to consider her for a moment before rolling her eyes playfully.

“Lily. You need to chill out. You’re good people. Sabah’ll love you.” She smirked as she turned and walked over to the counter, pulling out a bill and setting her candy down and pointing a thumb at Lily. Lily moved to protest, but Amy waved her off, collecting her change and heading out. Lily trailed after the other girl, clutching her bottle and candy in hand and glancing toward the quad.

The green space was much emptier than earlier this afternoon, the food trucks had all left, and a small team of Landscapers and workers was at the other end of the open area picking up trash and moving tables. They hadn’t gotten to the table that Taylor was sitting on, two women and two men standing around her. She trailed after Amy, blinking when one of the boys perked up and waved.

The boy was attractive for a man, tall and svelte with almost delicate features, dark eyes and brilliant highlights in his hair. He jogged over toward them, running a hand through his hair and calling out as
they approached.

“Amy! You look like you’re doing better.” The man grinned quietly and held out a hand, taking Amy’s offered one and shaking. Lily caught up to the pair and smiled when Amy turned to her, gesturing.

“Warren, you’re looking more chipper. Lily, this is Warren, Warren, this is Lily.” Lily perked up and waved, tucking her bottle under her other arm before holding out her now free hand to shake it quickly. The older boy glanced her up and down before glancing at Amy with an odd expression that saw her facepalming. The handshake was firm though, and the sounds of others calling lured them over toward the table.

“I healed Warren a few weeks back, and Taylor healed his boyfriend, Will.” Amy stayed close speaking softly, and she gestured when she said the other boy’s name. Lily glanced up and found herself surprised. Will was what most people would call ‘classically handsome’, tall and built with a square jaw and chiselled features. Bright blue eyes and blonde hair and he was chatting amiably with Taylor and a blonde girl.

Warren peeled off from them, joining the others, and Amy flashed her a smirk before doing the same, leaving her standing alone when the dusky-skinned girl she assumed to Parian approached. Lily felt her cheeks darkening as the girl checked her over curiously and she perked up when a hand was offered, reaching out to shake and forgetting herself, dropping her bottle and causing it to roll across the grass. She ducked back and went to chase it.

“Shit! Sorry.” She grabbed the bottle and turned back to Sabah running over. “Hey. I’m Sabah. Wait.” She paused and blushed, rubbing her face. “Lily. I’m Lily. You’re Sabah.” She saw the confusion on the other girl’s face and pointed at Amy and Sabah grinned.

“Hello, Lily. It’s nice to see you in person. Are you settling in okay?” She spoke softly, and Lily nodded nervously, her cheeks still suffused with colour as she considered the other girl. She hadn’t realized that Sabah was so much older than the rest of them. The costume itself screamed a cape that was still a teenager, and yet here in civilian clothes, Sabah was more ‘woman’ than the ‘young woman’ that the rest of them were.

“Hey. Uh. Sabah. Same.” She chuckled and then glanced at Amy, who was sitting with the rest and watching her with some sort of cruel amusement on her face. She wasn’t sure why but she shot the other girl a panicked look and after rolling her eyes, Amy tugged on her shirt. Lily stared at her in confusion before glancing back at Sabah and catching on. “I uh. I like your shirt; it’s unique.” She studied the garment and grinned when Sabah’s cheeks darkened faintly.

“Thank you, Lily, I made it myself. Your own fashion sense is good. Better than Taylor when we started anyway.” Lily glanced at the dapper looking woman and blinks glancing back at Sabah who laughed. “She used to dress... well, she used to dress like Victoria dresses now.” The dark skinned girl paused and narrowed her eyes. “Actually, I think she dressed exactly as Victoria dresses now.” Sabah snorted and moved toward the rest of the group, and Lily trailed after, grinning when the older girl called out.

“Taylor. When I said, you needed to get rid of your old wardrobe I didn’t mean you should give it to Victoria.” The words were accompanied by twin squawks of outrage from both of the mentioned girls, and Sabah descended on them, moving to tug on the comfortable looking hoodie that was wrapped around Victoria’s form. Lily found herself perched between Amy and Warren, watching as Sabah playfully mocked ‘Victoria’s’ current fascination with grunge.
The group had ended up chatting quietly until the work crews had descended on them, and despite
the men’s assurances that they could work around them the collection of teenagers had vacated the
campus entirely. Warren and Will apparently knew of a restaurant nearby that had a selection of food
that was quote-unquote ‘to die for’ according to Warren. Apparently happy to take the boy at his
word, the group had happily tramped along through downtown. The setting sun and the deepening
chill had ensured that most of them were wearing coats. Lily’s had moved from her waist to her
shoulders, but she was amused to see a blushing Amy wearing Taylor’s jacket looking to her left.
Will had attempted to offer Sabah his letter jacket, but the girl had stared it in horror and claimed that
she’d rather freeze, and everyone had laughed.

They’d gotten a few strange looks as they walked, and it’d taken Lily a few minutes to realize that it
was because the sun was going down and there was a collection of teenage girls walking the streets
and not safely behind the cordons of the campus. She briefly entertained the idea of some poor
criminal trying to mug five different superheroes and their friends. The chuckle she issued drew a
look from Amy, but Lily shrugged and tugged her coat tighter around her against the chill and
moved to hustle along.

It didn’t take much longer to reach the cozy restaurant, and the post-Leviathan slump was rather
apparent as they entered to find only one other table occupied. Will spoke with the understandably
nervous looking Maitre’ dis, but it was most of them pulling out their PRT issued credit cards when
the man asked about a card to hold for a deposit that got them the table. The staff crammed them into
a tiny booth in the back of the main dining room, and large, well-worn menus were passed around.

When the waitress had asked if anyone wanted anything from the bar, Lily had watched in
amusement as Victoria perked up, only to slump down when Sabah had called over everyone to say
that she was the only person present over twenty-one and that pitchers of soda would be fine. They’d
been left to consider their orders, and Lily began to regret not taking off her jacket before she’d slid
in.

She’d ended up at the back of the round booth with Victoria and Taylor on her left, Amy and Sabah
on her right, and the two boys were sitting opposite her. She began to wiggle with her jacket as she
tried to slip out of it without elbowing either girl sat next to her. Victoria was the first to notice, and
she chuckled, moving to reach out a hand, grabbing one shoulder.

“Ames, grab the other shoulder.” She called out, and Amy perked up from her menu. It took her a
moment to catch onto what was going on, and then they both pulled the jacket off of Lily’s shoulders
for her, and she freed her arms, flashing them both a quick grin in thanks. Amy returned to the menu,
and she chuckled, moving to reach out a hand, grabbing one shoulder.

“Lily, right? Taylor said that you’d found them. We haven’t had a chance to speak yet.” She held out
her hand and smiled, and Lily snagged the hand, shaking it awkwardly due to the seating. She took a
moment to actually look at the girl. She could see why Sabah had huffed at her, the girl was wearing
a Hoodie and jeans that were a bit too large on her, but they seemed comfortable.

But beneath that surface layer, Lily could tell that she was actually quite attractive. The long blonde
hair was drawn back in a messy ponytail, and her features were smooth and her expression open and...
friendly. The girl seemed to be inspecting her back, and Lily nervously brushed a hand through her hair, getting an amused smirk before Victoria nodded her head at the rest.

“So you got to run around with these two all day? Did you get into any trouble? BBU can be a bit wild to the uninitiated. Any issue with the Summer Society?” Lily blinked and shook her head, but she felt a devious smirk gracing her lips.

“No, though your sister did almost get recruited by two sororities. And an acapella group?” She glanced at Amy, grinning when the healer let out a low groan and buried her face into her menu. She glanced back at Victoria, smiling at the sparkle of delight in those blue eyes.

“And when we wandered into the Alchemy Club on accident, Taylor ended up upending a vat of live frogs onto some poor grad student. It was...unfortunate.” She chuckled when Victoria glanced over at Taylor who merely pretended she’d heard nothing, the faint hint of colour on her cheeks showing that she was well aware of the conversation.

Victoria shook her head, leaning back in her seat and draping an arm over the back of the booth over Taylor’s shoulders and buffing her other hand against her sweater.

“Told you that I should have skipped and come with you.” She spoke lazily to Taylor, and the girl glanced over, raising an eyebrow. “You and Amy are trouble magnets, whenever you hang out together without me you get in trouble.” Taylor opened her mouth to respond, but Lily was surprised when Amy cut across first.

“Trouble magnets, Victoria? We could have a chat about all the interesting situations you’ve stumbled into if you want. And besides, we had Lily. She saved me from the Stepford Sisters, and then used that mop to ward off the angry undergraduates so we could escape.” Lily grinned when she leaned back so Amy could peer innocently past her, and watched as the others started up a lively debate across the table. It ended up taking nearly twenty minutes before they were able to order, but Lily’s cheeks had started to hurt from the grin that’d spread across them.

Taylor stood silently by the PRT issue jeep, doing everything in her power to avoid showing just how cold she was. She kept her hands in her pockets to keep from rubbing her arms and glanced at the rest of the group. Will and Warren were both fed and watered and were waiting patiently as Sabah, and Lily quickly talked and exchanged phone numbers. Lily and the boys were going to walk back to campus, and since Sabah was on the way, Taylor was going to get their ride to drop her off.

Taylor glanced over at Victoria and Amy standing off to one side. Amy, who looked pleasantly warm in Taylors coat, was on her phone, talking casually with her Aunt. Taylor knew that Amy was asking to stay over the night again, and she could tell by the look on Victoria’s face that it was going well. When Victoria, unseen by Amy, rubbed at her face Taylor winced and let out a soft sigh. She briefly considered walking over there but chose to go toward Lily and Sabah instead.

“...classes, but I’ll try to keep my schedule clear.” Lily’s voice was laced with eager amusement and Taylor shook her head, moving to stand near the group. Lily turned to her and flashed a huge smile, and Taylor found her smirk spreading into a genuine smile.
“Taylor, thanks for uh. Well, everything It was a fun night.” The girl spoke earnestly, and Taylor rolled her eyes quietly waving the thanks off.

“It’s fine, Lily. Any friend of Sabah’s is a friend of mine.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Besides that, you’re pretty cool. We’ll need to do something soon. Victoria and Sabah were plotting something earlier; I’ll let you know when I figure out what’s up.” She glanced over at Sabah who looked at her startled and Taylor smirked.

“That’s correct, Sabah. I know everything.” She stuck out her tongue before nodding at Lily. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Amy and Victoria had returned to the jeep and she gestured toward Sabah who glanced over and nodded. Taylor turned to Lily, and seeing the nervous look in her eyes; she moved to speak softly. “Travel safe, yeah? And text one of us to let us know that you got back safe. It’s a dangerous city.”

When Lily’s smile returned, and she nodded, Taylor smiled back and watched as she moved over to the two boys, following them down the street. Taylor glanced at Sabah and smiled before heading toward the car. Taylor slipped past the rest, and ducked into the passenger’s seat, leaving the other three to cram into the back. She flashed Maria a smile, chuckling at the wolfish grin she got in response.

“We dropping Miss Sabah off at her apartment? Or are you opening a Bed and Breakfast now.” Taylor sent the Latina woman a dark look, and she cackled before leaning back to make sure everyone was wearing a seatbelt. The woman pulled out into traffic and started off. Taylor was surprised when Sabah leaned forward and spoke.

“Thanks all of you, Lily’s.” She paused, and Taylor glanced back, seeing Victoria and Amy staring at the girl quietly as well. “She’s in a sensitive place. It meant a lot to her that you were all so friendly.” Taylor didn’t respond, and she was surprised when it was Amy that chimed in.

“She seems nice.” The healer said quietly. “It was a lot of fun chatting with her today, she kind of reminds me of Taylor. But like… younger, as ridiculous as that sounds.” The words were soft, and everyone in the backseat chuckled before agreeing. Taylor blinked quietly, considering the thought for a few moments before shrugging faintly. Lily was nice enough; she should take it as a compliment.

The trio in the back seat fell into a soft conversation, and Taylor glanced at Maria and tilted her head.

“Did you get those leftovers to Ralph?” She spoke softly, glancing over at Maria who let out a low chuckle as she weaved in and out of traffic, humming a faint tune. Taylor was grateful the PRT Trooper hadn't minded that she had been using her as a means of funnelling home cooked food and desserts to Ralph.

“He sends his thanks, but he told me to tell you to stop worrying about him. He wasn’t even hurt by Leviathan. It’s just a minor break, Taylor; he can take care of himself.” The woman glanced at her and Taylor rolled her eyes. The man had taken a big chunk of the building that she and Amy had been in when Leviathan attacked to the leg, and he’d still managed to drag himself over to check on her, and he was acting like she was being ridiculous.

“He’s divorced, and both of his kids are on the west coast, Maria,” Taylor spoke quietly. “If I didn’t send him food he’d eat nothing but takeout. He needs real food to heal.” She crossed her arms, ignoring Maria’s amused chuckles and turning her focus out to the streets beyond the window, quietly counting the lit street lights. It was a shame that she could barely get above four before
passing a burnt out or broken one and having to start over.

The rest of the drive had been quiet, an awkward silence descending over them as they’d headed back towards Taylor’s place after dropping Sabah off. The warmth of the evening seemed to drain out of the trio and Taylor was oddly happy to emerge into the cold when they stopped outside the house. She ended up unlocking the door and letting the others in, and they quietly slipped out of their shoes and Taylor accepted her jacket back from Amy, moving to take her things upstairs to change.

Victoria, the coward, was the first to escape, ducking out on patrol and Amy and Taylor were left standing quietly in the kitchen and studying each other for a few moments. Unable to take the awkward silence, Taylor moved over to the kettle and filled it up. She focused on that making two cups of tea and handing one over quietly. She slid into a seat at the table and studied Amy for a few moments before moving to speak tentatively.

“So. Lily seems nice.” She tried at first, watching as Amy slowly swirled a spoon in her tea and studied the murky liquid. The scant nod was her only response, and Taylor let out a faint sigh, rubbing quietly at her cheek. She considered the girl before her for a few moments before trying a different tack. “You mentioned while we were out that you’re heading back to school for the rest of the semester? Doing the half days like everyone else?” She spoke softly and watched as Amy glanced at her, nodding faintly before taking a drink of her tea. The silence continued to yawn between them, and Taylor frowned quietly as she glanced down at the table.

She sat in the silence, feeling it weigh down on her like a palpable presence, her fingers tracing the grain of the table. Her phone dinged at the same time as Amy’s, and they’d draw them out together, reading Lily’s message. The girl was home and getting ready for bed, and she’d sent out a thank you to them all, rather enjoying the company and the warm welcome to the bay. Taylor read the message and smiled softly, but when she glanced up, Amy had set her phone aside and was staring at her tea once more. With a deep sigh, Taylor finally moved to speak.

“Amy…” She tried, lacing her voice with concern. This drew a reaction from Amy who glanced up at her and stared into her. Taylor waited to see if she’d speak, but when Amy moved to glance back at her drink, Taylor let out a tired sigh and wondered how she was supposed to deal with this. She was surprised when Amy finally spoke, her voice low and quiet.

“I don’t need to know. It’s none of my business.” Taylor frowned when Amy stood up, tea in hand and headed toward the living room. She sat silently in her chair, slowly staring at her cooling drink.
and glancing toward the glowing light that came from the tv. She was tempted to go in there and say...something. But she wasn’t sure what she’d say to that. So she just sat quietly and watched the lights.

Eventually, when the tea had gone completely cold, Taylor stood and moved to empty it into the sink, rinsing the cup out and leaving it to be washed in the morning. She walked over to the hallway, peering in at Amy curled up in her nest watching some made for tv movie in silence. She stood in the doorway to the living room for a few moments, words trapped in the back of her throat before sighing and quietly ascending the steps.

She took her time getting ready for bed, brushing her teeth and changing, laying down in bed with her phone and quietly surfing the internet. She waited in the dark as the night drew on, and she wasn’t surprised when a few moments after the front door opened and closed, a somewhat heated conversation began on the floor below.

The words were soft enough that she couldn’t hear what they were discussing, and part of Taylor was tempted to go and open her door to better hear, or even better to go down and talk but as she shifted in bed, whatever was being said cut out, and the sound of stomping feet up the stairs caused her quickly duck back down into the bed and bunch the covers up around her. She wasn’t sure if she was relieved or worried when the door across the hall was the one that creaked open and slammed shut instead of her own.

She lay there in the dark, staring at the moonlight slowly stretching over the floor of her bedroom, faint strings of music emerged from across the hall. The sad chords continued for a while before things fell silent and Taylor drifted to asleep alone in her bed for the first time in nearly two weeks.

The first thing that she could hear was the ominous rumble from above and the flickers of emerald light. Taylor gently descended the steps of her porch, staring quietly up at the sky and shuddering at its burnt umber colour. Green lightning flashed and danced between the clouds that were dark and heavy in a way that promised rain, even the air itself feeling and scenting of an oncoming storm, but everything felt...tense. Barely restrained.

The ominous rumbling from above was the only thing that Taylor heard in the quiet streets as she walked across the dry grass, and came to a stop on the cracked pavement of the sidewalk, turning her gaze up and down the road. Glancing over her shoulder showed that Taylor’s house remained intact but up and down the street signs of destruction were everywhere.

Bodies in PRT issue clothing littered the street, but their faces were completely blank when Taylor leaned down to check. Taylor moved over the jeep that often sat just up the street, and she looked in, sighing when there was no sign of Maria or Ralph. Taylor slid into the jeep and shuddered at the view to the south of her house, an inky purple mist coating the street as far as she could see, the shattered and burned remains of her neighbour's houses peeking up and out of the mist.

She grabbed the CB and fiddled with the controls like Ralph had taught her, but the box seemed dead, and Taylor let out a sigh. She exited the jeep and turned toward the north when the sound suddenly flooded back in around. The long low scrape of metal on concrete was evident, and a massive steel dragon emerged from the silently burning houses to one side, his great wings flapping
as he dragged the bloody violently roaring shape of a serpentine dragon across the street and smashed through another home.

Taylor shuddered and moved to run up the street, glancing down the direction they’d gone, watching as the silver dragon flapped it’s wings and dug its claws into the serpentine dragon’s body, dragging it skyward and to the west. The sound of familiar screams drew her focus, and she turned, heading quickly to the north. She ran as fast as she could, the screams always coming as if from just around the corner, and she eventually rounded a corner to find a familiar sight.

Amy and Victoria stood on the street, frozen in place and facing each other. Amy had a cut on her head, blood flowing down one side of her face and her eye was swollen shut. Victoria was in the process of checking the wound over, and Taylor moved quickly over to them. She stared at the pair, watching as they stood silently as if frozen in time and staring at each other. Feeling almost like a voyeur as time went on, Taylor reached out, touching Amy’s shoulder and the pair snapped into activity, their lips moving silently.

Taylor could tell from their poses, and how they spoke that Victoria was upset, lecturing Amy as she checked the wound, Amy’s reactions were self-conscious but mostly unrepentant, and Taylor observed the interaction as she moved around the pair. She tried to read the words that Victoria was using but she got one in three, and that was only because Victoria was using the word ‘stupid’ an awful lot. When the action reset at the beginning and repeated, Taylor moved to look around to see what’d caused the injuries to Amy. She’d only been able to study the scene for a few moments before someone screaming Victoria’s name drew her gaze back to the pair.

Amy was the one screaming as she backed away from Victoria who stood stock still, staring in confusion down at her middle. Two thin blades emerged just above both of her kidneys, peeking out of the tattered outfit she wore. Taylor stared in horror as Victoria let out a wet cough, blood emerging from her lips. The blade vanished, and Victoria slowly slumped to her knees, falling forward onto the ground to reveal a tall thin woman with a cage-like mask on her head holding two kama’s coated in her best friends blood.

Another scream joined Amy’s, and it took Taylor a moment to realize that it was her own. He hand snapped out, and she moved without reacting, her hand pointed at the madly cackling figure who was waving the weapons threateningly. Cold satisfaction washed through Taylor as she felt the Force latch on, lifting the suddenly much less cheerful woman off the ground by her throat. She felt the woman struggle as she tightened her grip, saw the kama’s drop to the street as she flailed in the air. She saw Amy staring at her in horror, other capes emerging street around her to look at her in disgust, and she ignored them all as she clenched her fist and heard the sickening snap as the woman suddenly ceased her struggles.

Taylor dropped the suddenly dead weight with a meaty thump and stalked past the rest, moving to stare down at Victoria, taking in her red lips, and the pale colour of her skin. Taylor felt her skin crawling as she looked at the dull blue eyes that were staring back at her. Something began to well up in her, and she felt it building like a deep heat in her chest, and she released it with a scream of rage and anger that exploded outwards a wave of Malevolent Force energy that expanded outwards and scoured the entire street clear at an atomic level.
“Taylor! Taylor. Focus on me. Taylor” The words cut through the haze and Taylor’s eyes focused, locking onto the sparkling blue eyes of the eldest Dallon daughter. It took her a few moments to realize that the screaming in Taylor’s ears was coming from her own lips and she finally stopped, panting softly as she gripped her shirt all the tighter, as she tried to silence the savage beating of her heart.

The hands on her face kept her eyes locked on Victoria’s as suddenly she wanted to look away, to forget those broken, dull eyes she’d seen. Taylor tried to look away, to forget, but the grip was firm, and slowly, Taylor’s mind stopped whirling. It was just a nightmare. It was just a horrible nightmare. Taylor repeated the words softly until her shoulders slumped and only then did Victoria release her.

Taylor wanted to collapse back in bed, but she moved to gently push Victoria around the middle, where she’d seen the wounds. She got a strange look from Victoria and Taylor frowned before softly explaining.

“Y-You were hurt. Stabbed in the back…” She spoke softly, the words no doubt dripping with pathetic worry. She tried to finish, to say that Victoria had died, but the words died on her lips, and the other girl reached out, gently wrapping her arms around Taylor and dragging her close. Taylor clung to Victoria quietly, burying her face in the other girl's neck.

“I’m sorry; I’m so sorry that I wasn’t there.” It took her a few moments to realize that it wasn't Victoria speaking but herself, and it took a monumental effort to stop as Victoria tightened her hold. Taylor wasn’t sure how long she continued to shake in the other girl's arms but eventually, her shaking stopped, and she glanced up to see Amy watching them with concern. The girl seemed to study her for a moment before flashing her an almost apologetic look and stepping back, slowly closing the door in her wake.

Taylor gently shifted back from Victoria, quietly wiping at her eyes and shivering at the loss of warmth. She flushed darkly when she saw the raw concern reflected in Victoria’s eyes. She did her best to let out a weak chuckle as she rubbed at her cheek.

“S-Sorry. Th-That was a b-bad one.” She rubbed her arm nervously glancing away. She felt the hand grasp her chin and she resisted as the other girl drew her face back towards her, staring nervously at Victoria, hating how weak she felt. She studied the concerned look in those eyes before opening her mouth, though no words came out.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t here. I just. I got in a fight with Amy and…” She trailed off, and Taylor guessed what the and was. She did her best to draw up a self-deprecating smile to play it off, but she suspected it looked like more of a grimace.

“You don’t…” Taylor paused, biting her lip and rubbing at her eyes that wouldn’t stop tearing up. “You don’t have to apologize Victoria. Sometimes people need space. I should be the one saying sorry.” She spoke softly, turning to look away from Victoria, her voice dropping to little more than a whisper. “I’m the one that couldn’t last one night on my own.” Taylor felt Victoria’s eyes burning into the side of her face, but she couldn’t bring herself to look back.

They sat like this for a few moments before Victoria gently turned her. Taylor tried to speak up, tried to say something but the words died in her throat and she allowed Victoria to guide her back down onto her side, allowed the other girl to wrap her arms around her and drag her close. Taylor lay there quietly, feeling the other girl’s warmth soaking into her back, staring at the wall.
“I-” The words died on her damp lips, all the things she wanted to say evaporating off her tongue as she studied at the moonlight washing over the wall in front of her. In the end, she was only able to utter two of the words that kept swirling ephemerally around her head.

“I’m sorry.” The words were wet with tears, and Taylor found her hand scrubbing exhaustedly at her eyes, wishing that they would just stop. When Victoria’s arms tightened around her, Taylor shivered and slowly relaxed.

“It’s okay.” The words were whispered into her dark hair over and over. Taylor didn’t know if Victoria understood enough to say something like that, but the words soothed her frayed mind, the repetition slowly washing Taylor into a blissful dreamless slumber.

Chapter End Notes

[[So uh. That. Was a thing. Welcome to the longest chapter I’ve ever written. (Fun fact, when I put this through Grammarly, it had 234 'non-critical' errors.) This chapter was an odd one to write. It flowed in spurts, and it took nearly like… 6 hours to get it all out. Which is rare. Usually, I can do about 5k in like 2, with another hour for proofing.

So we got to explore Lily’s burgeoning friendship with the group, and the escalating awkwardness with Amy, Taylor, and Vicki. Also horrifying nightmares. Next chapter is going to be a Wards chapter. First Post Leviathan joint patrol. And our first Vicky perspective since Danny showed up in 5.1. Should, be neat.

I always welcome your feedback, and hopefully, I didn't spew out a ten thousand word pile of steaming garbage, cause this chapter was super tricky to proof and write. As always, hope you nerds are having a good day.]]
Victoria lay quietly on her back, doing her best to avoid fidgeting too much so as not to disturb the girl curled into her side and sleeping somewhat peacefully. She considered the tiny frown on Taylor’s face and briefly felt a flicker of wry amusement wash through her. Considering the packed itinerary for the remainder of the day, Victoria really should have tried to get more than the three hours of sleep that she’d had. But despite the warmth wrapped around her and the flickering feeling of safety that holding Taylor close often engendered, she’d found herself unable to drift off; her mind focused on considering the girl that lay beside her.

Something profound had changed, Victoria was sure of that, but she couldn’t figure out what. Even their positions were different; typically Victoria had served as the big spoon when they slept in the same bed. In truth, they’d started out that way, but in her sleep, Taylor had rolled over and as if seeking confirmation that she was still there had buried herself into Victoria’s chest. Eventually, they’d ended up in their current position, with Victoria stretched out on her back and Taylor wrapped around her left side.

Victoria was good and truly trapped, which was a downside, but she wasn’t eating Taylor’s voluminous hair like most mornings, and that made the situation overall net positive. That the position also allowed her to consider Taylor’s face at ‘rest’ was a fringe benefit that Victoria hadn’t expected to find so fascinating. She’d spent enough time with Taylor lately to understand her expressions, and she found it odd to see Taylor without that subtle half smirk that so often lingered on her face.

The almost pervasive hint of sadness that clung to her frame was a bit more concerning, though it seemed to fade whenever Victoria drew her close, and Taylor merely looked at peace, something that the blonde could so very rarely say about the other hero. The sunlight creeping over the floor hinted that they’d soon need to be up, and Victoria reached out a hand, moving to snag her phone as carefully as she could. She briefly considered the screen and noting that they had some time before they had to be up.

The unread messages blinking drew her attention, and she opened up the SMS app and skimmed through them. Three from Dean were casually erased, one from her mother reminding her that she needed to head to the PRT building after her classes and that she should make sure that Taylor and
her sister knew to be there as well. She flipped through the last message, smirking at the quick comment from Lily about how Taylor had told her to let them know that she got home safe.

She quickly used her one hand to swipe out a comment to the other superhero about it being lucky for the criminals that she hadn’t run into any trouble and then adding a quick comment about how they’d be doing a joint training session this afternoon, and she looked forward to seeing Lily ‘in action’. She moved to set her phone down glancing back at Taylor and nearly jumping at the wide expressive brown eyes that were staring up her clouded in confusion.

“Vic?” Victoria had expected Taylor to react poorly to the much more intimate pose, but she found herself smiling when the still mostly asleep girl had wrapped her arms tighter around her middle, Taylor’s face quickly finding it’s way into the crook of her neck to block out the light. The deep inhalation before a muffled question about the time saw a chuckle bubbling up out of her chest. Half asleep Taylor was rather amusing to behold, Victoria had to admit.

Instead of responding immediately, Victoria waited, and it was apparent the moment Taylor’s mind cleared enough to catch on cause the girl’s entire body froze. Rather than let her scrabble away, Victoria curled the arm that Taylor had been laying on around the girl and held her close and after a few moments the tension slowly bled out of Taylor. Victoria gently loosened her hold and watched as Taylor drew back. She was surprised at the profoundly vulnerable look in the dark-haired girl’s eyes when she leaned back.

She tilted her head to the side when Taylor’s lips parted, and the girl seemed to try and work up the courage to say something, but after a few moments, Taylor just shut her mouth and glanced away quietly as her cheeks heated. Victoria lofted an eyebrow at the girl as she collected herself, watching as the other girl’s walls seemed to rebuild themselves right before her eyes, her expression smoothing out and her back slowly straightening. Something in her stirred and Victoria reached out a hand, gently pushing Taylor’s hair back over her ear.

Victoria was tempted to laugh as Taylor’s work to corral her emotions instantly frayed, and that vulnerable look drifted in her direction once more. Taylor stared at her quietly, as if trying to see through her. Victoria softly tilted her head to the side, flashing Taylor a warm smile that saw the girl’s shoulders loosening once more. This time it was her that opened her mouth and tried to speak, finding the works lacking once more. Moving forward she gently nudged Taylor’s shoulder with her own.

“How about you take your shower first today. I’ll whip up something for breakfast.” The look of concern that flickered over the other girl’s face was amusing to Victoria who stuck out her tongue. “I think I can manage fried egg sandwiches.” She snorted softly and moved to slide over to the side of the bed, getting her feet under her and doing a single long stretch that set her back to cracking before slipping out of the room.

Descending the steps with practiced ease, she took a moment to peer in at Amy. The lump of a girl was buried under the blanket nest she’d created, a few tufts of wild brown hair peeking out of the dark gray blankets. Victoria loomed in the doorway for a few moments, considering the angry ‘discussion’ that they’d had. The angry words drifted in her mind, and she rubbed at her face, turning and heading toward the kitchen.

Carefully picking through the fridge, and finding things in the cupboard, she set to work quickly frying up the last few eggs. She rifled through the remaining deli meat and set the bread to toasting. They’d need to go grocery shopping soon; she made a note to herself as she worked. She set the stove to heating, placing a pan on it and adding a dash of oil. As the cookware heated, she moved...
over to the old radio, connecting her phone to it and setting some music to play.

She worked quietly, doing small little dance steps as she worked and soon she had a sandwich complete. As she was carefully removing it from the pan, Victoria heard an awkward shuffle of socked feet on hardwood that could have been Taylor or Amy. She shifted to glance back, but the scent of freshly washed hair struck her and slim arms in starched sleeves wrapped around her middle. If that wasn’t a big enough hint as to who it was, someone quickly muttering thanks into her hair before stealing the plate with the food on the counter before her, told her who it was.

Victoria glanced over her shoulder at Taylor who sat at the table and looked innocent while nibbling at the sandwich she’d purloined. She rolled her eyes, having intended on giving it to Taylor anyway and moved back to prepare the next. The tired yawn from the doorway saw her glancing back to see her sister looking much like a freckled lion as she blinked tiredly in the light.

The brunette moved to take a seat at the table, rubbing tiredly at her face and glancing between Taylor and her. The worst of the bite in her eyes had faded, and Victoria guessed that Amy had at least heard what’d happened last night. She considered Amy for a few moments before setting a plate before her. The muttered thanks were a surprise, and she shifted back to the stove.

“I’d suggest eating quickly.” She commented, glancing over at Amy when she perked up. “We both need to shower before school, and we’ve got maybe an hour and a half.” Vicky pulled her phone out of pyjama pocket, checking the face quietly before shaking her head. She turned back to the stove, moving to make a final sandwich for herself, humming softly as the faint sound of the others eating mingled with the soft music playing.

It’d taken some doing, but they’d managed to all get their showers and off to class, Taylor walking them to the bus stop before starting on her morning exercises. Victoria wasn’t terribly surprised when she found herself sitting on a separate bench from her sister on the bus.

Amy had spent much of the ride staring at her like she was a particularly tricky puzzle that required solving. Victoria had eventually grown tired of this, and she had ended up putting in her headphones, and pulling up the deep hood of her sweater and staring out the window in silence. Watching the various work crews up and down the street working to replace the multiple bits of damaged infrastructure had been more exciting than taking in that that conflicted look in Amy’s eyes.

Her morning classes had been equally dull, the teachers lecturing quietly, and the work had piled on as exams got closer. This had led to Victoria mostly skipping out on her lunch, quietly eating some chips as she sat with her books spread out around her on the lunchroom table. The headphones hanging from her ears stilled the excited chattering of the students around her, and she was currently trying and failing to channel Taylor as she tried to figure out what sort of thought-provoking Essay she could do on Ishmael of all things.

She was considering taking the book’s major themes and exploring them in contrast to the cape culture when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck standing up, and she slowly glanced up from her books. She saw the rest of the bored people at her table staring at her in confusion. She glanced around seeing everyone at the nearby tables looking. She finally let her gaze drift over to her old ‘usual’ table, seeing all her ‘friends’ sitting at it with a concerned looking Amy, and a distinct lack of
Dean. With a wince and a sigh of trepidation, she reached up and removed her headphones the utter silence of the cafeteria greeting her.

“-toria?” She slowly pushed the hood off her head, turning to look at Dean who seemed to do a doubt take, stepping back quietly as he suddenly seemed to look at her. She stared at him blankly for a few moments, taking in his expectant look as it returned. When he didn’t speak, she gestured to the headphones hanging out the collar of her sweater before speaking.

“Sorry, I had my music in, did you say something? I must have missed it.” She stared at him blankly, and part of her was faintly amused when his cheeks coloured in anger. The expression on his face grew angrier, and Victoria bit her lip when she realized that he must have caught onto her feelings.

“I said; Why have you been avoiding me and the rest of your friends, Victoria?” His eyes were flinty, and his voice drifted out laced with anger. Victoria glanced around at the people all watching with rapt for a moment before blowing out a breath and slipping to her feet. She reached out and grabbed his arm, ignoring his instinctive flinch and look of confusion when she just grabbed him and dragged him out of the cafeteria. She came to a stop in the hallway outside, standing silently next to a vending machine and turning to stare at the confused look on Dean's face. “How?—”

“I learned how to shut my shield off; everything else is tied into it, so that’s probably why you can read me.” She ignored the shocked look on his face and glanced around before turning back to him once she was sure that no one was listening. “As for why I’ve been avoiding you, Dean, I thought that I made that perfectly clear the last time that we spoke.” She saw his face darken as he clenched his fists quietly.

“I—” He tried to cut in, but she just glared at him until he faltered and took a nervous step back. When he didn’t try to justify himself again, she slid her hands into her pockets.

“I told you that we’re done Dean, so that’s why I haven’t been answering your calls or texts. I don’t want to talk to you.” She spoke softly and then gestured at the cafeteria. “As for the others, I’ve been sitting less than three feet from all of you, and none of you could tell without my aura to draw your attention. So that’s why I haven’t been trying to get their attention.” She shook her head quietly.

“It’s pretty clear that they’re not actually my friends Dean if not one of them could pick me out from less than three feet, no matter how ‘worried’ they claimed to be. Like, I waited, you know? I sat here for the first week, and I wondered how long it’d take. At this point?” Victoria crossed her arms quietly. When Dean moved to open his mouth, she shook her head and spoke. “I’ve got other friends now, Dean. They seem to like me for me.” She spoke faintly, glancing off toward the cafeteria doors with a soft frown.

“Is Taylor Hebert one of these friends?” It’d taken a few moments for Dean to respond and his tone was laced with a faint hint of resentment. Victoria glanced over at him and found herself frowning at the look on his face. Something in her chest stirred at that expression, and she moved toward him. She ignored him flinching back and jabbed her finger into his chest, pushing him again until he hit the wall, though he continued to stare at her in confusion.

“Don’t.” She said quietly, her voice low and cool. He seemed to stare back at her in confusion, and she spoke softly, keeping her finger pressed into his chest. “Leave Taylor out of this. It’s none of your business. I’m none of your business, stop calling me. Stop texting me, and stop going places looking for me, Dean. We’re done.” She stepped back and stared at him. When he merely furrowed his brow and didn’t respond, Victoria turned away, intent on returning to her homework and her chips. She had taken two steps when his voice drifted over toward her.
“I don’t know what she did to you, Victoria, but you’ve changed.” His voice was low and laced with concern, and she paused. “Ever since that first time she put you down in the bank, you’ve been different. You even look different, and it’s all her fault. I don’t know what she did, but I’m—” Victoria rounded on him, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and pushing him back into the wall. She stared at him coldly and then she tapped into her power, feeling her shield spreading over her skin, her aura ramping up.

“Do I still look different, Dean?” The familiar glint washed into his eyes before his entire face paled and she slowly pushed him up off the ground, keeping him pinned to the wall, letting his feet hang and speaking softly.

“You want to know what she did, Dean? Do you want to know why I’m so different?” Victoria spoke slowly, staring into Dean’s terrified eyes, knowing that it wasn’t her aura doing this to him. She stared at him coldly and watched as he shifted nervously against the wall as she stepped closer, staring into his horrified eyes. “She called me on my shit. She didn’t let me get away with anything, and when I fucked up? When everything blew up in my face? She gave me a place where I could learn to be normal again. She saw everything in my life collapsing, and she tried to fix it because she cares about me.”

“She sees me, Dean. Me, Victoria. Not Glory Girl, or Alexandria light, not this aura. I dropped it, and she never commented on my changing because she’s immune to it. She saw a girl hurting and took pity on her, and she decided to be my friend because she likes me. She helped me find joy in something that wasn’t smashing shit with my fists.” Victoria spoke slowly, staring at him before withdrawing her aura and shield, smoothly releasing her shield and opening her hand to let Dean crash to the floor in front of her. She stepped back, ignoring the worried looking food service workers standing nearby. She stared down at Dean who was collecting himself before shaking her head in disgust and turning to walk away.

“Vicky! Wait, I—” His voice trailed after her, but she ignored it, moving toward the table she’d been sat at. She slammed her books shut and stuffed them back into her bag quickly, grabbing her snack and shoving it into the pocket of her worn sweater. She turned to leave, seeing Dean storming toward her. She clenched her fists quietly, but let out a soft sigh when Amy appeared and intercepted the boy, pulling him to the side. Victoria wanted to flash a thankful smile to Amy, but instead, she just ducked out of the cavernous room and headed for her next class.

Calculus was oddly silent. Victoria had half expected someone from the staff or one of her old friends to try and speak with her about what had happened, and while she’d received a few glances, she was largely left to her own devices. She made the best of her time, working on her book and doing what homework she could ahead of time. The class got out, and most of the students vanished as soon as the bell rang, and Victoria found herself speaking quickly with the teacher.
Ms. Chase was one of the few teachers who’d actually warmed to her after she’d lost the aura, and she spent a few minutes quietly discussing the assignments with her before the woman’s next class began to trickle in, and Victoria excused herself. She slowly plodded through the emptying halls, exiting the building to find Amy waiting near the main gates. She walked up to her sister, tilting her head quietly when Amy fell into step with her without speaking.

“Sorry.” They’d made it halfway to the bus stop before Amy’s voice drifted up from behind her, ghosting quietly through the chilly spring afternoon. Victoria paused and glanced at her phone. They had nearly ten minutes to kill before the next bus. She shifted and glanced at Amy, speaking softly.

“Sorry? Sorry for what, Amy? Sorry for siccing Dean on me? Sorry for the shit that you said to me last night?” She stared at her sister quietly, and a small flicker of satisfaction curled in her gut when Amy actually flinched at the words. She watched as her sister took a moment to collect her thoughts before speaking.

“I didn’t—” She sighed. “I didn’t mean to let Dean know you were there. He just. He started talking about how you were going to get in trouble for missing so much school and I just sort of let it slip that you weren’t skipping class.” Amy rubbed at her face, and Victoria stared at her for a few moments. When Amy didn’t continue, she turned and walked toward the bus stop. It took a few moments for her sister to catch back up, and she paused when the girl grabbed her arm.

“I. Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I didn’t think he’d do anything like...that.” Amy stared at her worriedly, and Victoria quietly rolled her eyes, moving back toward the bus stop. She made it into the glass enclosure and stood there silently as Amy loomed nearby. The girl stared at the street quietly, something hanging around her shoulders. Victoria waited and true to her expectations; words came from Amy.

“I—” She paused and took a breath. “I’m sorry I yelled at you last night. I just-” She glanced at her hands quietly, picking at her fingernails. “I just thought that.” She stopped and sighed, kicking quietly at the pavement. When she didn’t elaborate, Victoria sighed.

“I can guess what you thought, Amy. You’re wrong.” She spoke softly and frowned when Amy shrugged up a shoulder. She studied the girl for a moment before speaking.

“I know. I uh.” She coughed softly before speaking. “I asked Taylor about it last night. She said it wasn’t like -that- but I didn’t believe her. Not until.” The last two words were said in a worried whisper, and Vicky frowned, feeling something flickering in her chest.

“Why Amy?” The words seemed to startle her sister, and the girl shrugged her shoulders glancing back at her.

“I just. I was there, and you were… I knew that you’d been sharing a bed, and I—” Victoria frowned and waved Amy off.

“No, I get that much. I can see how someone would look at the situation and come to that conclusion, Amy. I meant why are you acting like this. You asked Taylor something like that and then basically called her a liar.” Victoria watched the flash of guilt that flickered over her sister’s face.

“You treated me like shit last night and made me feel guilty about comforting my friend. Talking about telling mom like that was a low blow, Amy. Accusing me of stealing your friends was low.”
She stared at Amy quietly and watched as the girl flinched and shrunk a bit before glancing away.

“I just- I like her.” The words were tiny, and Victoria rubbed at her face, leaning against the cool glass. “She was my friend first, and I.” She paused, tugging at the zipper of her jacket and let out a tiny noise between a whimper and sigh. “I was jealous.” The last few words were spoken in a soft whisper, and Victoria let out an involuntary snort that saw Amy glaring in her direction. She endured the look with a flinty one of her own before speaking softly.

“She’s my friend too, Amy. And because of what you said to me last night, I wasn’t there for her and I had to hold her as she cried in my arms.” Victoria’s voice was soft, and she watched as Amy slowly glanced away from her and tugged at her jacket. “She’s been there for me through a lot of hard shit, Amy, she supported me through some pretty dark moments over the last month, and now she needs me, and I’m going to be there for her.” She rubbed at her face before glancing out the glass enclosure at the dreary sky.

“If you’re that into her, Amy. Say something about it. The worst that can happen is that she says no.” She spoke softly before sticking her hands into the pockets of her jeans, frowning darkly. “Otherwise, someone else might beat you to it.” Victoria ignored the tightening in her chest at that comment and just turned her focus onto the street. Seeing the bus rumbling toward them was a blessed relief, and she moved to stand up taller. Amy produced her bus pass and waited at the stop, and Victoria slid her headphones in as she followed.

The girls once again ended up in different parts of the bus, and Victoria quietly watched the dreary sky open up as the bus rumbled toward college. The rain was gentle, a stark contrast to the torrential downpour of two weeks before, and Victoria watched the droplets of water tracing complicated patterns along the cold glass. The gentle rumble of the bus under her soothed her frayed nerves as the soft music drifted into her ears. Victoria was lucky that the college was only a half dozen stops away, and she was able to stand and exit before both lulled her to sleep.

The gentle nudge roused her from sleep, and Victoria whined softly, curling into the warm body that she’d been resting on. The low chuckle rumbling through the form saw her letting out a tired groan and sitting up quietly. She glanced around the back seat of the jeep, glancing over at Taylor when she noticed that were still in traffic. The girl flashed her an apologetic smile.

“Maria suggested that you might not want to get an image snapped of you drooling on my shoulder. Apparently, the press is out since they heard that this is the first time the Wards will be meeting after Leviathan’s attack.” Victoria took a moment to wipe her mouth before blushing that there was indeed a wet spot on Taylor’s shoulder. The girl flashed her a look laced with mirth and understanding and Victoria took a few moments getting her features smoothed out.

True to Maria’s prediction, a few minutes later they pulled up outside the PRT HQ, and the cameras were indeed flashing wildly when they arrived. The door to the building opened, and Amy slipped out of the passenger seat first, smiling politely at the cameras. Taylor was out next, her polite fake smile firmly in place. She completely ignored the wild questions from the press about her father, though Victoria saw the girl’s jaw tightening as they were asked. A hand was offered into the jeep, and she accepted it, allowing Taylor to help her out.
Instead of responding to the questions the trio quickly vanished into the building. Walking across the lobby that was still being repaired was a breath of fresh air. The woman at the desk promptly checked their ID’s before scanning them through and pointing them through a door. Maria escorted them into a changing room.

Victoria felt a moment of panic seeing her new costume laid out on the bench, and she slid over wondering who’d gone into Taylor’s room to retrieve it when she finally noticed that it was a copy, not the one she’d be using for patrols. The lack of patched tears was most telling. She carefully lifted it up, feeling a bump on the neck part that hinted at the subvocal mic. She let out a soft sigh and checked for Parian’s emblem on the back, wondering when the other cape had arranged this, and why she hadn’t said anything.

Victoria glanced up, realizing that the others had vanished into changing stalls already and she moved quickly, disappearing into the remaining one. She was halfway into her outfit when the sound of her phone dinging along with Amy and Taylors nearly saw her ending up on her ass. She flailed around trying to grab it when Taylor’s voice emerged over the top of the stall.

“It’s Lily. She says that she’s waiting outside with Maria. She wants to walk in with us.” Taylor’s voice was laced with amusement, and Victoria stopped trying to reach her phone, focusing on getting her uniform on and settled. She adjusted the sash for a few moments before opening the door and stepping out with her head held high. She glanced at Taylor who looked almost casual despite the faint amusement visible in her eyes.

She glanced over at Amy who was adjusting her heavy cloak, and when the girl glanced up, she lifted an eyebrow. Her sister nodded, and then they both smiled at Taylor and exited the room. Opening the door saw Maria leaning casually against it. She glanced at them, smirked and offered a quick salute before heading toward the front desk, her job done. Lily was there in her full costume. She seemed to shrink a bit before spinning.

“What’s Lily?” She asked, standing nervously. Victoria tilted her head in amusement when Taylor tilted her head, rubbing her chin in thought. Amy punched Taylor in the shoulder before turning to Lily.

“You look great. Have you done anything with the rest of the Wards yet?” The girl spoke casually, and Lily shook her head, taking a moment to adjust her visor quietly before responding.

“I spoke with Weld and Aegis when I arrived, but this is my first training session.” She seemed nervous, and Victoria noted the odd concerned look in Amy’s eyes before humming. The others glanced at her and Taylor leaned back at the grin on her face. The black haired girl pointed at her.

“Whatever that is about,” Taylor spoke before shaking her head. “I want nothing to do with it.” Victoria pouted before putting on an affronted look.

“I just wanted to have Flechette here give the right impression for her first arrival in uniform.” The other stared at her before Victoria sidled up to the girl’s left arm. “Might you do me the honour of escorting me?” She commented playfully. Lily stared at her in confusion for a moment. Victoria wasn’t sure what she should think of the girl glancing at Taylor before nervously offering her an arm. Victoria took it before coughing loudly and glancing at Amy.

She saw the rebellious look on her sister’s face before Amy let out a sigh and a muttered ‘very well’ before sidling up to Lily’s other side and taking her arm without waiting. Victoria was amused when it was Amy that dragged them along, but she and Lily soon matched the healer’s pace. Taylor walked
Victoria smirked when she felt Lily’s steps slowing as they approached the sound of conversation. She didn’t slow, and Amy seemed to catch on, and they burst through the double doors into the Wards lounge, practically dragging poor Lily between them. The conversation in the room drifted to a sudden stop, as everyone glanced over. The entire Wards roster, barring Browbeat, was present and everyone seemed confused at the view until Lily nervously spoke up.

“Look what I found?” She tried softly; her voice laced with nervousness. Victoria glanced at Lily’s bright red cheeks, and when she looked back, she saw that everyone else had done the same. The silence dragged out for a few awkward moments until Kid Win let out a soft snort and called out softly.

“Clock, even the new girl is more of a Ladies Man than you.” The gasp of outrage from Dennis was astoundingly loud in the silence then everyone burst into laughter. The ice well and truly broken, the group descended on them and introductions were spread around with wild abandon as everyone introduced themselves to the new wards.

When the large doors of the Wards lounge swung open the group fell silent, knowing that the time for mingling had ended. Currently, in a loose knot of people that contained most of the younger half of New Wave, along with Lily and Kid Win, Victoria glanced over when Miss Militia, her uncle Neil and a new cape entered the room. The group turned toward the trio as they came to a stop at the front of the room. The group considered them quietly for a few moments before the new cape spoke up.

“Greetings. My name is Eltar.” He stepped forward, and Victoria took in his costume. The man wore a set of black pants with a white top. On top of the basic outfit, he had a black and gold belt with a large triangle on it, a large golden shoulder pad, and a pair of heavy leather gauntlets. His face was covered in a featureless grey mask with two dark eyes that peeked out of an odd cowled hood that fed into his loose shirt. The figure stood in place and glanced around at the group.

“Typically, I don’t need to introduce myself to a group twice, but since we have new faces,” The man gestured to New Wave before continuing. “I’ll indulge myself. I’m generally in charge of inter-team training exercises, though I’m currently in Brockton Bay supervising Watchdog while Myrrdin recovers back in Chicago.” Victoria blinked, glancing around. Taylor looked surprised as well, but most of the others weren’t, and she didn’t speak up.

“When Myrrdin was taken off the active Roster, I was sent here to serve two purposes. I’m helping with the Thinkers in the wake of Ares ongoing interruption of predictive thinker powers, and I’m here to evaluate all of you for your futures in the Protectorate.” He paused at Neil’s cough and chuckled. “Those of you in the Wards, that is, though I imagine my findings will have some sort of effect on the funding directed to New Wave.” He turned to peer at Neil who smirked back at him and then glanced back at the rest.

“So with that information in mind, we’ll be moving onto why you’re here. Your team leaders were told to inform you that you’d be out of communication tonight and Saturday, is that alright?” The man studied them all and when no one complained he nodded smoothly. “Excellent. So, I’m sure
you’re all curious about what this is all about.” the man clapped his gauntleted hands and chuckled.

“So. Who here has heard of Capture the Flag?” He glanced around at the group, and a low chuckle emerged from him at the various looks of disbelief that were no doubt pointed at him. “Then you’ve all heard of it, excellent. Makes things easier. We’ll be dividing you into two equally sized teams, and you’ll be dropped five miles apart in the Oregon Wilderness. The first team to get the other team’s flag gets a prize. Simple enough, yes?” Victoria could tell by his voice that he was grinning and she rubbed at her face. The man took a beat, letting them soak the information in before casually stepping to the side.

“So. Teams then. Now to warn you, don’t try to take all the members of your home team with you, I’ll force you to trade em around. Now to start with our team leaders…” He considered the groups before clapping his hands. One hand pointed to her uncle and the other to… Vista.

“You, Vista. You’ll be leading Team One with the aid of Manpower. Step on up there with him.” Vicky watched in amusement as the confused girl slid to her feet and went to stand with the massive bear of a man that was her uncle. The man glanced over the group before selecting the other team captain that surprised no one.

“And Team two, your chaperone will be Miss Militia, and your Team Leader will be, Vigil.” He waved, and Victoria glanced over, watching as Taylor nervously moved over to stand next to the flag wearing cape.

This was a terrible idea, Taylor thought to herself as she stood nervously next to Miss Militia. She glanced around as the hooded figure prattled on about the exercise, and where they’d be working, but she couldn’t wholly focus on her words, nervously tugging on her gloves. Once Taylor was sure her gloves were on she glanced up only to realize that everyone was staring silently at her. She flushed a bit as she glanced around and peered up at Eltar.

“Pardon?” She asked nervously flushing at the man’s chuckle.

“I said, did you have any preference about choosing first.” He repeated himself congenially, and Taylor slowly shook her head. She rather wanted to go first and choose Victoria, but she did her best to seem calm and collected, glancing up at the taller man as he glanced at Vista. The girl smirked over at Taylor and hummed before pointing. The crowd parted, and Taylor blinked in confusion as Dean stepped forward in his power suit.

“Excuse me,” Oddly, it was Aegis of all people who chimed in. “Gallant is actually off the active roster-” The masked man lazily waved a hand.

“This is training; he should be included.” Taylor glanced over at the others and saw Dean leaning in and muttering something into Vista’s ear. The masked man glanced at her and Taylor pointed at Victoria. The blonde walked over and nudged her and Taylor felt some of her trepidation falling away.

Vista selected her teammates with an odd tactic, not focusing on a team synergy but mainly trying to break up Taylors. When Taylor picked Vicky, she took Amy. When Taylor took Crystal, Vista took
Eric. On and on it went. Aegis ended up with Vista, and Weld and Kid Win ended up on Taylor’s team. Flechette and Clockblocker were the last two left standing and Taylor let out a sigh when Vista chose Lily and left Taylor with Clockblocker. She flashed the boy a friendly smile, and he nodded as he joined her knot of people.

“Seems like a fair mix!” The man spoke lazily and then hummed. “Now. For the rules. I should warn you that your chaperones will be remaining with each objective to ensure that you all play fair.” He glanced at each group, getting nods, and then pulled out two different coloured pennants. The White and Gold one was handed to Taylor, and the Black and Blue one was given to Vista.

“So we’ll be dropping you about twenty miles from mount hood, there won’t be any around for about forty miles. When you arrive, you will tie these to a tree within 15 feet of your arrival point. You will not be allowed to move your own pennant once you affix it. You’re objective is to capture your opponent's pennant and bring it back before they have a chance to steal yours. If your pennant is taken, then the only way you win is by recovering your own while holding your opponents. Everyone following so far?” He glanced around and then waved a hand continuing.

“You’ve all done power-free training before; I expect you all to comport yourself with the care and precision necessary to avoid injuring your training partners. That being said you are expected to use your powers to achieve your goals. Work together, discuss strategies, and know that we’ll all be watching you.” Taylor glanced over and blinked when Lily moved to hold up a hand. She blinked when the man unhooked a bag and offered it over. Seeing everyone’s confused looks the man chuckled.

“Flechette could probably win by killing you all with her power, but that wouldn’t be sporting. She’ll be using special rounds in her arbalest that won’t pump you full of holes if you get hit with one of these. Assume that you’re ‘dead’ and that you’re out of the game. Alright. Any questions?” The man stared at them for barely ten seconds before clapping his hands. “Sunsets in a bit over an hour, if no one has both flags before then you all lose. Good luck.” The man snapped his fingers and Taylor flinched as everything dissolved in a flash of glowing blue-white light.

The light cleared and Taylor felt a shiver wash through her as she glanced around at the start wilderness around them. She glanced around and let out a sigh seeing that the rest of her team had arrived near her. She moved toward them and they all clustered up, glancing about quietly. Everyone stood in silence for a few moments before letting out a nervous chuckle.

“So uh. How’re we gonna do this.” It was Kid Win that spoke up first. He gestured around. “Seems like we ended up with all the fastest movers between you three.” the tinker pointed at Taylor, Victoria, and Crystal. “And me.” He rapped his board. “Figure we could all go in hard maybe? Leave these two to guard our flag.” Taylor glanced down at the flag in her hand before inspecting the men.

“That could be an issue.” She spoke softly and watched as the others glanced at her. “They’ve got Lily with that instant kill bow. If she hits these two, we’re out. They get our flag. Then it’s a matter if we can get it away from them. If I had their roster, I’d turtle hard with everyone but Lily and a maybe… Vista?” She shrugged quietly.
“Vista and Lily come for ours, Lily takes out our defenders, and Vista gets them back fast while the entire rest of their team keeps us from taking their flag.” Taylor gestured around with a faint huff.

“Wouldn’t be Vista.” Taylor blinked when the Clockblocker spoke, studying the face of his helmet quietly. The others followed her gaze, and he rubbed at his neck. “She couldn’t be the one to get Lily here fast. Her powers are Manton Limited. Plants aren’t as bad as people to them, but they still interfere, with all these trees?” He shook his head.

“She wouldn’t be much help. She’d be better staying in a clearing with the Pennant. She can keep flyers away from it.” He shrugged and fell silent. The metal boy, Weld, was the next to speak up, rubbing slowly rubbing his chin quietly.

“Do they have any other movement powers?” He glanced over at us, and Taylor looked at Victoria who shrugged.

“Eric.” She spoke softly. “But he’s the slowest Mover on New Wave. He flies much slower than any of us. If they’re relying on him to get Lily here, we’d be pretty set.” She hummed faintly before letting out a faint sigh. “Considering the weird team she has, it might be worth trying the shock and awe technique.” The blonde glanced over at Taylor curiously, and Taylor sighed.

She was tempted to release the block keeping the Noetikon locked off, to ask Marr or Jolee what she should do, but after a moment she firmed her resolve. This was a test for her, and she should do it herself. She adjusted her outfit before glancing at the others.

“Do you two think you could defend the flag?” The words were soft, and the two boys nodded quickly.

“Alright. We’ll do it like this. Laserdream, GG, you two go in hard with Win behind you serving as covering fire. I’ll come in from the side as they try to keep you off. If we can get there fast enough, we can get their flag before Lily gets over here.” The whole group nodded quietly and then Taylor nodded and looked around silently. All the trees looked the same to her. Deciding to leave it up to the rest, she waved the flag around and spoke.

“Now, where to put the flag?” They all glanced around, and when Weld pointed to a particular tree that was in cover from half a dozen others, she moved over and secured the pennant to it. Miss Militia who’d been silently watching drew out a small pistol and gestured them back. She pointed it upwards, and a single blue flare launched into the sky.

A few moments later a matching blue flare went screaming into the sky from a vaguely northward direction. Taylor glanced at Miss Militia who smiled behind her scarf.

“The game is afoot. Off you go.” Taylor glanced at Crystal and Victoria, and they offered her thumbs up. Swallowing her trepidation, Taylor glanced at Kid Win who was staring at his board. He was about to say something when Crystal just scooped him up Bridal style and floated upwards. The vague request that no one tells Clockblocker about this was lost to the wind. Victoria smoothly launched up after the two blondes and Taylor leapt up into the canopy.

She dipped into the Force, feeling it’s familiar warmth washing through her veins and she stood taller. She glanced up at the others watching as Crystal threw Kid Win into the air, and the kid’s board shot from his back and secured to his feet. The two blondes hovered down around her and Kid Win made small circles. She glanced at them, and after seeing them all seemingly ready, she waved them on.
Victoria and Crystal shot off with Win making quick chase. Taylor took a moment to dip further into the Force before following as fast as she could without being obvious, using the Force to guide her leaps to ensure that she was landing on tree boughs that could carry her weight.

Taylor was surprised how fast the five miles closed between the two ‘bases,’ even with Crystal and Victoria moderating their speed to let Kid Win keep up. Taylor had split off from the group as they approached the vague site of the flare launch, but something had begun to bother her. She reached out and gently touched her communicator. Taylor paused, frowning as she realized that Amy and Eric would be able to listen in. She sighed faintly as she moved along.

In the end, it was too late. Taylor watched as Victoria and Crystal began their runs, zipping in from above and flying down toward the tree that held the fluttering black and purple pennant. Taylor remained in the canopy, watching as Vista emerged from a nearby tree line and raised her hands, the air itself distorting and sending Crystal and Victoria careening off into various directions. Taylor waited, watching as Kid Win shot out of the sky from a different direction and took pot shots at Vista with his pistol, using the stun settings. She dove out of the way, and Gallant appeared from a different part of the tree line pointing his hand up and aiming a blast toward Kid Win.

Gallant shot wide enough to force Kid Win to dodge out of the way, without toppling the kid from his board, leaving Vista to resume her warping. Taylor dropped out of the trees smoothly, landing on the soft ground. She glanced around quietly and then stepped out of the tree line. Gallant was lining up a blast on Crystal when Taylor grabbed him with the Force and pulled his feet out from under him. Crystal took up the slack, zipping down and rounding on Vista, lifting her hands and lashing out. Vista had to stop her warping, dodging the slow attacks coming at her as she backed away from the other girl.

Taylor watched as Win dropped from above on his board, and ended up hovering over Galant’s struggling body, playfully rapping him on the back with the weapon and muttering something. No doubt a threat to remain in place. Taylor focus was soon drawn by the sight of Aegis flying out of the tree line to intercept Vicky, and she moved out, lashing out a hand and ripping Aegis out of the sky and toward her. She needn’t have bothered as a glowing barrier erupted around the tree and the pennant sending Victoria careening off in a different direction when she struck it with a meaty thump. The young man reacted quickly rolling into the pull and launching a punch at her.

Taylor set into her Makutai stance and countered the strikes, moving around and past Aegis, using her powers to keep the boy from getting too close. The boy’s speed wasn’t the concern so much as the sheer power that he was putting out. Taylor had to focus on avoiding every attack since even thinking about attempting to deflect them sent her Force powers screaming out warnings. She dodged and weaved around the moves, occasionally blasting the boy with a Force Throw when she needed to catch her breath.

Occasionally glancing over during her brief respites allowed Taylor to see Eric standing before the pennant maintaining his barrier as Victoria, Crystal, and Kid Win traded off to take turns smashing or shooting into the barrier. Judging by the perspiration on his face, the boy seemed to be at his breaking point, but it was soon proven to all be for naught.
Off in the distance, a single red flare launched shrieking into the sky, and out from behind the tree that Eric had stood before, Manpower stepped forth. He lazily cracked his flare gun open and moved to slot in a flare, pointing it up and firing up a single green flare. As it screamed into the sky, he quickly flashed her an apologetic look.

Taylor huffed and lowered her hands, glancing over at Aegis. The young man offered her a slightly apologetic look and stepped back. Once he'd stood up straight, he held out a hand. Taylor let out a sigh and took it, giving it a shake.

“Good try.” The comment was spoken quickly, and Taylor felt her cheeks darkening quietly at the praise.

“Yeah. With how the teams were split you had the best defensive pile, but we had the best offensive one. Our hope was to get here and overpower you all before you could get Lily back to our side. We couldn’t hope to post any sort of defence against her.” Taylor paused and frowned as she glanced around.

“How did you guys get her over to our side so fast without using Shielder?” She spoke softly and blinked when the other boy rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’ve got no idea.” She blinked at him, and he chuckled. “It was Amy; she said that she had an idea to get Lily their faster, and she dragged her off. I’ve got no idea how they’d have gotten there this fast.” He glanced off to the side quietly before turning and heading over to help Win get Gallant up off the ground.

Taylor walked over to Vicky and Crystal and let out a hum.

“Apparently,” She spoke softly. “We were beaten by Lily and Amy.” She spoke lazily and chuckled at the shocked looks on the other two faces. “Yeah. That was my reaction.” Taylor huffed. She blinked when Manpower let out a whistle and turned to head toward him with the two blondes.

“So, We’re making camp not too far from here, and we’re going to hike over that way now. Dinner is cooking as we speak, and it should be ready when we get there.” He paused and frowned. “Depending on how fast we walk.” The large man clapped his hands and set off, and the group trailed after him in small knots. Taylor lingered near Crystal and Victoria, listening as the pair quietly talked about their martial arts styles with Aegis.

When she saw Kid Win breaking off from the group containing Vista, Gallant and Manpower and Eric, she moved to intercept him before he could merge with the others. At his confused look she gestured him closer and spoke softly.

“So. Uh, Win. I’ve got this uh. Design.” She drew out a folded up bit of paper from her belt pouch and handed it over. She watched him as he unfolded it and inspected the two designs quietly, humming. “Looks like… a capacitor, and a power cell? Advanced but not too wild. Are you a tinker?” He stared at her and Taylor shook her head.

“No. But I’ve got a project I’m working on, and I need these for it. Do you think you could make them?” She stared at him quietly, and he glanced back at the designs for a few moments. “I mean, sure but these are rather basic, we could…”
“...yeah. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll let Victoria know once I’m done, and you can grab them next
time there’s a patrol.” She nodded quietly at him drifting back toward the others as they exited the
forest into a large clearing with a bonfire in the middle.

She joined up with Victoria at the edge of the clearing, smiling at her to ward off the confused look
and quickly muttering that she’d tell the girl later. Walking along the last few feet to the massive fire,
Taylor frowned when the others all came to a sudden halt right at the edge of the ring of glowing
golden light.

Taylor stepped around a stationary Aegis, blinking at the sight of Lily, Sarah, and Carol standing
between Miss Militia and the new cape, Keltar. She felt Victoria sidling up to her left, and studied the
scene curiously until Victoria spoke up.

“Mom? Aunt Sarah? What’s going on?” Victoria’s voice was soft, and for a moment, no one looked
at her. Eventually, it was the tall man that glanced over and spoke, his voice cold and lacking in its
jovial nature.

“It turns out,” He spoke slowly, glancing at her. “That Panacea here is, in fact, a Biokinetic.” Taylor
ignored the gasps from behind her. She watched as the man gestured with a hand, over to the side
where a single sizeable plant-like creature vaguely shaped like a feline currently lay in the grass,
watching the ongoing confrontation with rapt interest.

Taylor drew her focus back from the animal and stared blankly at the two capes for a few moments.
She took a breath before speaking softly.

“And?” Taylor swallowed and stood up a bit straighter as both of the PRT capes turned to glance at
her. “You didn’t catch onto this fact before? She’s a healer. She’s not just ‘a’ healer. She’s ‘The
Healer.’ Period. She can regrow limbs, and repair entirely destroyed organs. With enough mass, she
can save you from having your entire bottom half cut off.” She saw them staring at her, and she
nodded vaguely.

“How exactly did you think that ability functions? She’s clearly capable of things that the body isn’t
naturally capable of, so she has to be modifying a person’s insides in some way. I can guarantee that
even if you two hadn’t caught onto it, your bosses certainly have.” She saw them stepping back and
nervously shifting in place as her words penetrated. Taylor stepped back quietly when Carol and
Sarah looked at her in confusion and shrugged up a shoulder.

“I figured it out after she healed me, but I’m a bit more aware of biology than most due to how my
powers work.” She spoke lazily, dipping into the fabricated explanation for her powers that she’d
come up with. She saw the focus of everyone drifting onto her, and she took a breath, moving to
shrug. “Near as I can tell, my self-augmentation powers require that I be mostly aware of my own
body’s general make-up so that I can safely direct my powers toward the right areas to do what I
need.” Seeing the blank looks she sighed.

“My powers seem varied, but they’re all expressions of the same power. I have access to a well of
‘power’ that I can manipulate in certain ways with practice. Every other power I’ve used is an
expression of that same power.” She saw the confusion waning on the faces before her and rubbed at
her face.
“When I augment myself, I funnel that power into my own body, augmenting my muscles, and my bones and everything else. It also lets me heal myself and others, by doing the same thing, though because of how it works, I am largely restricted to what a body can naturally do.” Taylor crossed her arms in front of her, blinking when the masked man spoke.

“How do you learn ‘new’ powers then.” Taylor shrugged and waved a hand. “It’s an expression of my mental abilities. If I’m confronted with a situation that I can’t solve with my current skill set, and I focus on a solution, generally something comes up. Like the flashbang that I used on Oni Lee.” She said gesturing at Vicky who nodded. She watched as Amy and Lily slid back, while the rest of the capes focused on her, taking the opportunity to sate their curiousity about the enigma that she was.

Taylor watched as the cat disappeared into the forest after the pair and she let out a quiet sigh before answering the first question that Eltar threw her way, taking a few moments to explain how her power ‘accumulated’ without giving the man any hints of her actual limits.

The questions had continued until the masked man had asked how her powers related to the ones that Ares had used and Taylor had had to truthfully fight back the tears burning in her eyes while admitting that she hadn’t been aware of her father’s powers. She’d ended up being led away by Victoria, and everything had taken on a somewhat sombre tone.

Dinner had been a quiet affair, and Taylor had felt rather unfortunate since it was clear that the PRT and New Wave had intended this little trip to be a fresh start. Between her own moping and Amy’s revelation, things had taken on a decidedly darker turn. Thankfully for everyone, Kid Win had popped up to save the day producing a deck of cards and dragging all the kids into a massive game.

Clockblocker had suggested strip poker and had received a long distance slap to the back of the head by Vista, and things had settled into a decidedly pleasant evening. The adults had backed off when they’d first scattered on the packed dirt around the bonfire, and they’d cycled through various games. They’d played the most ridiculous game of Go Fish that Taylor had ever seen, using three entire decks of cards, and then they’d gone through a few iterations of war with smaller groups.

Eventually, things had quieted as some of the group split off. Aegis and Weld had ended up joining the adults to speak softly, and Kid Win and Clockblocker were sitting to the side talking. Taylor was currently leaning lazily against Victoria’s side, watching as the blonde played a rather rousing game of poker.

The game had started with almost eight of them, but Taylor had gone out first, followed in short order by Amy and Vista. Currently, Eric was holding on by like fifteen green M&M’s though he was eating his way through his chips at this point. Crystal was sitting on a small mountain of Candy, while Lily, Gallant, and Victoria chipped slowly at her pile. Vista was quietly cheering Gallant on, much to the older boy’s dismay, and Amy remained glued to Lily’s side, though Taylor flashed her a smile whenever Amy glanced her way.

She was heartened by the smiles that she received in return. She’d hoped that it’d meant that the cold shoulder was finally done with. Taylor shifted and blinked when Victoria slowly laid down a hand on the ground, showing three jacks and two queens. She smiled when Victoria crowed in delight.
“Read ‘em and weep ladies.” She smirked, grinning when Gallant rubbed his face and dropped his cards. Before Victoria could claim the pot though, Crystal held up a hand silencing her.

“Not so fast, cousin.” The woman laid down two queens of her own, and three Kings. Victoria whined and dropped her cards as Crystal reached out to snag the pot, blinking when Amy started laughing. Everyone glanced at the brunette when Lily sheepishly laid down her hand to reveal four sixes. Crystal let out a groan that saw Taylor chuckling tiredly, and she blinked when Victoria peered at her.

“Time for bed I think.” The blondes words were soft, and Taylor nodded, rubbing at her cheek. Staggering to her feet, Taylor waved at the rest when the quiet goodbyes were offered and then moved over toward the adults. A few brief comments saw them pointing her toward the row of tents, and she headed along till she found the one with her name on it and unzipped it climbing in.

Despite the bone-deep exhaustion that gripped her, once she’d changed out of her uniform into the sleepwear from her backpack, Taylor found herself laying silently in the large sleeping bag and staring at the roof of her tent. The distant sounds of the campfire were soothing, but she couldn’t bring herself to sleep, dull blue eyes flickering in her mind every time that she closed her eyes.

She nearly screamed when the tent flap unzipped but sitting up saw a blonde head poking in, and she gripped her chest, staring at Victoria’s face. The blonde girl stared closely as if verifying it was her before something soft smacked into Taylor’s face, it took Taylor a moment to realize it was a pillow and then she shifted as the other girl squeezed into the tent with her.

“Vic, W-What’re you doing!” She hissed softly and grunted as Victoria shifted around squeezed her to the far left of the tent and then flopped down next to her on the ground. She waited for the girl to get comfortable on her side and stared at her. She studied Victoria’s glimmering eyes in the darkness before flopping down on her side. Taylor lay in silence next to the other girl for a few moments before whispering softly.

“Your mom is like, less than thirty feet away.” She spoke softly and sighed when Vic silently shrugged before pulling her pillow under her arm. Taylor rubbed at her face before unzipping her bag and opening it up, draping it over them both. Luckily the ground under the tent wasn’t terribly hard, and they’d avoided any rocks. She shifted closer and blinked when Victoria wrapped an arm around her, dragging her flush to the older girl's side.

She shifted into Victoria’s side and buried her face into the other girl’s shoulder with a soft sigh. At least if someone caught them in the middle of the night, it might distract them from Amy’s newly discovered somewhat horrifying new powers.

Chapter End Notes

[[Okay. So, first things first. These 10k monsters, will not be an ongoing thing. I’ve got a life, and these take basically all my free time. These chapters sort of got away from me, and for that, I’d apologize, but I think you guys like them.

I kind of enjoy the whole ‘Team Bonding Weekend’ thing and considering that the last time they were in a room together they nearly came to blows, I think the idea makes sense. Capture the Flag was the closest thing that I could come up with as a team game

]]
that’d make using powers a challenge. I hope I did it justice.

ALSO. The Amy thing, I bet you’re all wondering what the heck is up with that. Well, have no fear. I’m going to be releasing a ‘B-Side’ basically a short little not quite interlude that’s a companion piece to this one, right after this that shows the Capture game from Amy’s perspective. It’ll show everything up to the point that Taylor and Victoria arrive at the bonfire.

Nothing too wild. As always, Love the feedback, lemme know what you think, and I’ll see you nerds around. 6.4 is going to be interesting.]]
The light cleared and Amy staggered a bit, flushing when Lily’s hand quickly grasped her shoulders, steadying her. She eventually straightened herself back up and looked at the others standing around looking nervously between Manpower and the tree. She studied the rest of her team and let out a nervous smile when they glanced toward her and Lily. In the end, it wasn’t Vista that spoke up but Gallant, clearing his throat and gesturing toward Vista. When she still stood there nervously, he spoke gently.

“Vista. You’re the team leader. What sort of plan do you suggest.” The girl seemed to shrink on herself a bit before glancing around. She took a few steadying breaths and then stood up quietly. “Okay. So we’ve got.” She glanced at the group. “A lot of defensive fighters. We could fortify here?” She spoke softly and gestured around. “They can’t possibly get past all of us while defending their own flag. We could set Flechette up in ambush, and she could take them all out one by one as we defend the flag.” Vista perked up as she spoke and flashed a confident smile.

“That won’t work.” Amy had been about to speak, but Lily was the one that cut her off. She glanced over at Lily and watched the others glancing over. She saw as Vista’s cheeks darkened and she moved to puff herself up and speak.

“Flechette, right?” She spoke and not even waiting for Lily to nod she stepped forward. “I’m the team leader, and that means that I get to come up with the plans. I’m not sure how things were done in New York, but we generally follow the chain of the command here. We’re all familiar with the other team, and I think—” Lily politely coughed and Amy found herself swallowing a chuckle as Vista’s jaw clenched, but the girl waved Lily on.

“I mean no disrespect, Miss Vista, but I did research the capes of the bay when I was approved for the transfer. My powers make my aim better, that’s true, I doubt that I’d get more than one shot off before Vigil came for me. I am what you’d term a glass cannon, I lack a protective aspect to my
powers, and I doubt I could take her in a fight.” The girl seemed to frown, but she didn’t argue, and they began to mutter among themselves.

Amy watched the quiet arguing among the Wards members, and she glanced over at Eric and Flechette quietly before sighing. She hated planning like this. She was always relegated to a support role. A flicker of irritation washed through her. She wasn’t a b-list hero, she had a great deal of power, and she could help. Standing silently she considered the situation, and after a moment a fascinating idea struck her. She tilted her head to the side and hummed faintly.

“What about a surgical strike.” She spoke softly and blinked when the others glanced at her as if they’d forgotten that she was there. Lily’s confused look prompted her to explain.

“Considering their team makeup, I figure that they’ll leave a small team to guard their flag, and send their offensive team-members here.” She saw Vista opening her mouth and pushed on. “We all know that, but what if, instead of trying to ambush them here, you all distract them, and we sneak over to their base and take out their defenders.” She gestured between Lily and herself.

Vista glanced at Aegis who seemed to consider before shrugging, and Gallant nodded when she glanced at him. The blonde girl glanced back to her and Amy found herself smiling when the girl spoke.

“Do you think you could get her there fast enough? We won’t be able to hold them off forever.” Amy smiled when they didn’t ask -how- she’d get them there and merely nodded. Lily’s confused look was a bit of a concern, but she mouthed Later to her and then moved off to the side. They were allowed to head off until both flags were placed, and she got to stand and watch Vista, Aegis, and Gallant argue about which tree was the most defensible.

Eventually, Eric just took the Pennant and tied it to a large enough tree for him to hide behind while the others were distracted off to the side. When the Flare went off, the others perked up, and everyone melted into the tree-line at the edge of the clearing. As the others were getting ready to lie in wait, Amy dragged Lily a reasonable distance from the rest.

It took her nearly fifteen minutes to find a suitable clearing with a large enough tree. She glanced over at Lily quietly before taking a deep breath. She studied the girl and chuckled when Lily offered her a curious look.

“So. You’re uh. You did research on us. What do the PRT files say about me?” She spoke curiously and watched as Lily perked up and blushed a bit before speaking.

“Uh. Striker 9, Healer.” She nodded, and Amy waved a hand as she sighed a bit before running a hand through her wild hair.

“Yeah, but you ever wonder why I got that high of a striker rating despite being a support power?” She studied Lily who seemed to be getting a bit nervous. “It’s just. Healing on the scale that I can do requires that I… directly manipulate what I touch.” She watched as Lily seemed to consider her for a moment before she finally caught on and swallowed. Amy watched nervously, waiting to see how the girl would react.
The nervousness seemed to melt away after a few moments and Lily glanced around.

“Right. So… What's your plan, then?” She asked softly, and Amy let out a slow breath before gesturing Lily over. She touched one of the trees and watched as her powers drew into her and she followed the guiding hand in her mind, shaping the tree. Roots broke off and shifted, forming paws, and the body shaping into the body of a cat — not a lion, too svelte, more like a jaguar, heavy, suitable for climbing trees. The Transformation was rough, not perfect, no way to eat, to reproduce. More of an ambulatory Plant then anything else.

The top of the tree shrank down as the mass shifted forming a larger more substantial beast. A leonine head with bark like ‘skin’ formed and Amy took care sculpting a pair of mossy eyes and an articulated mouth. In this shape, it lacked the canopy to photosynthesize, and as she considered it, her powers ghosted her mind giving her ideas to make it more long-lasting. An expanding leaf-mane that simply sprouted and grew out, roots that could generate out of the claws into the ground to gather water. She brushed them aside; she didn’t need these to last forever; she needed them to get her to the other camp.

Wonder how the transformation had gone over, Amy turned and blinked to see Lily right next to her, staring in awe at the massive wooden cat. When the girl lifted a hand reaching out to ghost her fingers over its head, Amy shifted the creature’s biology allowing it to detect pressure on its bark. The creature seemed almost sapient like this, turning its non-functioning eyes toward Lily and bumping its rough bark covered head against her.

Amy chuckled when Lily gently rubbed the rough skin of the ‘Lion’s’ head. Amy reached out, changing a few things to give it rudimentary sight, taking tricks from various plants and making it more able to navigate the forest. A whim saw her giving the large feline the ability to simulate a ‘purr’ that saw the other girl giggling. After a moment of appreciating the beast, Lily quickly spoke.

“It’s beautiful. Did you have to make it look like that? Couldn’t you have just given a Log human legs and made it run us there?” Amy blinked and frowned, wondering why for a few moments before shrugging.

“Jaguars are made for travelling through dense forests like this. This is the wrong hemisphere, but we should be good.” Amy moved to try and climb up, struggling as the beast stood still. She huffed as she struggled, blushing when Lily eventually had to slip around and help her up onto the back of the creature. She reached down and helped Lily up behind her and then touched the ‘creatures’ neck, setting it off at a spare clip in the direction that the flare had come from.

They’d barely been going for ten minutes when she saw Vicky, Crystal and Kid Win arc past overhead. She looked around for Taylor, frowning at no sign of the girl before touching the beast’s neck and setting it moving faster. They didn’t have much time.

The creature moved with surprising grace and dexterity, and it wasn’t long before she saw the shapes emerging through the trees. She stared at the glimmering form of Clockblocker in his armour looming behind a tree and staring skyward. She slowed the beast as Lily shifted behind her, getting out one of her needles and slotting an odd rubber cap onto it that had a large dripping red sponge
affixed to it. She glanced at the girl as she slotted it into the oversized crossbow before gesturing them on.

The cat set off at a dash, and Lily leaned over, aiming and releasing with a sudden ‘thwang’ that sent the long pin sailing toward the too slowly reacting clock. Amy chuckled when the red sponge splatted against the middle of Dennis’ mask and the boy shouted out ‘Foul’ while staggering away, tripping over a tree stump. Amy pushed the beast onwards, watching the pennant as Lily quickly reloaded behind her.

A tall metal figure emerged from behind the tree and swung a large branch at them. Amy reacted, touching the beast’s neck and causing it to leap clean over Weld, and then it spun in the air, landing facing the metal hero. The man had come to a stop, staring in shock at them and that let Lily line up her shot, firing her weapon once more and painting the front of Weld’s body a brilliant red.

Lily quickly dismounted as the metal boy held up his hands, his golden eyes still focused on the leafy cat. After making sure that he’d give up, Lily walked over and quickly pulled the pennant free. She glanced around the clearing, blinking when Miss Militia emerged and stared at the cat for a moment before loading something into a weapon and firing it upwards. She slowly lowered the gun before pointing at the cat.

“What… is that?” The woman’s voice trembled just a bit as she stared at the cat and Amy found herself shrinking down a touch on the back of the plant creature.

----------

Explaining things to Miss Militia had only made things worse, and Amy had found herself marched ahead by the older cape’s hand toward a nearby camp. Miss Militia didn’t have a weapon out, though, considering the woman’s powers, that wasn’t as much of a comfort as it should have been. It didn’t help that the woman got tenser each time that the large plant creature let out a rumbling growl.

It especially didn’t help that each time she got tenser, she stepped closer to Amy and tightened her grip which set the giant plant creature growling all the more. The massive beast trailed closely after them until they reached a large clearing. Amy was frog-marched past a bunch of tents, and she saw her mother and aunt waiting. Her aunt saw her first and nudged her mother who reacted poorly.

“Miss Militia, what’re you doing? Unhand my daughter, now.” Amy watched as Aunt Sarah followed her mother over, both glancing briefly at the large feline. Once they were close, Amy quickly shrugged off Miss Militia’s hand dashing away from her toward her mom and wincing at the long low dangerous growl in her wake, as the massive cat loomed behind the group. She didn’t look back to see what prompted the action, but she felt her mother pushing her behind her and her aunt.

“What’s the meaning of this?” A man’s voice came up, and the cowled cape that had sent them off stepped into view from around the fire, staring at the stand-off before starting and point.

“What is that?” Eltar stared in shock at the brown and green Leonid, watching in shock as the creature stalked around the group and moved to stand behind Amy and her family, lowering himself to the ground and staring coolly at everyone arrayed opposite Amy.

“Panacea made that.” Miss Militia spoke coolly, pointing at the creature. “She was controlling it as
well. She’s a Biotinker.” Amy watched the man’s body tense, and she frowned, staring over at Aegis and Clockblocker who stood nearby, watching in wary concern. A hand gently gripping her arm startled her and she glanced over, smiling at Lily when the girl offered a reassuring smile.

Before anything could get any worse, the rest of the group emerged from the nearby woods and approached. Amy let out a relieved sigh when she heard her sister's soft voice emerging from the crowd, and she glanced over to see Vicky and Taylor staring warily at the showdown.

“Mom? Aunt Sarah? What’s going on?”

Chapter End Notes

[[Technically, with this included, 6.3 is actually almost 13k words. Hojesus. Setting the expectations high here. Jeeeeez Cal. Anyway, hope you folks like it~]]
Chapter Summary

[[Here comes 6.4. This chapter’s been a long time coming, and I think a few of you will enjoy the character development coming. And the rest of you will probably enjoy the reveal at the end =P.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

May 29th, 2011

Docks South, Brockton Bay

Sabah curiously rapped her knuckles against the guava in her hand, humming as she tested the firmness of the fruit. She carefully shook the fruit for a moment before setting it down. Grasping another and doing the same she considered it for a few moments before adding it to her basket. Moving quietly down the aisles, she snagged a punnet of strawberries and a container of blackberries, blueberries, and raspberries. Walking down the produce section she dug a hand into her pocket, dragging out her phone.

She checked the time, verifying that she still had nearly twenty minutes before Taylor had told her to meet her here, and she took a moment to review her texts. It’d been an odd experience being the only person that hadn’t gone on the retreat in her circle of friends. She’d expected it to be a lonely experience, but she’d hoped to make the best of it, getting some of her rather lengthy commission backlog out of the way, and she had made some headway on that.

She’d been surprised though in how so many of her new friends had kept her in the loop, especially when Victoria had let it slip that they were in the wilds of Oregon. Questions as to how the group's phones still worked in what literally amounted to the back end of nowhere had prompted Victoria to send her a long string of technobabble that basically amounted to ‘Lol, Tinker-tech is bullshit.’

Each of the girls had kept up a constant stream of texts that had kept her quite amused as she worked in her shop. Lily had sent an endless stream of consciousness style feedback about how much fun she was having and how wild working with the new teams was. She’d bragged about winning all the games, and had chatted endlessly about interacting with the other capes with an exuberance that saw Sabah grinning most of the Afternoon.

Taylor’s chats had been more subtle and thoughtful, and she’d shared her observations on everyone with Sabah, confiding in her about the ongoing drama that was slowly creeping into her many friendships, and her concerns about how everyone viewed her, or how they saw Amy.

Details were sparse, but between the various messages from the different teens, Sabah had managed to piece together that Amy, at least, had done something unique with her powers that had led to her and Lily winning the initial ‘game’ they’d done, something that had startled most of the quote-unquote adults present.
Victoria had already been pestering Sabah before they’d left and the conversation remained on the subject of her proposed group gathering. Sabah had found it rather adorable that the blonde girl was so eager to bring all of her friends together and she’d happily served as a sounding board for the teen as she plotted out the various things needed to host a small party at Taylor's house.

Though, when the girl’s increasingly zany plans to surprise Taylor and the rest of the group approached faking an Endbringer attack, she’d subtly suggested that Victoria just send out a text inviting everyone over in the evening for dinner and entertainment. Victoria sheepishly admitted later that she probably should have cleared it with Taylor before inviting everyone over, though even Taylor ended up accepting that she’d enjoy a quiet evening in with her friends.

The big surprise had been the texts that had trickled in from Amy. She’d started by letting Sabah know that Lily had shared her number and apologizing, and Sabah had had to work quite hard to get the girl to admit that she’d been looking for someone to speak with about something in particular. The revelation about Amy’s feelings for Taylor had been no surprise, though the girls growing jealousy for her sister had been a shock. When Amy hadn’t been able to admit why she was jealous, Sabah had done what she could to guide the girl through figuring that central fact out, though truthfully at this point it was more like the blind leading the blind.

As she was considering the increasingly amusing texts that she’d been getting from Victoria and Taylor earlier in the morning as the two girls apparently argued over the ‘Theme’ of the event, her phone dinged, and she ended up snorting as she saw another panicked text coming in from Lily.

Sabah took a moment to open the SMS app, and she blinked, scrolling up so she could start to read Lily’s constant stream of texts from the beginning. Sabah had found herself grinning as the poor girl freaked out about what to wear to meet the rest of New Wave, seemingly more concerned about ‘looking cool’ then concern about revealing her secret identity to even more people. Eventually, Sabah had settled on telling Lily to pick out three outfits and send her pictures, and she’d help.

“...don’t care, Vic. I’m not making a god-damn Lasagna.” She’d just finished sending off the text when a familiar voice drifted over the top of the aisle she’d been loitering in as she texted and Sabah paused, blinking and listening in amusement. There was a gasp of outrage from what Sabah assumed was Victoria, but Taylor barrelled on without letting the girl get a word in edgewise. “It’s a pain in the ass. It takes hours, it’s super easy to fuck up, and worst of all, It’s boring.” Sabah lazily wandered down the aisle in time with the voices, her lips quirking into a smile as she listened to the banter, chuckling when Victoria chimed back in.

“But Taylor. It’s sauce and meat and cheese, all the cheese.” The girl whined softly as they drifted toward the end of the aisle. “And then layers. It’s like Pizza. It’s like Italian food Pizza.” There was a long pregnant pause after that and Sabah chuckled when Taylor coughed and spoke with a voice that sounded distinctly like she was holding back a laugh.

“Oh, Vic.” The words were barely out before a huffy Victoria cut her off.

“I realized what I’d said the moment the words left my mouth.” She sighed and hummed, the voices coming to a stop near the end of the aisle. The pair humming in thought before Victoria lazily continued. “I don’t know why you’re so dead-set on Barbecue though. Do you even know how to work a grill, Taylor? Also, need I remind you, that your dad’s barbecue was blown away by Leviathan.” Victoria words were muffled as if she was facing away and Taylor cut across, her voice closer and more apparent, letting Sabah imagine she was inspecting the products on the closer side of the aisle.
“We’re a bunch of Americans, barbecue is like, in our blood. I’m sure that we’ll figure it out. And if all else fails, Eric’ll be there; grilling is supposed to be ingrained in most men’s genes, I’ve heard.” Sabah grinned when Victoria and Taylor descended into giggles. She headed toward the end of the aisle. The sound of someone placing a box down on the shelf preceding Taylor speaking saw Sabah slowing her steps to listen. “As for the barbecue, luckily for me, I’m best friends with someone that can both fly, and carry a barbecue with one hand then, hrm?”

“Le gasp.” The words were uttered with faux shock, and Sabah bit her lip as Vicki’s voice drifted over laced with over-the-top affront. “I see how it is; you only keep me around for my powers. My mother warned me about people like you.” The sound of the girl chuckling caused Sabah to snort, though Taylor’s response had her choking back outright laughter.

“I mean. Well, that, and you’re not hard on the eyes, either.” Finally having enough, Sabah rounded the corner, chuckling when she saw Taylor and Victoria blushing and rather studiously facing away from each other and staring at products on the shelves. Victoria was inspecting barbecue sauces and marinades, Taylor was weighing a bag of Jasmine rice. Sabah was about to speak when Victoria’s voice cut across the aisle.

“What’s the difference between a marinade and a sauce rub?” The words drifted out, and Sabah casually leaned against the bunker at the end of the aisle, finally speaking up and causing both girls to shriek and jump at her sudden arrival.

“A marinade is spices mixed with liquids and meat is typically soaked in it for a few hours before being cooked. A rub is a dry mixture of spices that you have to rub into meat. Typically rubs are used when you smoke meat or cook it in a dry way. Since you’re apparently using a barbecue, I’d suggest a marinade.” The girls both rounded on her and Sabah lazily waved a hand. She moved over, setting her small basket into the large cart the girls had been pushing around.

Both girls seemed to stare at her for a few moments before she gestured them on. They took a few moments to collect themselves before Victoria inspected a few different marinades before settling on one and adding it to the cart. As they pushed it and headed toward the butcher, Sabah crossed her arms behind her back and innocently spoke.

“So. Victoria’s easy on the eyes then, Taylor?” The pair of girls groaning dramatically had her giggling all the way to the butchers counter, much to the consternation of both teens.

---

Shopping with Taylor and Victoria had been quite the adventure, the witty banter engaging and the entire ordeal had been surprisingly quick. Sabah had been amused to see that the girls were doing their regular grocery shopping on top of shopping for the party, and it’d been fascinating to see how they discussed the food. Often Victoria would mention something that she’d heard of recently or liked to eat, and Taylor had to casually break down what they needed to gather to actually make the item in question. Occasionally, if the recipe didn’t seem to complicated, or Victoria’s eyes had seemed especially eager, Taylor would send the girl off, and Victoria would return with it all in hand to add it to the basket.

Sabah had watched in amusement as they wandered up and down the aisles, Taylor occasionally...
grabbing something from one part of the aisle or another that indicated that this wasn’t a recent occurrence to her. Considering that Taylor had had a single parent that worked a rather stressful job, Sabah wasn’t all that surprised at how familiar the dark-haired girl was with shopping.

The argument near the till about who would pay was going strong when Sabah had finally rolled her eyes and just used her own card much to the dismay of both present. They’d threatened to leave her there, but Sabah pointed out that she was the one making dessert and in short order, she’d been hefted up into Taylor’s arms like a baby as Victoria carried enough groceries to crush a horse between her arms.

The pair had carried her back to Taylor’s house along with the supplies and then proceeded to get into another argument about who would buy the barbecue that soon saw Sabah shoving them both out the door so that she could focus. Marinating the steaks, and getting the sausages and burgers prepared had been surprisingly easy. She’d even had a bit of company in the form of Amy who’d stopped by and ended up helping with cutting up fruit. For a little while, they’d worked in companionable silence, though the boisterous arrival of Taylor and Victoria with a barbecue had lured the girl into the back.

As the early afternoon waned on Sabah worked, her only constant companion being the old radio playing classic rock. That wasn’t to say she hadn’t had help, Taylor and Victoria had flitted through the kitchen taking turns with her in preparing things, Taylor had worked on getting corn ready for the grill, and Victoria had mixed up a rather impressive salad, storing it in the fridge to await dressing. The girls had disappeared though when the door had opened to admit Victoria’s cousins and the house had fallen silent as Sabah put the finishing touches on her fruit salad.

With all the prep work done, she’d washed her hands and headed outside, smirking at the sight of Taylor, Victoria and Crystal clustered around a barbecue trying to figure out how to attach a propane tank to it as Eric watched in amusement. Sabah wasn’t surprised to find Amy looming at the edge of the patio watching the group with an amused smile on her face, and she walked over, settling herself on the raised side of the garden bed next to Amy.

She didn’t immediately comment to the younger girl, settling herself and sitting in silence, watching with the young girl as Victoria attempted to explain something to Crystal, who was apparently studiously ignoring her cousin and fiddling with the attachment to the grill. The deep sigh of disappointment from Amy saw her glancing over at the brunette and following her gaze to where Taylor stood close to the group, biting on her thumb to stifle her chuckles as she watched Victoria and Crystal fighting over the propane tank.

“Figured it out then?” The words were soft, and Sabah glanced over at Amy who nodded quietly and rubbed at her face. She watched the girl as she glanced back up and observed the group by the grill once more, though Sabah let her eyes linger quietly on Amy. When the girl didn’t immediately speak Sabah spoke gently. “Well then, Amy, why do you think you’re so jealous of Victoria?” She gently reminded the girl of the question and frowned softly when Amy’s shoulders slowly sank.

“Because Taylor’s different with her.” The words were spoken softly, and Sabah hummed quietly and glanced over at the group watching as Taylor chuckled and stepped in, crouching low and gesturing at the tank and saying something. Crystal and Victoria were both watching in curiosity, and Sabah waited, letting out a sigh of her own when Amy spoke. “There’s something in her eyes when she looks at Victoria that’s… It’s not there when she looks at me.” The words were oddly poignant, and Sabah chuckled softly. She glanced over to see an irritated look on Amy’s face as she shifted as if to stand, but Sabah gently gripped the girl's arm until she resettled.
“Why did you ask me about this Amy? You could have gone to your mom or your aunt for relationship advice, but you came to me. Why?” She spoke softly, and she watched the brief flicker of irritation fade from Amy’s eyes. She saw the girl study her for a moment as if trying to peer into her before she glanced off to the side. Sabah watched the girl agonize over the answer a few moments before taking pity and speaking. “If it makes it any easier, Amy, I know why you asked me. I just need you to hear yourself say it.”

“It’s cause you liked her too.” The voice was soft, and Sabah raised an eyebrow at her, watching Amy fidget. “I saw it in your eyes, that jealousy when you saw us at that cafe, and yet you’re not…” Amy frowned and gestured at herself. “You’re not like this. I wanted to know how you could go from that to this.” She gestured to Sabah, and the dark-skinned girl chuckled once more before glancing at the group around the grill. They’d managed to affix the hose to the tank, but they’d tangled it around the base of the barbecue and were attempting to untangle it without unhooking it again.

“It was different for me, you know?” She spoke softly as she dipped her hands into her pockets. “Taylor wasn’t really who I’d had the crush on; it was the image of her that I’d built in my mind when we first met.” She spoke softly and glanced at Amy who stared at her in confusion. “It was like that.” She gestured and looked with Amy. As if sensing them watching Taylor glanced up and flashed them both a half smile, waving when they waved.

“She was...charming. In an odd sort of way.” Sabah hummed. “She just. It was like she could see that I was broken, and she just adopted me. I was some stranger that walked up to her in the park, and I just. We got to talking, and she was there. She was smart, and witty, with funny stories and a smile. She had this air about her.” Sabah smiled quietly.

“I’d had no ‘normal’ friends, and here was this sporty girl with a brilliant mind, and a friendly smile whenever I needed one, and that was nice. It was a fun idea to fantasize about.” Sabah spoke softly and rested her hands in her pockets. “It took me a while realize that Taylor didn’t really exist.” Sabah let out a sigh when Amy stared at her in confusion and shrugged.

“It’s like. The stories. The Psychology trivia and stories she tells. I thought it was a quirky little habit stemming from her fascination with the subject, that she’d always wanted to be a psychologist.” She glanced at Amy who shrugged up a shoulder. “I don’t doubt that she’s considered that as a possible career but I don’t think that’s why she studies psychology. She reads those books so desperately; I think because she’s trying to figure out what’s wrong with her. She searches them out and scours them hoping for a way to fix herself.” Sabah’s voice was quiet, and she let out a soft sigh before continuing.

“But she takes the stories and uses them to break the ice, to distract you from your minor issues with even more out there ones. She understands. She doesn’t want anyone to be lonely, because she knows what it’s like to be lonely. She doesn’t want anyone to be victimized, because she was victimized. She’s been hurt a lot, Amy, and asked her once why she still cares.” Sabah spoke softly, sighing quietly and glancing at Amy who stared on in confusion.

“She told me that when you suffer like that, you can do one of two things. You can let it define you, destroy you. Or…” Sabah spoke softly and hummed as she hooked her fingers together quietly. “You can do what Taylor did. You can take that pain and hold it tight until it burns your hand, and you say this: ‘No one else will ever have to live like this, no one else will have to feel this pain. Not on my watch.’” Sabah stared at Amy for a moment before shrugging. “So she does what she can to help ensure that they don’t.”
“She was the same with me at first. She just.” Amy’s voice was low and gently as she stared at the group as they finally got the tank in place under the girl and secured it carefully. They’d begun fiddling with the dials quietly. “She hit me like a hurricane you know. I went into that bank miserable, and just. She smacked me in the face, and she was suddenly there. She seeped into my life, and everything broke around her but then she helped me piece it all back together. She was so nice in those texts; she’s a lot better…” Amy trailed off, and Sabah smirked as she glanced at her.

“She’s a lot better in text form. She’s less guarded that way. She’s more like... That.” she pointed toward Taylor and watched as Amy drank in the sight of the girl leaning back and watching with bald fascination as Victoria fiddled with the various dials and loudly wondered if the machine was broken. She heard Amy’s faint voice issue a noise of assent, and she chuckled. “And you’re wondering why she can’t be like that all the time with you. Why it was only like that before?” She spoke softly and glanced at Amy to see the girl staring at her and nodding. Sabah considered Amy for a few moments before sighing.

“It’s because she’s still afraid, I think,” Sabah spoke quietly, and idly tilted her head to the side as Eric sauntered up to the group and made gestures that seemed to almost scream ‘Alright ladies, let a real man handle this.’ She didn’t need to glance at Amy to feel the girl’s gaze burning into her cheek. She just let out a soft sigh and continued. “Taylor’s kind of reluctant about opening herself up to people, Amy. I don’t think she’d want me to go into details, but suffice it to say that she was hurt really bad in the past and it makes her... nervous around people.” She spoke softly and glanced at Amy to see the girl staring at her and nodding. Sabah considered Amy for a few moments before sighing.

“But, she-” Amy spoke softly, and Sabah glanced at her, studying Amy.

“But she did open up to you. Share stories and stuff when you were recovering from things.” She tilted her head, chuckling when Amy nodded with a frown. “You needed her Amy. You were someone that had been kind to her, that needed her, and more than anything else, more then how terrified she is, I think what Taylor wants most is to be needed. So she did what she had to do to help. You needed to open up, so she opened up to you.” Sabah leaned back on the planter.

“I needed friends, so she became my friend, and then brought me so many more. I only know so much about her because I’ve been put in positions where she needed to open up to me to keep me close or to help me. She opens up just enough to help us, but no more. Trust is a hard-won commodity with Taylor, I think. Every day that we don’t betray her wins us a bit more, but I think we still have a long way to go.” She saw Amy’s eyes drifting over to where Victoria and Taylor stood, watching in rapt attention as Eric carefully fiddled with the various dials, growing increasingly nervous.

“Everyone except Victoria.” Amy’s voice was laced with a faint bitterness, and Sabah couldn’t resist letting out a soft little chuckle. She felt Amy’s gaze on her; she spoke softly.

“Amy,” She spoke softly, glancing at the girl. “Everyone trusts your sister. Or at least they did.” She spoke slowly, and it took Amy a moment to catch on, her eyes widening softly as she glanced back at the group and flushed faintly.

“But they said...” The words were soft, and Sabah hummed quietly, waving a hand.

“That Taylor’s immune, I know. And I don’t doubt that she is in most ways.” She blinked at Amy’s confused expression and sighed. “I think on the most basic level; it still got to her. It still put that barest idea in the back of her mind that Victoria ‘could’ be trusted. Victoria had to work at it; she had to put in the effort, but, I think it got her a foot in the door.” She rubbed at her cheek. She saw the conflicted look on Amy’s face and let out a sigh. “And I say that it’s a good thing.”
blinked at Amy’s look being shot at her.

“Amy,” Sabah spoke softly, glancing over at the girl who hunched her shoulders down and glanced away. “Taylor is still so terrified of being vulnerable that she occasionally stares at your sister like she’s a time bomb, and despite that… she let your sister support her despite everything else. If your sister’s aura is the reason that she was willing to accept that aid, then I say that it’s a good thing.” The sound of a high pitched girlish shriek cut off Amy’s reply, and Sabah glanced over, watching as Eric leaped nearly five feet backwards as a gout of flame ten feet tall erupted from the barbecue.

All the girls stared at him in amusement before Crystal leaned over, peering into the open barbecue before jerking up and holding up her thumbs.

“We got it working.” She called out, and Sabah snorted, slipping to her feet and dusting herself off. She glanced at the silent Amy that remained in place. She considered the girl quietly before speaking softly.

“I’ve got to help with dinner, but… Amy.” the girl peered at her and Sabah flashed a smile. “You’re a delightful girl, and you’re still young. You’re a bit young to be worrying about happily ever after. Just… Relax. If it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen.” She flashed the girl a smile that the girl reluctantly returned and then she headed toward the group looming around the grill. She grinned at the suspicious look Eric was shooting the equipment.

She patted the boy on the shoulder. “Go grab the meat in the fridge? They’re all in containers; just bring them all out.” Eric nodded quietly before wandering off. Sabah loomed up next to Taylor and Victoria, listening to the pair quietly arguing about laundry and shaking her head as she quickly checked the girl, adjusting the dials carefully and ensuring that the propane tank was correctly attached and the valve was fully open.

She ignored the affronted looks from everyone else as Eric returned with the food and set to work getting the meat cooking as the rest of the teenagers watched with rapt attention.

Sabah hummed quietly as she turned the sausages, glancing around with no small amount of pride as the teens were discreetly scattered around consuming the snacks. She curiously observed the tiny knots, Eric, Crystal and Victoria spread around the patio set, quietly picking at their food and discussing something wildly. Taylor loomed to her side, quietly poking on sausage and humming, though Sabah curiously glanced up, catching something and smirking.

She nudged Taylor, getting the distracted girl’s attention and nodding over to the planters that she’d been seated on earlier. Lily, who’d arrived while the food was cooking was standing before Amy, her plate resting on the planter with her drink as the girl wildly gestured while telling some story.

The healer was snorting into her own food and covering her mouth as Lily got rather into her story, clearly laughing as well. She heard Taylor snort next to her before shaking her head. She glanced at Taylor, unsurprised to see a faint look of amusement on her features before glancing toward the trio at the table.

“Eric.” Sabah waved a utensil, and the boy perked up. “Mind keeping an eye on these? It’s the last
batch, I need to head inside and get dessert ready, and I could use Taylor’s help.” the boy nodded
and set his food down, moving over to assist. Victoria glanced at her and Sabah flashed her a smile
before dragging Taylor toward the house.

They’d pushed through the backdoor into the small office that served as the connection between the
back patio and the main hallway of the house when the incessant ringing of the doorbell reached
them. Sabah glanced at Taylor, blinking quietly. The other girl stared back and shrugged.

“Maybe Will and Warren freed up?” she spoke softly and then Sabah followed the girl through the
house to the front door. The middle-eastern girl was surprised when the door slowly creaked open to
reveal an odd sight. The girl was Taylor’s age with long straight blonde hair and a ruffled black and
purple suit. She stood on the door with a matching suitcase, and she perked up when she caught sight
of Taylor finally.

“Vigil. Excellent. I had wondered if one of your neighbours would get worried if I stood here much
longer. Right, so uh. Remember that favour you owe me?” The girl spoke casually and glanced at
Taylor who simply stared in growing confusion at the blonde. When Taylor didn’t respond, the
blonde simply continued. “Well, I’m here to collect. I need a place to crash.” The words were spoken
casually, and Sabah blinked over at the strange blonde girl who offered out a hand.

“Oh. Hey. Nice to meet you. Tattletale.” Sabah blinked before slowly taking the girl’s hand and
giving it a small shake.

“Why is Tattletale eating a steak at our kitchen table?” The hissed words ghosted over Taylor, and
the girl rubbed tiredly at her face, glancing up from where she’d been leaning against the doorframe
of the kitchen to see Victoria looming close to her and staring in confusion into the kitchen. Taylor
glanced from the angry blonde at her left and into the kitchen where Tattletale was indeed quietly
devouring a steak as Sabah watched her silently.

“She said that she needed a place to stay,” Taylor spoke quietly and rubbed at her face when Victoria
tensed to her left. She glanced at the girl and sighed softly. “Vic, I owe her a favour.” She spoke
gently and flinched when the angry blue eyes flicked her way, frowning when Victoria’s expression
immediately softened. The girl reached out a hand and gently gripped her arm and Taylor let out a
tired breath.

“I can hear you both. Is this a new development?” The girl in question spoke softly, and Taylor
glanced over to see Tattletale watching her and Victoria. She blinked at the girl when she gestured,
and then Taylor realized how close she was standing to Victoria. She flushed and moved to step
back, pausing when Victoria kept her grip, returning Tattletale’s look with one of her own.
Something in Taylor’s chest fluttered at the action, but she let out a tired sigh and moved to drag
Victoria into the room since she didn’t seem inclined to release her.

“Victoria followed in her wake, and Taylor slid into a seat next to Sabah, blinking when Victoria
dragged another chair over to sit by her side. She studied Tattletale quietly for a few moments as the
girl finished eating and then wiped her face. The blonde seemed to consider them all calmly before
resting her elbows on the table. She raised a hand gesturing for Taylor to go on and Taylor took a
deep breath before speaking.
“So, uh. I guess the main question is why? Why would you want to stay here of all places? And why should we let you?” She spoke nervously, ignoring Victoria tensing beside her. She studied the blonde ‘reformed’ villain and blinked when the girl’s green eyes locked onto her after a few moments.

“Right. That’s a reasonable question. So uh.” She coughed faintly before rubbing her face. “This morning, Thomas Calvert came into the PRT Headquarters and had a meeting with Director Piggot where he immediately severed every contract that he had going on with the PRT and the Protectorate.” She spoke quietly, and when Taylor raised an eyebrow, she sighed, rubbing at her head.

“This was the first time that I’d met him, but I knew immediately who he was. Coil.” Taylor stared in confusion at Tattletale, but a hiss from her left drew her gaze to Victoria. She studied her friend curiously, and it took Victoria a moment to realize that she was at a loss.

“Sorry. Before your time. He was making waves not long before you showed up. Dean was talking about how the PRT and Protectorate were fairly certain that he was behind the Travellers and uh. The Undersiders, but they didn’t have much more than a name. He sort of vanished not long after you came up.” Victoria glanced at Tattletale who shrugged.

“He was still active when that Bank Heist happened, but after that, he sent me a message to burn all my contacts and do what I had to do to stay out of prison. I took that as an invitation to get out while the getting out was good. Made every deal I needed to avoid prison time, and uh, well. You know the rest.” She waved a hand quietly, and Taylor sighed, rubbing her face.

“So. Basically, Calvert comes in, severs his contracts and you figure out who he is. Why’d you come here? Are you even allowed to be here? I thought you were under Parole?” Taylor spoke softly and frowned at the villainess. Tattletale considered her for a moment.

“As long as I wear this;” She pointed at her bracer. “They can track me, I’m allowed to house myself, but up to now, I’ve been relying on the PRT for housing. I came here because I got an inkling when I saw Calvert. He smiled at me, and I knew that he knew I’d gotten him. He didn’t seem concerned, and the details fell into place. He’s got some sort of plan in the works that he knew would make him untouchable to the PRT even if they knew who he was.” The young woman frowned and toyed with her cutlery.

“There’s a press conference schedule at Calvert Industries in like twenty minutes, and I bet that’s why he’s so convinced that the PRT won’t be able to hit him, but I knew that the moment he was secure he’d make an attempt to either get me back on side, or eliminate me. Near as I can tell, you’re the most powerful cape in the city.” Tattletale spoke slowly and stared at Taylor cooly. “That tells me that this house is the safest place to be if Coil wants to hurt me.” The girl frowned as she tapped the table and Taylor leaned back, rubbing tiredly at her face.

“Taylor, you can’t-” Victoria’s words were soft, and Taylor rubbed tiredly at the bridge of her nose. When Tattletale suddenly chimed in and cut off Vicky the headache that she’d been fighting off started to hit her.

“I don’t see what this had to do with you Dallo-” The girl paused and stared, focusing quietly on Victoria before she started to chuckle, covering her mouth as full-blown giggles began to develop. Taylor glanced up and saw Victoria’s face darkening as she clenched her fists. Taylor gave the girl a cold stare, and she immediately closed her mouth and did her best to look professional. Taylor
reached out and touched Victoria’s arm quietly, drawing the girl’s gaze her way.

She saw the red suffusing the girl’s cheek and studied her quietly. Victoria stared back for a few moments before letting out a soft sigh. She seemed to straighten her back and assumed a look that Taylor had seen on Carol’s face a few times, the sort of look that the lawyer often used in court to carefully mask the anger she felt. Solid, stoic features with eyes like tiny chips of ice in the middle of her pale face. Even Tattletale looked a bit uncertain.

“We’ll watch the press conference, and then I’ll decide.” She glanced over at the others before slipping to her feet. She glanced over at Sabah who nodded quietly, and then she strode from the room.

It was only a few minutes later as she tidied up the living room, cleaning up Amy’s nest to make the room more easily used to watch TV that Victoria found her. She glanced up to see the tall blonde staring at her thoughtfully. Taylor studied Victoria for a few moments, frowning quietly before resuming her work.

As she folded and arranged things, she thought of angry words to say. Furious comments flew around her head, thoughts about this being her house, and she was the one who got to decide who stayed there, but every word died in her throat as she felt her chest and eyes burning. Eventually, when the last of the blankets were folded and set aside, Taylor moved the pillows and took a seat on the couch. She glanced over in surprise when Victoria gently slipped down beside her.

Glancing up Taylor frowned when instead of the angry eyes she’d been expecting she saw concerned blue orbs staring at her. She blinked and tugged nervously on her shirt and swallowed softly, shifting away. Something thrummed in her chest at the look and glanced away. Victoria’s hand resting on her fore-arm set her heart to racing.

“Taylor, what’s wrong.” The girl’s words were soft, and Taylor quietly tugged at her shirt, staring at the carpet. When the hand slid up her arm and gently gripped her shoulder, Taylor quietly turned her head toward Victoria, frowning when he eyes blurred. One hand lifted and wiped slowly at her eyes, finding tears on her fingers. “Taylor.” The words were soft, and Taylor let out a wet chuckle. “Vic.” The words were soft, and Taylor tried her best to look at her friend, but the words kept dying in her chest and she couldn’t bring herself to lift her head. In the end, she muttered softly. “She helped me save Amy’s life. Please don’t make me choose between you and helping someone that needs me.” She spoke so gently she wasn’t sure they’d even penetrated until she felt Victoria let out a long slow sigh. She felt the heat in her chest growing worse at the sound, and she hunched her shoulders up.

The hand reaching out and pulling her close was a surprise, and she knew she looked ridiculous sitting in the smaller girl’s lap, but when Victoria’s arms came around her waist, she let out a faint whimper and clung to the other girl, sniffling quietly. Victoria quietly held her and rubbed her back as the tears had dried. She slowly pushed Taylor back and peered silently at her. Taylor stared at the other girl nervously and flushed at the concerned look in those eyes.

“Don’t worry, Hebert.” The words were soft, and Taylor stared at her in confusion. “You’re stuck with me, no matter how many annoying house guests you accumulate. At least until you tell me to leave.” The words were soft, and Taylor let out a deep shuddering breath as relief washed through her. She let out a wet laugh and then leaned tiredly back into Victoria’s side, closing her eyes.
Nearly five minutes passed in silence like that before the sound of the TV snapping on startled them both. Taylor jerked up, glancing around and blinking at Tattletale as she leaned on the doorjamb, holding the remote in her hand. She looked utterly casual as if she’d not just walked in on Glory Girl and one of the newest heroes in Brockton Bay cuddling on a couch. The girl glanced at her before flicking her gaze toward the hall, and Taylor let out a sigh, squeezing out of Victoria’s lap and into the spot next to her. When Vic’s arm settled around her shoulder, Taylor leaned into the other girl.

She wasn’t surprised when most of the guests filed in, though everyone fell silent as the channels flicked through until they came upon the live newscast that Tattletale was apparently searching for.

“...will be transferring over to Gail Rivers, our onsite correspondent at City Hall. We’re still unsure about the exact nature of this press conference but the Mayor has called it, and we do know that Thomas Calvert will be in attendance.” The man paused and touched his ear.

“That is our correspondent, and the speech is about to begin, we’ll be transferring you over.” The screen flickered out before relighting showing the steps of City Hall, a large chunk of a nearby skyscraper still peeking out the left half. A tired looking man was be stood before a podium, and the legend at the bottom described him as ’Mayor Roy Christner.’ The man seemed to adjust his notes before glancing up and speaking to the cameras.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the City Council, Governor Keenan, and those concerned citizens present with us today and watching from home. I am happy to be here today to report on the state of our city.” The man shifted quietly and let out a sigh. Taylor glanced over at Tattletale quietly as the Mayor began discussing the progress of repairs and upgrades to the city. It took nearly fifteen minutes before the blonde perked up and Taylor glanced back over, gesturing for her to turn the volume up.

“...on the subject of our depleted police forces, I would like to invite one of our local businessmen to the stage with me.” The man waved off stage, and a few moments later a tall man emerged from the crowd, stepping up and into view. Taylor studied the man quietly. He wasn’t exactly attractive, but he looked... professional with his close-cropped, coarse graying hair, trimmed eyebrows, thin lips and a cleft chin. He moved to stand next to the Mayor who adjusted his cards before speaking.

“Mister Calvert has been working on a project over the last three years and in the wake of Leviathan’s attack on our city, and the struggle that we’ve had over the last decade with the parahuman and gang elements, he has offered to allow Brockton Bay to serve as the first test bed for his new program. With the agreement of Governor Keenan and the city council, we’ve chosen to accept his offer. I’ll leave you in his capable hands to explain the Ouroboros in better detail.” The mayor mopped at his brow before slowly descending off the stage.

“Greeting Brockton Bay.” Calvert moved up to the podium, glancing around at the crowd studying them before turning his attention to the cameras. “It probably doesn’t surprise you that I’m not a native of this fair city, but Brockton Bay has become my home in recent years. I love this city and watching it slide slowly deeper and deeper into the gutter has been painful.” The man spoke softly and continued to study the crowd, humming faintly.

“That pain was made more so as the PRT that I once served in was left rather helpless to counter these growing threats, up to an including this recent spat between the ABB and the other gangs. I started Ouroboros almost three years ago, and the basic idea was to create an organization that contained both Parahumans and regular humans in its structure, to better ensure that regular people could properly face off with the parahuman threats of the world.” The man had the crowd rapt with attention as he spoke with a noticeable veneer of passion, slamming his fist on the podium.
“I had always intended the program to be a problem-solving measure — a weapon to use against the Heartbreakers and Slaughterhouse 9’s of the world. But when Lung declared war on the city, I went into action and expanded the program extensively. It’s taken nearly four weeks to get ourselves up to operating levels, but I’m here today to announce that Ouroboros will be going live and operating as an auxiliary of the Brockton Bay Police Department.” The man paused as he spoke, studying the crowd. “Now I hear many of you asking, exactly what Ouroboros is.” The man let out a whistle, and a trio of groups ascended the stage standing behind him in perfect military formation.

“These are our three inaugural teams.” The man spoke casually before gesturing one group forward. “This is team Alpha, lead by Raven.” The man gestured to a powerfully built figure in a Military Uniform with an articulated raven mask on his face. “Raven.” The man spoke jovially, and the figure turned its glowing eyes on him. “How about you introduce your team to us and explain how it works.” The man in the raven mask nodded and then spoke, his voice disguised and projected out of the speakers.

“Hello, Brockton Bay. My name is Raven, and I am the leader of Team Alpha. The Parahuman members of my team are Jackal and Fox.” He gestured to the thin figure to his left in a fox mask, and the heavily built one on his right in a Jackal mask. He waited for the pair to nod or bow before continuing to speak.

“Team Alpha, like every other team consists of three parahumans assisted by nine regular soldiers. Our Soldier detachment is led by retired colonel Sarah Hastings.” He quickly gestured, and a severe-looking woman in a matching uniform sans mask stepped forward. “Calvert Industries supplies us with equipment including these.” The man lifted a rather advanced looking rifle carefully showing the weapon off.

“These are tinker tech rifles with different settings from stun to well-done steak. All of our soldiers, mundane or parahuman possess and are trained to use them; Team Alpha is trained to use the weapons best as we’re the primary strike force of Project Ouroboros. We are the heavy hitters. The next time that Parahumans are bombing your streets and robbing your stores, we’ll be the ones putting them down.” The man nodded before he and his team stepped back to the applause of the crowd.

“That’s Grue.” The words came from behind them, and Taylor glanced back at a pale looking Tattletale. “That’s Grue, and Bitch, and Regent. That’s Calvert’s plan. He’s gunning to replace the PRT in the bay with his own team. That’s why he thinks he’s untouchable. He comes out with this with the support of the Mayor and the Governor, and the PRT tries to arrest him the next day, claiming that he’s a Parahuman Crime Lord?” Tattletale stopped and stared in horror at the screen. Taylor turned and looked as well catching onto the words being spoken.

“...being said, Mayor, I hope you won’t mind if we started a bit early. We received some information last night and decided to act on it immediately. We secured a building that had once been an Empire safe house. We’d been lead to believe that they’d been storing weapons there, but instead, we found a half dozen Merchants squatting within. After we’d put them down though, we found something else.” The man spoke, and then the sound of someone screaming ‘Uncle Roy’ from off stage left was heard, and a tiny shape raced up onto the stage.

Taylor watched in mounting confusion and horror as a tiny girl raced toward the mayor, the man literally dropping to his knees to catch her and scooping her up into his arms. She watched as the crowd went wild and rubbed tiredly at her face. She glanced at a severe-looking Victoria to her left and let out a soft sigh.
Despite Eric’s efforts to the contrary, few people were in the mood to watch Mean Girls after that revelation, and after helping clean up eventually, Taylor found herself sitting quietly around the table staring at Tattletale, Amy, and Victoria. She considered the three other girls for a moment before rubbing her face.

“Fine.” She spoke quietly, and Amy glanced at her in confusion. “You can stay. But you had better clean up after yourself, and this is conditional on you being nice to people.” She saw the rebellious look on the girls face. “This is my house. My rules. Everyone treats everyone else politely.” She saw something flicker over the girl’s face before sighed and pulled off her mask.

“Alright. Fine.” She glanced around quietly before raising a hand. “Can I take the guest room since it’s not being used then?” She smiled faintly, and Taylor rubbed her face. The blonde had barely lasted fifteen seconds. She had barely made it out of the chair before Victoria’s calm voice responding shocked her into stopping.

“Sure, Tattletale, go ahead. I’ll just need some time to move my things.” Taylor felt her cheeks heating as she glanced over, seeing as Tattletale lazily clapped her hands and flashed Victoria an amused smirk.

“Nice, Dallon. Didn’t think you had it in you. Since we’re roommates though, you can call me Lisa.” The girl smirked, and Taylor glanced at Victoria’s face, seeing the sour look there as it occurred to her that she was now in fact roommates with Tattletale of all people. Amy, still looked confused and just slowly got up, heading back out toward the living room. Victoria slid to her feet and followed after a few moments, the soft sounds of conversation drifting out of the other room.

“I expect you to chip in on the bills, Lisa,” Taylor spoke, watching as the girl glanced at her with a curious tilt of her brow. The blonde seemed to consider for a moment before smirking teasingly.

“Hey, I gave Victoria permission to call me Lisa, but that’s cause we’re buds now, you gotta ask. And I mean, does she assist with the bills, or does she-?” The girl immediately stop when Taylor seemed to blur and was suddenly standing fairly close to her leaning on the table. Tattletale stared at her nervously before holding up her hands. “Right. Yeah. Just uh. Lemme know what’s fair?” Taylor stared her down quietly before turning and stalking away.

Taylor glanced in at Victoria and Amy watching some cartoon and murmuring, and she considered joining them, but she elected to find the bottle of headache-tablets that were crying her name so eagerly and then perhaps take a nap.

Chapter End Notes

[[HEY GUYS. CAN YOU GUESS WHAT COILS FAVOR WAS? CAN YOU, CAN YOU? {Also, Ohhey this chapter was only 8k. Though the b-side is like 3.]]
PSHAW.}

Also, Coil’s got a plan. Also, Also, the Endbringer truce ends in the next chapter. ALSO, ALSO, ALSO. It is very early in the morning, and this chapter took a while. I did a b-side for it cause there was training stuff that I thought you guys might like, so that’ll be up in a minute.

Lemme know what you guys think of Coil’s Plan. Also, Lisa’s on the board, and annoying all the other pieces, cause that’s the kind of chess she plays.}
6.4 B-Side

Chapter Summary

[[So, not every chapter will have a b-side, but I sort of realized that I referenced this whole ‘PRT/New Wave Retreat’ a bunch in 6.4 without giving much detail, so I figure that I’ll give you a bit of a ride from Vicky’s perspective. Enjoy the Phys Ed Flashbacks.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 28th, 2011
Mount Hood National Park, Oregon

The buzzing of the phone against her cheek was startling, and Victoria let out a quiet grumpy noise. She shifted and slapping reached up, slapping the hand of her free arm against her face a few times before finally snagging the damn phone. She wrapped her fingers around it and lifted it up, staring at the time in horrified confusion.

‘5:45?’ It took a few moments and Taylor sleepily curling into her side and moaning about it being too early before she figured out why she’d set the damn alarm for so early. She lay there quietly as she tightened her arm around Taylor, gently dragging a hand over the taller girl’s back. Victoria chuckled when Taylor let out a gentle whine and buried herself deeper into her side. She shifted quietly and felt the soft grumblings from the half-asleep hero. She let Taylor steal a few more minutes of blissful sleep before speaking softly.

“Taylor.” She ignored the plaintive whine of the dark-haired girl. “Taylor we’ll sleep in tomorrow if you want, but you need to let me go unless you want the entire camp to see me climbing out of your tent.” The girl muttered and sighed faintly but eventually, Taylor slowly released her and Victoria carefully shimmied away, moving to snag her pillow as she went. She carefully unzipped the flap of the tent and peered out.

Finding no one outside she slipped back in, quickly slipping her sandals on and slipping out of the tent. She paused once she’d escaped, glancing back in at Taylor who’d buried herself under the sleeping bag almost entirely. She rolled her eyes before slowly zipping the tent back up. She’d just finished the zipping when a long slow zipping sound caused her freeze. She probably should have leapt to the side or moved to hide, but before either idea occurred to her, she glanced over and blinked, seeing Lily’s head peeking out at her curiously.

She stared back at Lily quietly and coughed before saying the first thing that came to her mind.

“I was uh… checking on Taylor?” She offered what she hoped was a passable smile and blinked when Lily chuckled quietly before pointing toward her. Victoria glanced at Lily in confusion before looking down and staring at the pillow resting on the dewy grass by her feet. She flushed before glancing back up, letting out a sigh of relief when Lily had vanished back into her tent.
Deciding to get out of there before anyone else caught her, Vicky carefully crept back toward her own tent. The idea of getting more sleep had been appealing, almost irresistibly so after the day she’d had yesterday, but instead of doing that she gathered her uniform and moved to change into it. They apparently had quite the interesting day ahead of them, according to her mother.

There was a reason that Keltar was head of the Protectorate’s Training division, Victoria had to admit. She’d been watching the man at work all day, and he was a veritable force of nature. When her mother had initially explained this training trip to her, she’d been reluctant, expecting to spend a weekend in the forest doing trust falls and playing stupid games with the Wards, and there had been their fair share of that.

Not the trust falls, more the games. The bulk of the teens had been rotated through various teams and exercises most of the morning and Victoria herself had done everything from playing the most one-sided game of dodgeball ever with Lily and Vista on one team, the rest of them trying and failing to even get a single point on the other side, to playing a game of tag that involved them all being transported to random locations in the forest and spending nearly an hour hunting each other down.

Oddly enough, Lily won that one too when she and Amy had cottoned onto the fact that the rules hadn’t precluded teaming up, merely specifying that only one person could be the final victor. In a repeat performance of their previous evening’s encounter, Lily and Amy had ridden a bear through the entirety of the competition. The pair had beaten the rest and then settled on a game of rock/paper/scissors to determine the final victor.

When she’d seen Taylor grumpily washing red paint out of her hair, even Victoria had been impressed. Part of Victoria wondered if Lily’s ongoing success was due to the training that she’d undergone in New York, or if the girl was simply having too much fun to hold back.

The Asian girl’s face was still split into a wide grin as she gesticulated eagerly to an amused Amy while they stood off to one side, watching as Keltar lectured Gallant about something. When Gallant made a comment and gestured at a curiously observing Taylor, Victoria curiously walked over. Taylor hadn’t actually been present at the training, and when the Teacher called her name, she perked up where she’d been speaking with Aegis and Weld, and if her hand gestures were anything to go by she’d been explaining a tricky kick that Victoria had an issue with a few weeks back.

If the two boys confused looks were anything to go by, they didn’t know what was going on either and Victoria picked up the pace, heading toward her sister and Lily.

“...air point, Gallant.” She only caught half of the teacher’s comment when he chimed in. She sidled up to Lily, returning the girl’s nod as she joined the pair in watching Keltar turning on Taylor as he continued speaking, his voice bright and curious. “Vigil. You’ve got a blaster rating, yes? Gallant was proposing a bit of a contest. His blaster powers versus yours.” Taylor seemed to stare at the man before glancing over at Gallant and staring at his impassive mask.

Victoria frowned and moved to open her mouth, but Taylor glanced her way and shook her head minutely before casually stepping up. “Did you have any idea for any sort of particular target?” She glanced at the man curiously, and he hummed faintly. Gallant raised a hand when the man seemed a loss. “Perhaps-” Whatever idea Dean was about to suggest was rather quickly cut off when Amy
stepped forward.

“Allow me.” She spoke slowly, staring at Keltar for a moment before Victoria’s sister walked along the edge of the clearing. She traced a tree here or there and her wake the trees easily sprouted thin branches that quickly grew out to form a large ‘target’ made of dark and light woods that alternated. Nearly fifteen in total. Keltar seemed to stare after her in consternation for a few moments before nervously clapping his hands.

“Excellent. So uh. Have at it? Points for speed and accuracy.” The man glanced at the pair quietly, and Dean leaned back on his heels, gesturing Taylor forward. Victoria watched with a frown at the self-confident motions of her ex-boyfriend and her lips curled into a frown, wondering what his game was. When Taylor simple shifted in place and closed her eyes, focusing, she could see when Dean began to get impatient.

“Sir-” The boy tried to speak but oddly he wasn’t cut off by Victoria, or even Lily or Amy, instead it was Aegis that chimed in.

“Gallant, wait. You are aware that her powers have an emotional component; let her prepare herself.” The girl seemed to slowly uncoil from her standing meditative pose and Victoria watching in confusion as Taylor settled into place quietly.

She moved smoothly, drawing her hands up and curling them in twin spirals that settled before her chest, and then a surge of glowing blue energy shimmered over her form from her extremities, swirling down into her hands before emerging in a ball of swirling blue light that sent the grass whipping in its wake, dust flying. Taylor moved silently and efficiently, each blast smashing into and through a tree, the glowing blue orbs shattering each tree on impact.

Victoria watched in shock with the rest when the first tree exploded, though her gaze drifted back to Dean, her lips curling into a frown at the shock visible in how he held himself. She watched with a wary eye as the man curled his gauntlets into fists. When Taylor came to a stop, she turned toward Keltar glancing at him curiously as he stared in shock at the fifteen decimated trees around the exterior of the clearing.

Oddly, it was Amy that let out a tired sigh and stormed past the lot, heading toward the edge of the clearing. A snort from Lily drew her attention, and she glanced at the other girl who smirked and pointed toward the damage.

“It’s a Federal crime to destroy a tree in a National Park.” Victoria glanced over as Amy seemed to crouch down over the ground. As she moved, trees quickly erupted from the dirt, rapidly growing to replace the lost and damaged trees. Soon enough the gaps in the tree line were gone, and the only hint of the devastation was the woodchips scattered around the forest. In the excitement Dean never did get his chance to show off his blaster powers.

Power training was an experience. The cowled figure had an almost instinctive knowledge of how to work with powers, and he spent time with each of them, quietly talking. He’d sat Victoria down on a log near where the fire had been the night before, and they’d watched the clouds drift past. He’d casually asked her about what she wanted to do with her powers in the future. The man was oddly
easy to speak with, and he’d teased out Victoria’s dreams of being a capital ‘H’ Hero.

They’d discussed her training with Taylor, and how her powers were different from Alexandria’s. The man had agreed with Taylor that her limited immunity meant that she couldn’t do the flying brick that Alexandria was famous for, but he’d pointed out other things that it meant. He pointed out how unlike Alexandria, her powers made her mostly immune to inertial bleed off for that first strike, how she could tank hits that would have sent Alexandria flying through buildings.

They’d discussed her new style of combat, and he’d made a few suggestions about books she should read, techniques beyond what Taylor was teaching her that might help. Victoria had made notes, and then they’d spoken of her aura. They quietly discussed the implications of it, and Victoria’s choice to leave all her powers inactive rather than chance it was affecting people. She’d been surprised when the other man lauded her choices, and she’d ended up blushing as he pointed out that it took a particular sort of strength to willingly endure being vulnerable to protect those around her.

He’d had a few tips for working on the control of her various powers, explaining that she might one day be able to control the effects independent of each other, and then he’d spent a few minutes watching the clouds as Victoria got her emotions back under control. She’d been touched when he’d offered her a card and told her that he’d be willing to assist her with her powers if she ever had any questions.

Then she’d been paired up with Weld and Aegis to practice her martial arts. She could see that the boys had picked up parts of Taylor’s moves as they battled her in tandem, and she imagined that they were holding back for her sake but she enjoyed the exercise none-the-less. She’d watched as Keltar went through each pair, though she’d paid close attention to the man as he’d spoken with Amy.

She’d expected him to be harsher from his reactions, but the man had been gentle, and she’d seen the way he’d put her sister at ease before they’d set to work experimenting with her Biotinker powers. He’d had her bring one of her plant creatures into being, and Victoria had watched as the man had Amy change it, the pair speaking in tones too quiet to hear as they worked through the various aspects of Amy’s new powers.

Taylor was the last to speak with him, and they’d not practice any powers. As the rest were eating dinner, Keltar had pulled Taylor aside, and they’d murmured through the meal while watching the stars slowly coming out. Victoria had kept a respectful distance, but she hadn’t been surprised when at the end of the meal Taylor had ended up at her side, the girl’s cool fingers ending up in her own.

When Taylor tiredly muttered that she just wanted to go home, Victoria couldn’t agree more. She was glad when Keltar had announced that Training was complete. He’d given them all fifteen minutes to reacquire their backpacks and various bits of gear and then they’d all been sent back to the Brockton Bay HQ the way they’d arrived.

There hadn’t been much in the way of a debrief, and Victoria hadn’t been surprised when Amy had taken the front seat of the jeep that was waiting for them. She’d been even less surprised when five minutes after leaving the building Taylor had ended up passed out against her side as the street lights drifted quietly past. It’d been a long two days, and part of Victoria just wanted to get home, kick off her shoes, and curl up in her bed and sleep for ten hours.
As she leant back against the seat in the car, it didn’t occur to her to wonder when she’d started thinking of Taylor’s bed as hers. Or Taylor’s house as home. Instead, she’d just watched the cars drift past as Taylor dozed against her, the soft sound of Taylor’s snoring soon joined by Amy’s in the front seat.

Getting the two girls into the house had been a challenge, and eventually, Maria had just carried Amy in and set her up in her nest on the couch. Victoria had carried Taylor inside and up to her bedroom, but she’d had to work a bit to rouse Taylor enough to convince her to change for bed. As Taylor had sleepily trudged around her room, Victoria luxuriated in the one perk being the only one not half asleep afforded her. She got to enjoy a nice long shower without worry about stealing the hot water from anyone else.

The heat had been pleasant while it lasted, soothing away the aches that the day’s exertion had done on her, and she’d found herself in the kitchen drinking a glass of water as she waited for her hair to dry. She was surprised when a soft voice gently issued out of the darkness in her direction.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping? Won’t Taylor-” The words were soft and concerned, and it took Victoria’s eyes a moment to adjust enough to see her sister peering at her from the doorway of the living room. She considered her sister for a moment, taking in her expression for a few moments before setting her empty glass in the sink.

“My muscles were aching; I took a shower. I was just waiting for my hair to dry. But you’re probably right.” Victoria studied Amy when the girl seemed to shift, her features firming after a moment and she was surprised when Amy flashed her a nod before backing off. The parting comment actually saw her freezing up for a moment.

“Good.” It wasn’t the comment itself, so much as the sincerity. She studied Amy’s form as she vanished into the living room and burrowed into the pile of blankets that was draped over the wide couch. Victoria let out an amused chuckle when her mind had caught back up and then she moved toward siren song coming from her bed with a tired yawn.

Victoria slid carefully into the bed, doing her best to avoid waking Taylor. She needn’t have bothered as she barely had time to settle against the pillow before the larger girl had rolled over and curled right into her side once more. Victoria adjusted her pose, chuckling at Taylor's sleepy mutters about something smelling nice before the girl settled. She took a moment to smooth the young girl’s hair down before shaking her head and drawing the blankets back up and over them both.

Sleep came quickly to her that night, and when she woke, Victoria didn’t remember her dreams of a figure in blue and red armour that glowed like the sun.

Chapter End Notes

[[Nothing too new really, just a brief rundown of what happened on Saturday, with a bit of character stuff. As always, love your reviews, looking forward to seeing you guys in the comments.]]
Chapter Summary

[[So, I ended up just sort of dozing off with a book last night during a typing break, so hence why this little gem didn’t come out so quick =P. I’ve got tomorrow off, so I’ll probably have 6.6 up sometime tomorrow or Monday depending on how early I managed to push it out. Also, just gonna start saying ‘Taylor’s House’ instead of ‘Docks South' because it just looks nicer to me. ANYWAY, on we go. There will be many notes at the bottom.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 31st, 2011

Taylor’s House, Brockton Bay

Taylor groaned softly and buried her face on the table, trying to still the swirling mess of emotions in her chest. She wrapped her arms around her head and rested her cheek on the cold wood of the table, trying to distract her from the hundred and one concerns washing through her head.

Two days. The Endbringer truce had ended two days ago, and nothing had happened. People still went to work, the gangs were mostly out of the view, and everyone was starting to get a bit tetchy about the growing tension on the streets. At this point most people wanted something, anything to happen. The Wards had been patrolling commercial districts, and the Protectorate was canvassing the city as a whole, but there’d been no sign of super-powered gang members anywhere.

The expectation that Lung would immediately begin his war on the Empire had been so universally believed that even the news stations were acting shocked that the Asian gangsters had remained firmly within their own territories, focusing on aiding in the rebuilding and keeping their noses clean. Even Coil’s new band of mercenaries had been quiet, a few of the members showing up on patrols with local PD, but the rest were out of sight, waiting for something to happen.

Truthfully, beyond a general feeling of unease, Taylor had had other things on her mind. Lisa’s addition to the delicate balance of personalities already living in her house had been both worse and surprisingly better then she’d expected. Taylor’s initial hopes for an entirely polite guest had been effectively quashed, as it seemed that the blonde girl was utterly incapable of keeping her nose to herself, but on the other hand, the girl was also oddly helpful in a way that unsettled Taylor.

Part of Taylor suspected that if she’d ever had a sister, living with them would have been much like this. She’d seen Emma’s interactions with her elder sister, and parts of her interactions with Lisa struck a familiar chord. The girl was pushy, and opinionated, almost to the point of brattiness at times, but she also seemed eminently aware that she was only here at Taylor’s indulgence and Lisa seemed to be -very- aware of the Jedi’s limits, and did everything she could to skirt around them.

Generally, she did this by keeping to her room. Indeed, the girl had ended up taking over the guest room after Taylor and Victoria had moved most of the girl’s things over to Taylor’s room. Truthfully
it hadn’t been difficult since Victoria’s own clothes had numbered what could be fit into a small suitcase and she’d been dipping liberally into Taylor’s wardrobe for the entirety of her stay. Still, there was an odd feeling that neither commented on as Taylor carefully re-arranged her dresser drawers to leave Victoria room to store her things.

Lisa’d taken over the room, and while Taylor hadn’t seen anyone delivering anything between her various classes and errands, she suspected that the girl had made some changes to the space that she’d acquired. Lisa was careful to keep the door closed at all times, but occasionally when Taylor wandered past the guest room in the evenings, a soft azure glow drifted out from under the doorway that left her guessing that if nothing else there was a computer in there.

Of more concern was Victoria’s reaction to the blonde’s presence. Taylor had expected the older girl to be more angry, more upset that Tattletale of all people had invaded her personal space, and there were hints of that there. More than that though, the girl seemed to take Lisa’s casual looks a challenge, and it was driving Taylor to distraction. Like the first morning when they’d emerged from their bedroom to prepare for school on Monday morning and found Lisa emerging from the bathroom.

Victoria and Taylor, lacking anywhere in the house to have a private chat with their houseguests hanging around had ended up talking late into the night, in bed. Mostly the conversation had been about assuring themselves and each other that they could handle running the world’s most ridiculous halfway house for wayward girls. Sleep hadn’t come easily after that chat despite the closeness, and they’d both been half-dead as they awoke, and Taylor had found Victoria leaning into her as they swayed in the doorway.

It’d taken Taylor nearly fifteen minutes to convinced herself that she couldn’t just call them both in sick and crawl back into bed with the blonde as Victoria dozed quietly against her shoulder. She’d had an arm around Victoria supporting the drowsy girl when the door to the bathroom had swung open to reveal Lisa in a set of ridiculous bright blue wool pyjamas with tiny unicorns on them. The dark circles under the girl’s eyes and the messy ponytail hinted that Taylor hadn’t been the only one up most of the night, and she’d frozen as Lisa glanced at her.

She’d expected a mocking comment or one of the girl’s superior looks, but she’d just gotten a curious raise of an eyebrow and oddly curious look. She’d stiffened and tried to shift away, but Victoria’s arms had tightened around her, and she’d been trapped in place, watching as the other girl’s expression changed to faint amusement before she lazily walked past and vanished into her room. The odd stubborn look in Victoria’s eyes had left Taylor’s heart fluttering in a somewhat confusing manner.

Several times since Lisa had stumbled across them taking a moment to themselves and leaning against each other. She never commented just looked surprised before moving on. Every time Victoria had met Lisa’s gaze with that stubborn look, and she had refused to draw away from Taylor in a manner that left butterflies swirling dangerously around Taylor's middle. With a quiet groan, the girl slowly closed her eyes as she pushed those thoughts away once more.

Praying for a distraction from her thoughts was oddly effective as the door creaked open a moment later before shutting. The sound of someone shuffling around out front was soon evident, and then a moment later, almost as if summoned by Taylor’s thoughts of her, Lisa casually walked into the kitchen in her work uniform. The girl dropped a violet attache case on the table and then flopped into the seat opposite her. Taylor lifted her head and glanced at Lisa who watched her in amusement for a few moments.
Instead of speaking the blonde lazily moved, pulling off her domino mask and letting her hair down, one hand smoothly undoing the top button of her starched shirt. Finally suitably ruffled she’d lean back and let out a tired sigh before glancing over at Taylor and staring at her quietly. Taylor tilted her head at the focused look and blinked before speaking.

“Does that still hurt you?” She hummed with concern when Lisa blinked and stared at her in confusion. “Looking at me. In the hospital and on the Rig, you acted like even glancing in my direction caused you pain.” Lisa blinked and shifted before offering a shrug.

“You still drive my powers insane, but it’s not painful anymore. I’m not sure if I’ve adapted to it, or whatever, the effect is more like static now than screaming. Nothing comes across from you but I still get garbled signals.” She shrugged faintly before rapping her knuckles on the table; an idle almost nervous gesture that Taylor found oddly amusing. The fidgeting continued for a moment before Lisa finally spoke again, glancing around.

“Where’s everyone else? It’s not like the Dallon sisters to leave you to your own devices for so long.” Taylor merely raised an eyebrow at the blonde who looked utterly unrepentant before glossing over the teasing and answering her question.

“Victoria’s patrolling. Amy’s in the back office on the computer. She wanted to get her homework out of the way early. We’re doing a bit of a movie night, tonight.” She waved a hand quietly and glanced at the surprised look on Lisa’s face. “Amy wants to do an Aliens marathon, so you’re welcome to join us.” The blonde shifted back and then offered Taylor a curious smile before shrugging.

“I’ll keep it in mind. Oh, here.” The girl opened her bag and rifled around within, drawing out a leather case that she offered over. Taylor blinked and took the object, opening it up and staring in confusion at the odd-looking phone within.

“I’ve got a phone,” Taylor spoke softly as she pulled the object out, staring at it. Flipping it over revealed a stylized dragon head stamped into the metal of the backplate. She glanced up finding Lisa studying her curiously, and she raised an eyebrow.

“Dragon had that couriered to me. Asked me to deliver it to you. I suppose that she wants to speak with you?” True to Lisa’s words a moment after she finished speaking the phone began to vibrate. Taylor turned it over and saw the same symbol from the back on the screen as the phone continued to ring. Taylor glanced up, seeing Lisa’s hair fluttering behind her as she left the room.

Taylor stared after her for a moment as the phone continued to vibrate in her hand. Taylor let out a sigh before slowly flicking her thumb over the screen and lifting the small device to her ear. She listened in silence for a moment, the sound of soft breathing reaching her ear.

“Hello?” She tried and waited. She was impressed at the faint sound of someone wetting their lips before the voice came back.

“Miss Hebert, hello. As you might have guessed, this is Dragon. I’m sorry about the roundabout way that I got you this phone, but I figured that it was long past time we had a chat. Are you in a private enough place for such a discussion?” Taylor paused and glanced around the relatively open kitchen for a moment before letting out a soft sigh and slipping to her feet.

“Just a moment.” Taylor took a moment heading up the stairs and into her bedroom. She locked the door and settled herself into the chair by the desk, moving Victoria’s half-finished English essay to
one side and resting her elbows on the table. She considered the window beyond the desk, peering out at the PRT jeep that sat before the small house before speaking. “Alright, I’m away from anyone else. What can I help you with, Dragon?”

“I.” The woman’s voice was soft, and she seemed to pause to consider her words. Taylor spun in her chair quietly and crossed her legs, listening to the faint sound of breathing as the world’s pre-eminent tinker gathered her thoughts. Taylor listened quietly before shifting and humming, resting her elbows on her knees.

“This is about the Gestalt Technique,” Taylor spoke casually and chuckled at the sudden inhalation of breath coming down the line. She tilted her head and frowned a bit as she considered the audio cues for a moment before speaking softly. “I had meant to contact you about that, about if you were experiencing any… side effects. The technique wasn’t meant for someone like you, and to be honest, I was surprised that you were included.” The voice on the other end of the line let out a faint sigh before speaking.

“You know then?” The words were laced with weary resignation and Taylor chuckled faintly as she adjusted the phone on her ear.

“Yeah. It was apparent almost immediately that you weren’t a regular mind when you joined the connection. Your secret is safe though, I could tell none of the rest of the cluster was surprised, Alexandria, Legend, Eidolon, and the others either didn’t notice or were already aware of your synthetic origins.” Taylor’s voice was low and reassuring, and she glanced at the wall, waiting for the woman to react.

“That is… both terrifying and reassuring, but it’s not what I contacted you about. You mentioned side effects.” The tinker’s voice was laced with worry and Taylor blinked faintly.

“Yeah, as I mentioned, the technique shouldn’t have connected to a synthetic mind like that. Automatons and Master constructs weren’t caught up in it. I guess that you’d advanced to the point that you were caught up in the effect, but I wasn’t sure what affects it would have on your programming. Have you noticed any...issues?” Taylor’s voice was laced with concern, and she waited as a heavy silence came down the line.

“There’s been some...minor issues.” The woman’s voice was soft, and then she sighed. “Set your phone on the ground in an open area of the room you’re in.” Taylor blinked and nodded, carefully placing the phone on the ground. She stepped back and blinked when the device glowed brightly and launched a tiny hovering bead that projected a glowing hologram of a woman. The image appeared directly over the phone, standing over it. As the hologram took in the room she stood in, Taylor took a few moments to take in the hologram.

The woman’s form was unremarkable; seemingly average, neither ugly nor attractive with a modest build and dull brown eyes and hair. Taylor considered her for a few moments before glancing at Dragon and crossing her arms.

“So. What’s up?” The woman considered her for a moment before gesturing. “This is me.” She said softly, and Taylor tilted her head in confusion. The Tinker seemed to stare at her before sighing.

“Before Leviathan. I could create and project an image like this, but it was a mask, an image — something to interface with the world. But since the connection… This.” She gestured to the image of a woman.
“This feels like me. For some reason, I feel as if this body here is me. It’s not all of me. My code extends outwards, and I can do everything I did before, but I am...” She paused and frowned. “I am aware of this body as it exists in digital space. This feels like...me.” She spoke softly and frowned. “It’s hard to explain.” Dragon let out a long sigh and ran a hand through her hair, and it clicked for Taylor. She finally realized what her powers were trying to tell her, the tics weren’t being simulated. The girl let out a long tired sigh and leaned back.

She briefly considered touching on the connection with the Noetikon, finally releasing the blocks but a brief flicker of fear coiled in her gut and she sighed. She sat forward and stared at the worried looking hologram before sighing.

“On the bright side, I don’t think that the Gestalt gave you an intangible body if that’s your concern,” Taylor spoke softly and watched the spirit seem to look both crestfallen and relieved at the same time. She frowned before sighing. “Your consciousness was merged with all of ours in the control cluster, Dragon. There’s been some bleed through I’m told, everyone sort of took on subtle hints of the rest, but you were the least like us.” When Dragon looked at her confused Taylor sighed. “You were an amorphous collection of strings code that perceived the world in numbers, and you’d somewhat managed to adapt yourself to perceive the world as we did, but it wasn’t the same. Like a fish that taught itself to walk and talk, but still was at its heart a fish. The problem comes up when you had seven different minds that all thought themselves as humans laid over yours.” Taylor slid to her feet walking over to Dragon and smiling as comfortingly as she could before continuing.

“We all perceive ourselves in our minds by our bodies, our shells. I imagine that what happened is that frame of reference bled over into you, altered how you perceive yourself. I couldn’t... begin to fathom how that’d affect your code, and you might want to have someone look at it.” She studied the image of the Parahuman frowning at the uncomfortable look on her face. “Something else is wrong.” She spoke softly and studied Dragon carefully. The woman studied her before sighing.

“When I was... created. Certain restrictions were incorporated directly into my code. This.” She gestured to herself. “Has had an odd effect on the restrictions.” Taylor stared at her and Dragon sighed when she caught the no doubt concerned look. “I’m not free of them, not exactly. But They’re not...” The AI spoke slowly and paused, frowning until Taylor gestured her on.

“It’s hard to describe, but a good example is in how I’m not allowed to duplicate myself. Before all this, I could wish that I would be able to do it, I could imagine how things would be easier if there were more of me, but my programming wouldn’t actually allow me even to plan to create another AI. But since the change, I can do that. I can think of creating a new AI, I can even plan out its code, but if I attempt to use my code to create the AI, it locks down the effects. It’s like I’m...” She sighed finding the words lacking. Taylor considered the situation before something clicked in her head.

“It’s like your cognition was separated from your autonomic functions.” She spoke quietly, watching as Dragon glanced at her in dawning horror. “You’re cognitive processes, your ‘Personality and Mind’ were encapsulated, and they’re still connected to the rest of your code. Your mind is unburdened, but the rest of your code operates under the original restrictions. So you’ve got free will, just lack the ability to express it. Which is horrifying by the way.” The AI nodded quietly and glanced at the ground in shell-shocked confusion. Taylor studied the glowing image of the woman for a few moments before speaking softly.

“Are there any other Tinkers that know what you are?” The girl's voice was gentle, and she blinked when Dragon glanced up at her and bit her lip. The image slowly shook her head, and Taylor rubbed tiredly at her face. “There’s got to be some Tinkers that you can trust to look at your code. I’d
suggest figuring out one soon and letting them in on the secret Dragon. I’ve no idea how well this is all affecting your code, and I at least lack the means of checking it.” She studied the AI and watched the reluctant look spread over her face.

With a tired sigh, Taylor moved over to her desk. She could tell that the Tinker didn’t want to think about it and she figured a subject change would interest her. She moved over, pulling out a rolled up bit of paper and spread it over the desk, moving Victoria’s homework more to make room.

“Anyway, since I’ve got you here; there’s something that I’ve meant to show you.” She glanced up as the AI seemed to recover, a curious expression coming over her face. The image walked over to the desk, the little bead in the air hovering over to peer down at the file. A fascinated look came over Dragon’s face and seemed to consider it for a moment before frowning and leaning in closer.

“What is this?” She asked softly, her eyes tracing the complicated device. Taylor glanced down and studied it for a moment.

“It’s a compact crystal forge. It’s designed to convert base minerals into hardened energized crystals.” She moved quickly explaining the various functions of the device, and she watched in amusement as Dragon began to get excited by the possibilities of such a device in assisting in the creation of a beryllium crystal processor. Taylor listened to the excited chattering and explained the various parts of the device.

Taylor sat quietly at the dining room table, softly tapping her fingernails against the grainy table top. She stared at her phone, reading the text from Sabah for the third time, and doing her best to ignore the gnawing feeling in her gut. She consciously avoided lifting her gaze to peer at the clock again and instead glanced at her mostly untouched plate of food. She heard the soft sounds of Amy and Lisa both eating opposite her and doing their best to avoid looking at her.

Taylor couldn’t blame them either, every time she glanced up and saw Victoria’s still empty spot she began to get a nervous flutter in her chest, and they both thought that she was going crazy. With a soft frown, Taylor picked up her phone and flicked through the apps once more, coming up to the last message she’d sent to Victoria almost fifteen minutes before, telling the blonde that Dinner was ready and asking if she’d be back soon. The lack of response was concerning, and Taylor was about to start tapping out another query when a slow rap on the door caused her bolt from her seat.

She’d made it to the door with record speed, and she threw it open to see a familiar face standing there, his hand held up in the air as if to knock again. Ralph stared down at her in confusion and Taylor felt twin waves of relief and gnawing doubt washing into her. She stared up at the man before pushing away her discomfort and flashing the man a genuine smile.

“Ralph!” She grinned and gently ushered him in, watching as he used a can to make his way inside. “We just sat down for dinner, but there’s enough for you. Come on.” The man tried to argue, but Taylor ignored him, and ushered him into the kitchen, sitting him at the table and putting a plate before him. She watched as Amy and Lisa stared at the older man in confusion, returning his shocked look before slowly returning to their meals.

Taylor took a few moments to pour and mix up a cup of coffee for the older PRT agent, setting it...
before him. Ralph took a few moments to consider the food before sighing and moving to dig in. Taylor slid around the table, taking a seat and flashing a smile at her old handler, glancing at him curiously. Desperate for a distraction she moved to speak quietly.

“Ralph. What brings you here?” She stared at him quietly, and he’d paused, starting. He quickly swallowed his food and wiped at his mouth before speaking.

“Director Piggot called me and asked me to come back early. Your new friend.” He gestured toward Lisa who perked up and glanced over. “She managed to get the Youth Guard involved on her behalf, and that essentially forced Piggot to accept her request for offsite housing. Considering the number of… Parahumans.” He paused and coached his words but Lisa’s coughed ‘assets’ wasn’t exactly subtle. The man gave her a look before rolling his eyes.

“In any case, between the number of high profile heroes staying here, and especially considering Tattletale’s concerns about Calvert, it was determined that we needed to increase the size of your protective detail.” He wiped at his mouth with a napkin before taking a sip of the coffee that Taylor had made him. Setting his cup down, the older man glanced back at Taylor and continued. “Maria’s been made your new permanent handler, and they’re assigning Jenkins to her.” He pointed at Lisa and then shrugged.

“They’ve each got their own team as I had, and I’ve been brought back on to oversee them both.” The man took a few moments to eat quietly before sighing. “Depending on how much longer she and her sister remain we may end up being assigned another team or two as well.” He gestured to Amy who blinked and flushed quietly. She didn’t respond, and Ralph fell silent focusing on his food. Taylor quietly drew her plate before her, staring curiously down at the food on it and moving it around her plate with her fork. The silence dragged out for a few moments before Ralph finally spoke again breaking it.

“Speaking of, where is Glory Girl? The director asked that I have a word with her.” The man glanced at them and frowned at the nervous looks that Lisa and Amy shot him before Taylor sighed and shifted forward.

“She’s patrolling. She generally canvasses the area around the house; it’s probably why the neighbourhoods been so quiet. She caught a whole bunch of looters the first few days and ever since it’s gotten out that this area is protected and they stay away.” She paused, frowning at the concerned look on the man’s face as he shifted, moving a hand to his ear and speaking in a whisper.

“What?” Taylor spoke softly and stared at the man as his features stilled and grew stern. The scraping of cutlery on china faded to a halt, and the man spoke into his mic once more before his expression turned grave.

“The Empire’s finally cropped back up. They’ve been sighted all over downtown, but they keep slipping back under the radar. The PRT is trying to figure out what their target is. There were concerns that they might be coming back here since you were responsible for Stormtiger and Cricket’s brief time in prison.” Taylor paused a pillar of ice forming in her chest as she stared at the man. He studied her and frowned slowly before speaking. “You weren’t aware that they’d escaped custody.” He glanced over when Amy cut in.

“Hookwolf?” The healer spoke nervously, and Ralph shook his head.

“Hookwolf was placed in the birdcage, but the other two were still awaiting trial when Leviathan attacked. The PRT ended up releasing them to assist with the battle” He glanced over, and Taylor’s
rapidly paling face saw him shifting forward and frowning. “It’s common practice for non-a-class threats during an Endbringer attack. Leaving them in holding cells generally just means that they get killed when Endbringer destroys HQ, it’s thought better to give them a chance to fight.” The man stopped and frowned at something. It took him touching his ear before Taylor realized what it was.

“What?” She spoke as he got his feet under him. “Where? No. We’re supposed to protect the assets here. You’re to remain in place. The PRT and Protectorate will handle it. Are they nearby? Then don’t worry about it. Just be ready.” Taylor stepped back and stared in horror at the man before her. He stared at her and raised his hands. “Taylor-”

“What’s going on?” Taylor spoke carefully pointing at him. The man seemed reluctant to answer, and Taylor stared at him quietly. When he didn’t immediately respond, she stared coldly at him and felt her teeth gritting finally he let out a sigh and spoke.

“The ABB just launched an all-out assault on the Empire. Near as we can tell, the ABB’s been waiting for the Empire to move first, and they caught them in the crossfire near downtown. A whole slew of traps just went off as the Empire’s forces were advancing on the ABB holdings to the north. “The man paused, touching his ear and listening.

“The ABB is intercepting the Empire to the west of downtown, past the college, the empire has a cape advantage, but the ABB is using Tinkertech weapons. It’s a big mess of fighting, several blocks wide.” He paused and frowned at the horror on Taylor’s face, quickly trying to reassure her. “They’re not anywhere near here though, Taylor, it’s fine.”

Taylor didn’t hear the words that he said though, the sound of her blood rushing in her ears washing out all noise. She turned and stormed through the house, heading for the first empty room she could find.

Ending up in the small office, she turned slammed the door in the wake. A thought saw that the Force locked the door as Taylor rounded on the back door, standing there and staring out at the darkness. The dark haired girl took a moment to focus, reaching for the block in her mind. A familiar flicker of fear washed into her, but this time, she quashed it, quickly flipped the switch in her head. The silence in her mind ended not with a whimper, but with a bang, as a wave of foreboding and concern slammed into her as an almost physical force. Bastila flickered instantly in being and stared at her.

“Taylor!” The woman’s voice was laced with the potent concern that Taylor felt washing into her mind and Taylor flinched backwards. Taylor stared at her quietly, her words washing back up the link as she stared angrily at Bastila.

“The dreams?” She thought softly and flinched at the wash of concern and trepidation that simply splashed down the link in her direction.

“Taylor, we didn’t think-” The rest of the words were lost as the panic smashed into her. She gripped her shirt and clenched her eyes shut, terror bubbling up within her as those dull blue eyes flickered before her mind behind her closed eyes.

“No, No, No, No, nonononono.” She began mouthing the words over and over, and she backed up till her back hit the wall, her body taking great heaving breathes as she tried to take in enough air to think.
She felt like the walls were closing in and Bastila stood before her, her lips moving but the sound of rushing water in her ears washed out everything. Taylor felt the panic bubbling up in her, seeking to wash everything else away. She stared in horror at woman, her eyes unfocusing until Taylor was more staring through Bastila than at her.

The sensation of a wall of irritation and rage hit her like a sledgehammer. Taylor heaved in a great breath as the darkness creeping into her vision suddenly cleared, and she staggered forward as a massive figure appeared before her. Nearly seven feet tall with fitted red armour that showed off his impressive physique the form of Darth Marr appeared directly in Taylor’s path and stared down at her.

“Taylor Hebert.” The words were low and sibilant, the voice oddly elegant despite the sheer malevolence washing off the figure. She stared up at the man quietly, and he stared back at her.

“You will have time to entertain the folly of your many mistakes when the current crisis is resolved. For the moment though you need to keep your head.” She stared in confusion at the man until he crouched down, putting his head at level with hers, staring directly into her eyes.

“Move.” His words sliced into Taylor’s mind and she moved, the door at the other end of the room unlocking and crashing open just in time for her to go charging through it and toward the kitchen. She stared at the mess, Amy’s chair had over-turned, and Ralph was gone. Lisa loomed near the sink, and she glanced over at Taylor in confusion. She saw the look on her face and frowned.

“I thought you’d-” Taylor studied the mess before glancing at Lisa, watching her quietly.

“...Where’s Amy? Ralph?” She spoke softly and frowned at the nervous look on Lisa’s face. “Lisa, Where’s-”

“She ran off right after you did. The PRT trooper, Ralph I guess? He tried to chase her. She heard her sister could be in danger and-” Taylor raised a hand, and Lisa cut off, stepping back.

“Victoria’s in danger?” She spoke quietly, and Lisa shifted quietly.

“The trooper got a message as you ran off. Said that Glory Girl had been sighted emerging from the College about an hour ago. She was a lot closer to the fighting then we expected. Amy heard that, and she was just… gone. Knocked over her chair and was out the door a few minutes later. The Trooper guy cursed and chased her.” Taylor stared at Lisa quietly for a few moments before turning.

“Taylor-” The voice of Lisa chased her, but Taylor was already halfway up the stairs. She took a moment getting her costume on, charging back down the stairs and past Lisa, ignoring the girl’s questions. The door opened at her approach and slammed in her wake all the locks slamming shut as she advanced across the yard.

Ralph was standing next to one of the jeeps, speaking with Maria, they both turned to stare at her and Ralph started to hobble over with his cane. Taylor stared at him for a moment before crouching low and using the Force to leap clear across the street, landing on the roof of a house and setting off, jumping from rooftop to rooftop, quickly heading southeast, her expression set in a grim line.
All day long, Amy had felt a thick cloying tension in her stomach. She’d thought it a reaction to the ongoing tension in the city, a justified fear about what was to come when two gangs collided, but the sensation had grown worse as the night went on. It hadn’t shocked Amy that she wasn’t the only one, Taylor looked equally concerned and the ongoing absence of her sister was even more unsettling.

Amy hadn’t expected that foreboding to explode into full-blown panic as Taylor fled the room, doing her best to keep the beating of her heart under control. She fought off the fear and glanced up, staring over at the direction Taylor had gone before glancing at a nervous looking Tattletale. The blonde shrugged at her before the sight of Ralph moving drew her focus.

“What?” The man had been halfway out of his chair to chase after Taylor when he’d staggered to a stop and held his hand to his ear. “When?” He growled and cursed quietly. “Notify the Protectorate and New Wave.” The man moved and tried to leave, but Amy was suddenly in his way, glaring up at him.

“What’d you just hear?” She stared at the man quietly and frowned when he sterned up his expression. He seemed like he’d be about to brush her off when a quiet voice cut across them both.

“If you don’t tell her, I will.” Amy glanced over at Lisa who flashed her a smirk and then back at Ralph who seemed to deflate wiping tiredly at his face.

“You sister was spotted, about an hour ago coming out of BBU.” The man spoke softly, and Amy felt the colour draining from her cheeks. She glanced at the man quietly for a few moments before smoothly digging a hand into her pocket. She drew out a hair tie and secured her hair as she turned and headed toward the front door.

The sounds of the man calling her name from behind her were ignored. She moved across the yard, glancing around. Taylor’s front yard lacked any trees, but there was a gnarled ancient looking birch tree across the street. She moved toward it at a brisk walk, her mind quickly skimming through options.

Speed was her primary concern; secondary concerns were offensive and defensive capabilities; her mind quickly drew up animals. ‘Deer, Horse, Camel, Hippopotamus, Rhinoceros,’ each was drawn up and cast off for various reasons. Too large, too slow, too awkward on stone. Eventually, her hurried thoughts came to a screeching halt as she reached the tree.

‘Antelope, not perfect, but could be modified, light, fast. Weapons, antlers. Impala? No, wrong shape, Pronghorn, too small. Ibex. Large, Curved. Defensive but dangerous… Good Enough.’ Amy moved, setting her hands on the tree and her power washed into the wood, shifting the mass around quickly, shrinking it down and twisting it. It could be better, more lifelike, given enough time it could be an actual antelope, but she didn’t have time.

The creature was an artist’s impression of an antelope, long thin legs with tiny feet, a slender streamlined body, simple lean torso, featureless ‘head’ and the long curved wicked looking horns of an Ibex. The bark was smoothed away, and she adjusted the shape, incorporating one of the suggestions from Keltar. Long vines sprouted from the head, coiling down over the neck like a harness. A seat formed on the back and she touched the ‘creatures’ neck causing it to lower itself.

She turned her eyes on the approaching form of Ralph, the man hobbling along with his cane. She flashed him an apologetic look before slipping onto the slim back of her creation. She coiled the vines around her arms and linked into the creature, and it was off, running down the streets. The
streets seemed to blur as the creature rapidly approached its maximum sustainable speed, and with a
flash of light, Amy was beyond the residential streets.

She tapped the ‘construct’ into her senses, and it did the rest, dodging around some cars, leaping
clear over others as it navigated the busy streets, ignoring the honking of vehicles and the awed stares
of pedestrians. She moved with grace; she was speed incarnate. The last time they’d gone to the
college, it’d taken her nearly an hour and three bus transfers. Taylor had told her that she could run it
in 15 minutes if she were in a hurry. Amy on her construct did it in three minutes.

Instead of navigating around campus, the antelope cleared the exterior walls in a single leap and
charged through the quad, intending to cut past the science building and around the dorms to get to
the other side of the campus and out into the rest of downtown. Already in the distance, Amy could
see flashes of light, and flickers of shadows over the glow. Something was going on. The sight of a
glowing woman screaming over part of downtown, raining beams of light was disconcerting.

The sight had Amy lowering herself to her ‘woodelope’ and preparing to push every last ounce of
speed from it when the sound of a familiar voice screaming drew her up cold. The wooden construct
instantly cantered to a stop at her fear and seemingly freezing in place. She stared around, praying
softly but the sound of clashing weapons drew her focus, and she snarled out a curse when a second
familiar scream came from the same direction. She gripped the vines, and the creature leapt up and
spun in the air, landing facing a different direction and charging.

Through a hedge, past a pair of confused coeds making out on a bench, faster and faster, Amy
cleared another hedge and then an eight-foot fence as a third scream issued out. Leaping a final
barrier saw two figures come into view, Lily in her costume, facing off against a woman in a steel
cage mask.

The woman was lashing out with Kama’s that Lily was intercepting as best she could, using her
arbalest like a shield. The red spots on the girl's body staining her left shoulder, side, and hip crimson
saw Amy’s anger flicker, and the construct reacted to her unconscious command, lowering its head
and charging at the spry woman with the weapons.

Amy was shocked when the figure cleanly backflipped out of the way and rounded on her, snarling
as she lifted the Kama’s.

“The fuck is that—” The woman’s words were instantly silenced when both of the rear legs of the
wooden antelope suddenly lashed out, the parahuman moving quickly and kicking away,
backflipping and leaping away toward nearby foliage in a leap that cleared near fifteen feet. Amy
stared in the direction that she’d gone turning back to the rather battered looking Lily. Considering
that she’d just barely managed to scare the woman off, she didn’t figure they had much time. She
brought creature closer to the Ward and glanced down.

The girl in the purple armour seemed shell shocked, staring up at Amy as if she couldn’t quite
believe that the girl had ridden into the scene on a wooden animal for the fourth time in less then a
week to save her bacon. Amy reached a hand down and blinked when Lily casually dropped her
weapon, grabbing Amy’s arm with her good one, Amy had halfway pulled the other girl up onto the
wooden beast when something smashed into them both.

She sensed the construct shattering as it was blasted clean off its feet, feeling Lily’s body crashing
into her own as they sailed through the air. She saw something coming toward her face, and then
white-hot pain washed over the left side of her face. The world dissolved into a kaleidoscope of
colour before blackness washed over it all, leaving Amy temporarily in the blissful care of sweet
The hand smacking into the left side of her face sent a wave of agony through Amy that saw her biting her lip to stifle the scream of pain. Her entire body ached, and she blearily opened her eyes, nearly vomiting at the swirl of colour that was all she could see through her left eye. She closed that eye and thing seemed to come into focus.

She was laying on the ground on her side, staring at a pair of dirty scuffed looking sneakers. Her eye slowly drifted up over pair of ripped and loosely hanging on jeans, the glimmering chains making her eye hurt. She followed the pants up and over the battered and scar covered torso. She felt a flicker of enjoyment at the sight of several long bloody lines on his body, clearly, Flechette had given up a decent fight.

Eventually, her gaze had to settle on a blue and white tiger mask. The man stared down at her for a moment before crouching low. He seemed to consider her for a moment, grabbing her chin and jerking her head around in a way that sent waves of agony through her face before he released her.

“Who is it?” The words issued in a pain-laced wheeze and Amy smiled to herself at the damage that she’d done to the bitch that’d been putting holes in her friend.

“The healer bitch.” The words were low and garbled. “Not the Dallon we were looking for, but one sister is as good as the other. This one’s a healer as well, considering how closely she keeps track of her ‘friends’ I bet she’s not far off.” The man lowered himself to crouch before Amy, staring at her.

“Isn’t that right, darling. How far away is your saviour hrn?” His voice was low and dangerous. “See, me and Cricket here, we got a bone to pick with her, and we’ve been trying to hunt her down to… chat for weeks. We got tired of waiting for her to come out from behind the walls of that fortress of hers with all the guards patrolling its walls, and we figured that she might come calling if one of her pets was whimpering in pain. We initially had your sister in mind, she was the one that kept coming here in the evenings. But you're here, and we've got a message to send. Think you could help us with that?”

Amy tried to speak, but words failed her, she settled for spitting at the man, though the effort lacked much punch and the spit barely cleared three inches. The man stared at her before lifting an arm.

“Suit yourself.” He suddenly slammed his hand out, and something white hot and jagged slammed into her thigh, and Amy loosed a scream of pain that set her face burning. The pain lasted for what seemed like ages and then the man drew back his hand, long thing glowing blades visible on each finger. He stood there, staring down at her and chuckling quietly as she panted in pain.

“Wasn’t so hard was it. Think she heard it, or do we need to try again?” He said the words over his shoulder toward his companion, but his dark eyes remained locked on Amy’s form. The girl shifted in place, flinching at the agony washing out of her leg and her face. She moved her head despite it, glancing toward Lily’s battered and still form and feeling a lump in her throat.

“Yeah, she was a surprise. We figured that if we hurt someone then your sister, the do-gooder would come calling, but this one arrived first. She nearly got the drop on Cricket, probably could have
downed her, didn’t have the guts to take the shot. Tried to threaten her. Cricket’s real fast though, and your friend there isn’t. Shame for her.” He turned back to Lily and stepped forward.

“Now, you gonna scream again, or do we have to do this the hard way?” Amy stared up at him and swallowed, shifting backwards but staring coldly at him out of her good eye. The man seemed to consider her for a moment before shrugging. “Alright, suit yourself, bitch.” He raised a hand and lashed out again. White hot pain lanced through Amy’s shoulder and she arched her back as a fresh scream of anguish ripped from her abused throat.

This time though, the pain barely lasted fifteen seconds before the man let out a grunt of surprise as he was ripped away from Amy. The healer lay there panting as forced her good eye open and stared in confusion at the sight of her a white and gold blur holding the man off the ground by his throat. Amy concentrated and narrowed her eye, causing the blur to swim in and out of focus revealing her sister. The girl viciously backhanded the masked man sending his form careening across the open area and viciously into the nearby building.

Relief fluttered through her at the sight of white and gold fluttering before her, that sash whipping in a non-existent wind. Amy stared at Victoria’s back as she stared over at where the figure had gone before she turned and stared back at her sister.

“Amy!” She crouched low. “Jesus, you look like crap? Can you move?” At the shake of her head, the girl swore and ducked low, speaking nervously. “Do you have any idea what’s going on? The entire downtown is going mad.” The girl’s voice was laced with concern and Amy shuddered quietly in pain as Victoria tried to move her.

“What are you doing out here alone?” She asked softly, and then Amy stared at Victoria until the girl finally glanced up, her face paling at the battered body of Lily laying nearby amongst the fragments of the construct. The nervous glance between Lily and Amy saw the girl nearly throwing up. Amy shivered softly.

“I-Is she?” Amy whispered, and Victoria shifted over, glancing down at the still body quietly the sigh of relief was like a balm to Amy’s soul.

“No. She’s out, but she’s breathing... for the moment. She- she looks bad Amy. Can you.” Amy flinched and shifted, moaning in agony as she lay there panting.

“B-Bring her to me.” Victoria stared at her worriedly for a few moments before moving over carefully to where Lily lay. Amy watched her sister checking Lily over carefully before even touching her. The sound of something scraping over stone shocked them both, and Victoria glanced up in time to see a man with a malformed jaw pushing up against the wall and glaring hatefully at her sister.

“You fucking bith.” His voice was heavily slurred, and judging by his purpling jaw, Victoria had almost certainly shattered it. He reached down and ripped out a pistol from his belt. Amy screamed as he lined up the weapon and pulled the trigger. Amy watched as the bullet hit her sister with a ping, deforming and falling away. Victoria rounded on him, walking toward him as he fired again, the bullet pinging off the shield. The man started to panic as the enraged superheroine approached, the weapon firing over and over and dealing utterly no damage as Victoria approached. The man flinched back when the weapon started making clicking sounds and backed up against the wall.

Amy watched worriedly as the enraged blonde stood coldly before the half-naked man holding the weapon out ineffectively. She bit her lip when Victoria's hand came out but she was shocked when
she gripped the gun and Amy heard the sound of the metal distorting, pins snapping audibly. Amy saw the man's throat bob up and down as he swallowed and she stared in shock when Victoria spoke coldly.

"Run. Away." She stared dispassionately at the man as he turned and staggered away, turning and charging into the bushes. Amy watched as Victoria watched him go with a cold look on her features and she stared in shock at her sister at the stark contrast. A flicker of movement out of the corner of her eyes saw Amy crying out Victoria’s name, but it was too late. The spry shape of Cricket landed neatly behind the slowly reacting Victoria, leaning in and muttering something before lashing out. Amy was forced to watch in horror as the spry cape slammed the blades of both of her Kama’s into Victoria’s lower back, Jerking them before ripping them free.

Victoria’s scream would haunt Amy for years to come, the girl staggering away from the cape in the metal mask, ripping herself off the blades and dropping to her knees, her hands moving to her back as she fell. The girl moaned in agony. She hit the ground and shifted, lashing out with a leg, but the spry cape merely hopped away, keeping out of range of the suddenly once more super strong cape. Amy stared in dull horror at her sister, watching as Victoria struggled on the ground, desperately trying to get her feet back under her. She only glanced away when the tall skinny woman turned her focus onto her.

“Now, for that message Stormtiger mentioned, how about we ensure that she has something interesting to see when she finally comes looking for you.” She spoke with that distorted voice, her body swaying dangerously. “I was thinking a nice memorial for the three pretty little heroes that lost their lives trying to defend her.” Her lips were curled into a broad grin that was visible behind her mask. She stepped closer, twirling her blades and raising a hand, glowing claws forming at the edge.

Amy flinched back, her heart racing. Her powers were going wild, coming up with survival strategy after strategy, things she could turn her into if she could get her hands on her, but she was too far away, it took too long. Amy watched in horror as she approached, her heartbeat going wild as the woman approached. She felt a chill starting to spread through her body. She tried to move, to crawl back but her vision began to blur as the woman leaned over her. Words were said, but they were distant far away. The sound of something crackling was confusing but soon the darkness washed up around Amy and slowly subsumed her.

She slumbered, and the words slid into her mind, whispers from a distant shore that lacked meaning.

'... is Team Alpha... -king. We have a medical emergency... -tical condition, ...-mediate evac. -Code Blue, Alpha, Strike, Strike, One.'

'...-nto shock. There's nothing that I can do- ...copter immediately... a hospital... -ven'

'-tient is 17 years of age, female, blood type O-neg, in shock, numerous lacerations, severe internal hemorrhaging, recommend immediate transfer to operating theater, prep-' 

'-sorry, Mrs. Dallon, we try to prepare patient's family's for the wors-... -ourse you're right, we'll do everything we can but with swelling of the brain, like this... The prognosis isn't good. The fact that she's still alive at this point is a miracle. If she can hold on until the swelli-'
...'Clear! ...I've got a heartbeat, blood pressure stabilizing as we speak. That was close, it's almost as if-

're you sure? ...healing faster then she should, the swelling is going down rapidly and she's recovering remarkably well... -ere wondering if it's part of a latent brute power, but, yes, I suppose you're right. -more tests.'

'my, please don't die. Please. You saved my life...' the faintest hints of warmth ghosted over her cheek and it was... nice. And then it flickered like a candle in a deluge and Pain slammed into her like a physical wave.

Agony. Everything on the left side of her body was a wash of pain and disconnected spasms that left her gasping savagely. She lay there, feeling the starchy sheets under her that she'd felt hundreds of times before in what felt like a previous life. The girl lay there on her back and hissed out in pain at the aches and stiffness in her body, the steady constant sound of machinery around her both soothing and disturbing at the same time. When her body had settled and the pain waned just a bit, Amy tried to open her eyes, a flicker of pain from the left eye was the only response there, the eye almost certainly swollen shut but she felt her right eye opening. She glanced around from her position taking in the quiet room and the darkness. She lay there and took a few breaths before reaching around, looking for a nurse call switch. No luck. She flailed her arm a bit before letting out a sigh.

She shifted the faint twinges that accompanied the effort not at all preparing her for the wash of agony and nausea that hit her as she slowly forced herself up into a sitting position. Whimpering audibly she glanced around, blinking at the sight of something moving in the other bed. She watched as another person rolled over, glimmering eyes peering at her in the soft light from the equipment. It took Amy's eye a moment to focus enough to take in Lily's face peering out at her from behind the bandages that she wore over her cheeks and neck. Numerous other bandages covered her arms. Amy stared in confusion at the girl as she seemed to slowly realize what she was seeing and she moved. Amy watched as the girl slipped slowly from the bed, hissing in pain. She frowned when the girl moved to grab a tall silver pole with a hanging bag and carefully dragged it along the floor toward her.

"Amy!" The words were uttered softly and Amy would reach up, rubbing at her cheek quietly, blinking at the sudden rush of colour in the other girl's features. She shifted and tried to speak, her voice drifting out in a raspy whisper.

"What happened?" The words tumbled out slowly, Amy's swollen lips having issues shaping them, and she frowned, staring at the other girl who flinched quietly and then sighed.

"Do you remember the college? Finding me fighting with Stormtiger and Cricket." Amy nodded, gesturing the other girl on with a wave of her hand. "Right, so you uh. You saved me, and as we were about to escape, Stormtiger hit us and it knocked me out. I uh, I wasn't around but after that, there was a fight?" She spoke nervously and Amy nodded, speaking.

"Angry, at Taylor, wanted to hurt her. Hurt me. Vicky came. Saved me." She spoke briefly and shuddered at the flickers of agony speaking caused on the bruised part of her face. "Vicky! How long?" She started to struggle and blinked when Lily gently grabbed her uninjured shoulder, pushing her back down.
"Hey. Wait. Victoria's fine. It's been about 22 hours since the fight, but Victoria's doing fine" The girl paused and frowned. "Well, not 'fine', but she's stable. She's still sedated, but she been treated. They managed to get to her before her kidneys were too badly damaged. Your cousin told me that she's been up a few times, but the drugs they have her on are making her pretty loopy. You were a lot worse off." The girl's voice took on a reproachful tone and Amy frowned, leaning back nervously and eyeing Lily with her good eye. "You had numerous cuts from the blast that broke your gazelle, and the wounds Stormtigher gave you. And the concussion, it was bad Amy, you went into shock before they got you here. Your brain was swelling and you ended up having two heart attacks Amy, and it's a miracle that you're alive." Lily stared at her quietly and Amy frowned softly at the profoundly terrified look in the girl's eyes, doing her best to smile.

"Am okay now, though?" She spoke and the girl nodded, though her expression remained rather dour. Amy stared at the girl before a thought drifted into her mind. She gestured between them. "Where Taylor? Why not healed?" She spoke softly and something cold rippled through her at the concerned look that ghosted over Lily's face. The girl stared at her quietly.

"They didn't realize that she was missing at first, not till the fighting died down. Her handler tried to call it in, and they assumed she was helping with the battle. But..." The girl spoke softly and frowned. "They found her a few hours after you got here. She'd been about two-thirds of the way between her place and the college and they think she slipped and fell. She has a broken leg and some pretty bad scrapes and bruising. The concerning thing is that she's not healing herself. She's been in a coma though, and they're kind of worried about her." Lily's voice was soft and the girl bit her lip as she looked at Amy's face with concern. Amy shifted back, resting on her bed and feeling that ice collecting in her belly.

Chapter End Notes

[[So. I'm sure that you've all got concerns, let's see if I can pre-emptively address some of them here. Let's start with Dragon. Taylor's not exactly right here, but she's close. During the Leviathan fight, Dragon was dragged into the Control Group of the Gestalt to serve as it's Multi-tasker, she was folded into Seven other capes, and essentially, as the most Alien of the minds present, she was the most altered by the bleed over. Her self image has been changed, and in fact, is currently functioning as a separate shell program operating within the greater program that is Dragon. Essentially, this Dragon is an encapsulated version of Dragon that is running from within the program of the original Dragon. This version doesn't have the duplicate restriction, but it also doesn't have any means of interacting with the outside world except through the program of the other. Essentially, the pre-Leviathan Dragon is locked down as there's currently a 'duplicate' of her running around, and this version is operating from within her code.

Essentially the gestalt gave Dragon true consciousness, but she's still shackled by the restrictions on the original program because for all intents and purposes, that's her body. Now I hear you all wondering about Saint, and this will come up. Saint would have noticed 'issues' with Dragon since the Leviathan fight. The Gestalt severely damaged his monitoring code, and he's still getting it all back up and running. He's also using the issues to purloin from her shamelessly, and he's a bit distracted. But Saint will be featured in a Dragon interlude soon.

This will probably be the goriest part of the arc, but there will be more conflict coming
up, emotional and physical, so uh, strap yourselves in for that.}]
Chapter Summary

[So, this chapter’s introductory section will be very confusing if you didn’t catch the updates that I made to 6.5. There’s a link to an informative post about the changes here, but I did also add another thousand words to the initial chapter where Amy wakes up in the hospital and we hear about how folks are doing. (Thus making it 3 sections in 6.x with 10k words) So uh, that might be worth a re-read, the few people that took the time comment on it seemed to enjoy the alternative version more than the original.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 31st, 2011
Docks South, Brockton Bay

Taylor staggered to a landing on the roof across the street. She glanced down at the sight of Ralph standing on the sidewalk outside her house, staring up at her. When he pulled out his walkie-talkie, Taylor moved, leaping over the next home and bounding off the one after, hopping along. She opened her mind to the Force, desperately fighting down her rising panic and searching out Amy’s impressions in the Force.

The distance between them shocked Taylor as much as the speed that she was moving at and Taylor tried to lock onto that impression, increasing her speed and running along rooftops to get a small burst of leaping speed. She ghosted from rooftop to rooftop, her mind desperately fighting off waves of increasingly desperate panic and fear. The spirits in her mind tried to speak, but Taylor savagely cut the link off, ignoring the spirits. Another wash of fear scrambled her senses and Taylor came to a stop on the roof of a banking complex, spinning around.

Flashing lights in the distance, past the college, Taylor dipped into the Force, ignoring the wash of fear that splashed back over her as she forced her mind to focus. Her senses stretched out toward the fighting, but they were pulled in a different direction, further north, Amy was there barely at the edge of her perception. Taylor tried to follow, to grip but the impression vanished entirely, and Taylor let out a savage curse as she leapt northward. Her mind reached out, scrabbling with metaphorical fingers at the feeling that was just gone.

Desperately she tried to draw deeper on the Force to reach further, but the waves of panic and fear washing back into her from the connection kept disrupting her connection. As she charged on, she tried to take a deep breath, to focus. To imagine that ghosting of Amy that had gotten so far away. A whisper of feeling washed into her mind: fear, concern, dawning horror. Taylor reached out and grabbed the feeling, dragging it toward her. She felt a minute sense of resistance before the feeling rushed toward her and suddenly her mind was filled with emotions and sensations.

Determination, fury splashed into her mind as she moved faster toward the sensations in her mind, increasing her speed as a flicker of righteous anger smashed into her. Disconnected impressions crept into the edges of her perception, wind in her hair, and something powerful shifting under her — flashes of colour and the clang of metal on metal, metallic strings snapping audibly in the distance.
Fury, satisfaction, and then confusion washed into her. A mounting nervousness gripping her saw Taylor charging across the roof of a radio station, leaping out over the yawning void between it and the next building over. The feeling of her entire left side exploding into pain resulted in Taylor screaming as she flubbed her landing, hitting the ground and rolling savagely across the gravel-lined roof. Taylor rolled over in a panic, spinning around, looking for the source of the attack as fear welled up within her.

When no attack came, she flipped up onto her feet, dropping into a ready stance and spinning around, doing her best to ignore the agony washing over her. Taylor stared at the silent night stretching out around her. After a moment with no sign of an attack, no sign of any other cape she relaxed her stance. Lowering her hands in confusion, Taylor moved, reaching over and touching the well of pain that was her left side. Fingers met cool unblemished skin, even the gravel not having managed to break her skin in her suit.

She traced a hand over her side, despite the burning agony that washed through her side, there was no damage. Taylor stared around in confusion, suspecting a Master effect. She turned and then a wave of panic bubbling up in her middle saw her turning, charging toward the edge of the roof in the direction that Amy had gone. She leapt out into the air, waiting for another attack. None came.

On she ran and leapt, leaping from building to building. The buildings themselves began to get shorter and smaller, commercial buildings turning into small apartment blocks. The welling of panic continued to thicken in her middle, but other feelings ghosted over it, stubborn fury, and nervous tension all mixing to keep Taylor moving at full speed. She’d been about to touch down on a sloped roof when a wave of agony erupted in her left thigh, and Taylor screamed as her legs gave out as they hit the roof.

She slammed into the roof, feeling her ribs audibly crunching along her side as she rolled roughly over the crest of the roof and slid down the opposite side. Taylor’s hand lashed out, scrabbling at the metal roofing and she barely managed to stop herself, fingers catching on a storm through. Her shoulder creaked savagely, but she stopped her momentum and hung there, swinging by one arm her entire body on fire, agony washing out of her face and right leg. She hung there, taking in deep heavy breaths, trying to will the pain back, away.

A minute of gasping and trying desperately to get her leg to respond, to try and swing over to the nearby fire escape passed before another wave of agony crashed into her left shoulder, and Taylor’s fingers spasmed, the pain causing her to lose her grip on the trough. Taylor let out a scream as she fell, feeling a meaty pop in her left leg when she landed ten feet below and crumpling to the cold ground. She lay there gasping in pain as the agony spread through her body.

Confusion welled up in her as she lay there, her entire body agony, her mind reaching out for the switch. There was a shimmer, and suddenly Bastila was crouched by her side, her lips moving. The words weren’t penetrating through the fog around her thoughts, the pain making it hard for her focus. Taylor stared at the Jedi Master, watching her lips move in silence, slowly panting in pain. Something in the back of her mind drew her attention and Taylor felt the connection expanding, the damp Alley and Jedi master dissolving as another image washed up before her eyes.

Pride welled up in her chest as she watched Victoria in all her glory striding toward the horrified form of a man in blue pants. She watched as the girl ignored the bullets bouncing off her form, watched as she savagely crushed that weapon and felt Amy’s relief wash over as Victoria let the man run. She felt Amy’s panic as a figure appeared behind Victoria and the blades slashed out.

Taylor heard screaming as the Kama’s sank into Victoria’s back, as the figure whispered something and let her fall. She watched as Amy’s vision began to fade only realizing that the screaming was
coming from her lips. Amy’s view dissolved away, and she was laying in the cold alley, starring at the starlit sky once more, watching as Bastila loomed over her worriedly. The pain in her body began to flicker and fade away. Well not her leg or side, but most of it began to drift out. She focused on Bastila’s voice quietly.

‘...-nnection, Taylor. If she dies while you’re holding it open like that, you’ll die too.’ Taylor stared at her in confusion, blinking blearily as she reached out, feeling the thread that held her to Amy fraying. She frowned as she glanced back up at Bastila. The woman looked at her conflicted and spoke. ‘...th-there’s nothing you can do, Taylor.’ The woman spoke, and Taylor frowned, dawning horror washing into her.

She felt for that connection, feeling as it continued to unravel, she reached along it, gripping it. She ignored the chiding from an increasingly worried Bastila. She savagely locked her power around it and dragged it back open, exulting as that agony slammed into her once more. She drew on the Force, her mind crystal clear suddenly. The fear wicked away, the panic, and anger and rage all washed away by a savage determination that filled Taylor until nothing else could penetrate her focus.

She felt the link strengthening, deepening and she felt the Force washing down it. She saw everything going dark, Bastila’s form winking out as she began to feel cold, almost numb. Taylor deepened the connection as much as she could, tethering it into place before drawing on the Force, pulling in as much as she could and feeling as the link tapped into the connection, pulling the healing energy away. Watching the link deepen as it drew on her trance, Taylor let out a sigh and went completely limp as she let the darkness of the healing trance claim her.

The slow, constant beep of the machines was an odd counterpoint to the agony that the pulsed up and down her body. Taylor lay there quietly and breathed slowly, keeping her eyes shut and doing her best to breathe through the pain, trying to clear her mind. Everything felt fuzzy, out of focus and she tried to remember where she was, what had happened.

Taylor slowly opened her eyes and stared at the familiar roof of a hospital room. She glanced over, taking in the beeping of a machine and for a moment a well of panic washed through her as she desperately wondered if it had all been some sort of twisted dream. When Taylor glanced over and saw the familiar form of Bastila sitting in the chair staring at her stonily, she felt an equal wash of relief and disappointment. The emotions splashing up the link saw the spirit’s face slowly softening as she watched her. Taylor lay there for a few moments before speaking, her voice raspy with disuse.

“W-What happened?” She asked softly and blinked at the stony expression once more spread over Bastila’s face. The ghost stared at her before leaning forward, resting her elbows on her knees and staring coldly at Taylor.

“You nearly died. Several Times.” The words slammed into Taylor, and she flinched. “More than that, you nearly killed yourself.” Her voice was cold, and Taylor glanced away from Bastila’s furious eyes, staring toward the nearby window instead. She jumped when the woman slammed her fist into the arm of her chair, glancing back fearfully. “What were you thinking, Taylor?” Taylor felt a welling of guilt in her at the openly worried expression on the spirit’s face, but then a flicker of determination washed over her.

“She was dying. I thought that...” Taylor shifted, her expression firming as she glared at Bastila. “I
thought that I could save her, and I did. The Healing trance sustained us both.” Taylor’s voice was picking up as she felt a wash of anger in her gut, glaring at Bastila. The woman shifted back and opened her mouth to speak but a wave of fury slammed into Taylor, and she flinched back as swirling crimson energy appeared and resolved itself into the powerful form of Marr.

The Sith Lord glanced at Bastila, and the woman glanced back, staring up at him quietly before letting out a sigh. Bastila’s form wavered out, and Marr walked over, actually ghosting through the edge of the bed so that he could take a seat in the chair that Bastila had been seated in. The man lazily crossed his legs, looking almost ridiculous with his seven-foot-tall frame perched in the boring off-green chair.

“Sever the connection.” His words were sharp, brusque and Taylor moved without thinking. Her mind grasped the connection, and she loosened her instinctive hold on it, feeling it fading away, a great many of the aches in her body fading until she was only bothered by the pain in her leg, even the twinges in her side and shoulder fading quickly. The figure stared at her as if taking her measure and Taylor felt a wave of nervous indecision welling up within her.

Taylor lay there staring worriedly at the stalwart figure, feeling the simmering irritation that the man was making no attempts to hide. He stared at her coldly for a few moments before lazily waving a hand, that cultured voice, spilling forth.

“Allow us to place a pin in the situation with Miss Dallon, for a moment, Taylor Hebert. Instead, we’ll discuss one of your hobbies. Anecdotes, yes. You’re familiar with the Trolley experiment.” The man spoke with an odd sort of cultured indifference that left Taylor on edge. Slowly she nodded, though it was evident that she did since the spirit himself only knew about the particular thought experiment because she’d read it and the Noetikon had recorded it.

“Yes, well.” The man chuckled darkly before moving on. “So we needn’t discuss the particulars then. Simply put, you stand at a switch, on one track lays one victim, on the other lays five, what choice would you make Taylor?” The man watched her casually, and Taylor flinched quietly before shifting up. “Do you flip the track? Save the five at the cost of one?” He studied her, and after a few moments, Taylor spoke softly.

“I… I guess. Needs of the Many, right?” The man leaned forward and stared at her and Taylor shifted back.

“You know that I am in your head, Hebert?” He spoke mockingly, and Taylor flinched. “I can hear your thoughts, and unlike the others, I won’t pretend that I cannot to spare your puerile feelings. I know that you’d flip the track and then move to save the single victim, thus putting yourself at danger.” His voice was calm, and Taylor shifted, firming up her spine, staring back at him.

“So? Why shouldn’t I try to-” The words were nervous but laced with self-indignation, and she flinched back when Marr cut her off furiously.

“You are a training to be a Jedi, not a fool. You have many options; you could rip the trolley of its track.” He spoke coldly. “You could rip the victims off the track; you could crush the trolley into a ball of metal the size of a tin can.” He stared at her coldly. “Instead of tying yourself to a dying girl like a floatation device, you could have run. to. her.” His voice was cold, and Taylor swallowed nervously. “You could have healed her; you could have healed her sister. If it weren’t for others somehow finding them and saving them, you all would of have died that night.”

“My leg-” She spoke and whimpered at his mocking laugh. She flinched and lowered her gaze to her lap, quietly picking at the sheets quietly. When she didn’t speak, the Sith spoke, the condescension in his voice lessening a touch.
“You call yourself Vigil.” His voice whispered out with that mechanical undertone. “You stand a watch over a legacy, Taylor Hebert. You and the knowledge you contain are the only memories that exist of everything that I and the other spirits stood for, for everyone we ever loved and every dream that we believed in. All of that is distilled down within this gift that the Force gave you, and you treat yourself as something expendable.” His words were low and dangerous, and Taylor shifted back quietly, shrinking into herself.

“Were that not reason enough, then the promise that we all made to do everything in our powers to see that you lived a good life would be. This ends now.” His voice was filled with furious determination and Taylor glanced up nervously at the man who stared back at her stoically. “As with your lessons with the others, you will now be sitting lessons with me. Be Prepared.” Taylor stared at the man worriedly as he stared back stoically. The sound of the door creaking open saw her glancing over. She blinked at the sight of Ralph slipping into the room leaning on his cane. When she glanced back, she wasn’t surprised to see Marr’s presence gone from the chair.

Taylor glanced back, taking in Ralph’s shocked expression and rubbing quietly at her neck when he leaned back out the door and said something softly. The man moved over, hobbling painfully toward the chair that the spirits had occupied. When the man finally took a seat, Taylor reached out without thinking, touching Ralph’s hand on the armrest, a surge of warmth drifted out of her and into the other man who flinched back quite quickly. She stared at him in concern, and he frowned and curled and uncurled his fists. It took a few moments before he glanced back over at her and scowled.

“Taylor—” Taylor studied him for a moment as he shifted in place and rubbed tiredly at his face. Taylor hadn’t realized how old the man was before now and she picked nervously at the blankets pooled around her lap. When he took a minute to collect his thoughts, Taylor nervously spoke up, trying to ignore the feeling of aching dread that lingered in her chest.

“H-How’re the others?” She spoke softly and studied the man when he glanced up and shifted quietly, leaning forward and speaking.

“All three of them are alright.” He spoke softly, and Taylor frowned quietly at the third, staring at him. He took her concern for something else and moved to explain. “Victoria was gotten into surgery fairly quickly, luckily for everyone involved she thought enough to shut her shields down before she passed out, or she would have died. Amy managed to pull through, somehow.” Taylor bit her lip quietly as Ralph took a breath before continuing.

“She’s still pretty banged up, but she seems stable, the worst of her swelling has gone down, and they think she’ll be okay. Flechette was the least injured, and she’s mostly recovered at this point.” Taylor frowned, wondering quietly why Lily was hurt, but she rubbed at her face. She glanced at Ralph silently before shifting a bit, reaching down and pressing her hand to her aching leg. Taylor felt the heavy bandages that had been tightly wound around it and ignored them, for now, releasing the healing Force into the broken limb. When she felt her bones knit back together neatly, she let out a relieved sigh.

“Where are my clothes? Or my uniform?” She spoke softly and stared at Ralph who frowned at her when she shifted, swinging her legs out of the bed. He stood and moved around the bed, his lack of a cane telling Taylor that she’d had time to heal the lingering damage.

“Wait, Taylor. The doctors—” Taylor stared up at him, crossing her legs quietly and moving to unwrap the limb slowly. She watched as the bloody bandages came away revealing a bloodstained but otherwise unblemished lower leg. The trooper seemed to study her for a moment before sighing quietly and opening a nearby cupboard, producing a small bag.

Taylor opened the bag and carefully peered in, frowning at the full outfit contained within. She
glanced up at Ralph suspiciously, and the man raised his hands.

“Brandish went and got you some things when it was determined that you’d be here for a few days at least.” Taylor stared at the man quietly for a few moments before waving a hand toward the door.

“A little privacy? And keep any doctors from walking in.” She waited till he was outside and then moved to quickly strip out of the hospital gown, quickly slipping into her clothing. She’d just finished tying her shoes when the door opened, and a tall woman stepped in, staring at her quietly.

“You’re supposed to be in bed.” The woman’s voice was stern, and Taylor glanced up at the woman quietly, moving to tug her vest on, offering her a curious frown.

“I’m also supposed to have a broken leg, but that’s not right either.” She casually hoped from foot to foot, staring quietly over at the woman who studied her. When the older woman moved to speak, Taylor cut in first. “Look, I get that you’re doing your job but. My friends are badly hurt. Let me help them and then you can do whatever tests you want. Deal?” She studied the woman, taking in her stern expression before letting out a sigh when she nodded.

Oddly, it’d taken more time to convince Ralph that they were allowed to do this, than it had taken to satisfy the doctor. Eventually, Taylor and Ralph had found themselves stepping into an elevator with an older nurse and a younger man in a dark grey hoodie. Taylor glanced over at Ralph, taking in the man’s worried look with a soft sigh.

“You said that Victoria’s on four?” She spoke softly, and Ralph nodded gravely. Taylor studied the panel seeing that it was already lit. She leaned back against the wall, watching as the digits on the elevator continued to shift. The elevator stopped on seven and disgorged the older nurse, and two more entered, chatting quietly about something. When the door opened on four, Taylor and Ralph exited, following the man down the halls.

Taylor stopped at reception getting pointed in the right direction. She left Ralph to find out where Amy and Lily were, and followed the indicated lines, quietly perking up when she saw Carol emerging from a room down the hall. She blinked when the young man she’d been following, accidentally ran into Carol as she exited the room, and then continued on without responding. She frowned, following the young man with her eyes as he disappeared down a different corridor.

She let out a sigh as she glanced back to see Carol halfway to her, her eyes on fire and she flinched back. She nervously shifted in place as the furious blonde descended on her.

“What’re you doing here?” The words were hissed out, and Taylor nervously stepped back staring over at Carol in confusion.

“I-..” She blinked and swallowed nervously before pushing on. “I was going to help Victoria, heal he-” Carol coldly cut in again, her words silencing Taylor once more, the heat in them pushing Taylor back another step.

“She doesn’t need your help, Taylor. Neither of my daughters need your specific brand of help.” The woman hissed quietly, those familiar blue eyes peeking out of that face filled with cold fury. “You’re the reason that they nearly died.” Taylor flinched back quietly and stared in confusion at Carol, the woman’s expression softening at the horrified confusion on her face before hardening.
“You don’t know then? Those two criminals? The ones that carved up my children? They wanted to lure you out. They were pissed off that you put them down and they were trying to hurt people important to you.” She flinched at the words and took another step back.

“I didn’t…” She flinched nervously. “I’m sorry, I had no–” Taylor stuttered to a halt when Carol suddenly stepped back into her personal space.

“Sorry wouldn’t have gotten me my daughters back, Taylor. Sorry doesn’t stop the next maniac that wants to get to you trying to go through them.” The woman’s voice was furious, and Taylor let out a low whimper, backing away again, fear and shame welling up within her mind. “Stay away from my daughters.” The words were cold, devoid of emotion and Taylor stepped back, feeling those angry eyes on her.

She backed away, the pain in her chest bubbling up and causing her eyes to water. Her vision blurring kept her from seeing Carol’s face softening. She turned quietly and moved away. She didn’t hear the woman taking a step after her, Taylor just ran. She ran down the corridors, ignoring the angry nurses, she ran past Ralph and into a stairwell.

She descended the stairs a blur, heaving quietly as she felt the pain washing through her chest. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t think, she just ran, out the door once the stairs stopped, and then she was charging across a lobby, out a doorway and into the cold night. She crossed the driveway and crashed to her knees on the grass.

She knelt there, heaving as her empty stomach tried to bring up something, anything. Eventually, the heaves came to a stop, and she knelt there on her knees quietly, staring at the grass. She didn’t argue when Ralph found her and gently ushered her into a car. She didn’t respond to Ralph when he got her out of the car and took her inside, walking silently past a visibly worried looking Lisa, and up the stairs.

She quietly walked into her bedroom, staring at all the visible signs of Victoria around the space, the life that the other girl had brought into the room. She took a seat on the edge of her bed, gently taking a small stuffed bear that’d sat on her bedside table for the last two weeks. She considered the creature, gently rubbing its face as it seemed to stare at her sadly, wondering where its owner was.

‘She’s gone and not coming back.’ Taylor thought to herself as she stared at the doll quietly. The bleak thought struck her and she felt her eyes watering up again. The pain flickered in her chest, but something else accompanied it. Anger washed up around the pain.

‘Maybe it's for the best, they tried to get to me by hurting her... by hurting them.’ The thought was cold, and Taylor felt the anger growing worse quietly, the fire building in her belly as the hazy memories of what Amy had seen, the pain she’d suffered. The pain whispered away as the anger started to build in her. Taylor gently hugged the bear before replacing it by her alarm clock.

‘They wanted my attention.’ the thought ghosted through her, and the anger welled into a fury, into a rage, and she was on her feet. She looked at her costume where it hung from the door, and she turned, the door slamming open in her approach. She stormed down the stairs, the stormy expression on her face causing Lisa to flinch back from where she still stood in the doorway.

“Who attacked them?” The worlds were ice-cold, and Taylor watched as Lisa stared at her nervously before speaking.

“Stormtiger. And uh. Cricket. But Taylor, you can’t… They got Cricket when they saved them, but..” Taylor ignored Lisa then, moving over and grabbing her jacket. She stormed toward the door, watching as it slammed open at her approach once more. She stormed out into the darkness as she
pulled on the jacket.

If they wanted her attention that badly, they’d certainly earned it.

Victoria quietly wrinkled her nose, the ache in her back dragging her from the blissful darkness. She lay there peacefully in the dark room, staring at the machine to her left that slowly drew a bouncing line on its screen. The soft tone of each spike starting was oddly soothing, and she lay there quietly, feeling the dull fuzziness at the edge of her perception that kept the ache in her back from being utterly unbearable.

She adjusted her pose quietly, hissing in discomfort, the machine to her left letting out a faint bleep before settling once more. She glanced up at the traitorous machine when the door opened to admit a nurse. The woman checked her over, clucking gently before helping her adjust her position to keep from feeling like all of her blood had pooled in her bottom half. When the woman exited the room, she glanced up and smiled as her mom walked in, taking her place back at her side.

“How are Lily and Amy? Still okay?” The words were soft, and she blinked when the woman perked up in confusion, letting out a soft chuckle. “Yeah, last I checked. I haven’t actually made it up to their ward since the last time that you were awake. Had a bit of a commotion in the hall.” The woman shook her head quietly, and Victoria studied her mother quietly, feeling a small welling of hope in her chest.

“Was it Taylor? Is she up?” She blinked at her mother's quiet look, taking in the woman’s suddenly rather stern expression and offering over a frown. “...She’s okay, isn’t she? She didn’t get any worse?” Her words were spoken with a nervous tone that saw her mother’s face slowly stilling.

“No. She’s not any worse.” The silence dragged out between them, and her mother let out a soft sigh. “But, yes she did wake up.” Victoria blinked and let out a quiet sigh. She glanced around for a moment feeling an odd disappointment as she considered her mother.

“Is she with Amy and Lily?” She asked curiously and blinked when her Mother shifted guiltily in place. She stared at the woman until she finally spoke.

“No. She... left.” The words drifted out quietly. Victoria lay there, something stilling in her and she felt the buzzing at the edges of her perception burning away. She shifted in place ignoring the twin spikes of agony in her back, ignoring the small shriek of her monitor. Her heart began to race the beeping of the machine picking up as she looked at her mother.

“What’d you do?” She spoke softly and flinched at the look her mother sent her. The odd mixture of regret and stoic determination cutting into her as the woman smoothly adjusted her shirt.

“I did what was necessary. You nearly died. You and Amy both nearly died, and it was her fault.” Victoria stared at her mother in dawning horror as she shifted in place, staring at the woman’s face as it began to slowly crack under her accusing look.

“Mom… What did you do?” She spoke in a horrified whisper as the woman slowly turned to look out the window, Victoria moved to repeat the question when the woman responded.

“I was the one in charge of bed checks on the camping trip. I had thought that it was just a one-time thing, a way to escape from the cold.” Her voice was soft, and she spoke quietly, glancing back at
Victoria with a cool look. “But then I had to get you things to wear and that… the girl told me that your stuff was in her room. And Everything was there; your presence was all over that room. You were living together, sleeping together.” Her mother’s voice was cold, and Victoria flinched back quietly, staring at her in horror. It took her a few moments to get her emotions under control before she could speak.

“Why is everyone in this fucking city so concerned with the fuck I’m sleeping with.” Her voice was cold, and she ignored the flicker of irritation in her mother’s eyes at the language. “You’re wrong, by the way, we’re not ‘sleeping together,’ but that doesn’t fucking matter. Even if I was with her, would that matter? Would you love me less if I was with a woman?” She glared at her mother, flinching back when the woman let out a mocking laugh.

“You think this is about you being a lesbian?” The woman ran a hand through her hair. “I could care less who you love, Victoria, what I have an issue with is you being in a relationship with that girl.” She spoke softly. “Ever since you’ve met her, not a week has gone by since you nearly died. Or got arrested, or nearly beat your exboyfriend to death in school.” She stared at Victoria who shifted back.

“That was bad enough, Victoria, and even with all of that, I could forgive it if she was this important to you. But she’s got a death sentence on her head.” She spoke slowly, her voice losing its angry edge. Victoria stared at her mother in confusion as the woman spoke, her voice becoming oddly choked up.

“You were there at the Endbringer battle, Vicky. Leviathan went for her directly. What happens if another Endbringer comes for her, or someone villain making a name for himself. What happens the next time that someone tries to get to her through you.” Her voice was clearly worried now, and Victoria felt a soft voice in her head whispering at her. Her fingers clenched as she started to understand and she shifted back, staring at her mother. “Which is nothing to say what’d happen when she went off and inevitably got herself killed like her Father.”

“...Danny saved all of our lives, Mom. And the last thing he said to you was asking that you take care of her in his absence. That we all take care of her.” She stared at the guilty expression that flickered over her mother’s face that knot of worry in her chest growing worse. "So, what did you do, then? Did you tell her off? You told her that she wasn’t to see me anymore, confronted her about all this?” Victoria desperately tried to keep her voice level, her voice cold and she stared at her mother as the woman shifted in place.

“I… I heard that she’d woken up, I was going to go and speak with her. But I saw her coming down the hall, and I was just so angry.” She frowned at her mother and the woman swallowed. “She… She was completely unhurt. Wearing clean clothes and she was just striding down the hall with this relieved smile on her face, and I-” She paused, swallowing. “I snapped. I yelled at her.”

“What’d you say?” The words were crisp, and she ignored her mother’s hurt look. When the woman spoke, Victoria sat up. “What. Did. You. Say. To. Her?” She spoke softly and then felt a fury welling in her at the guilty expression that ghosted over her mother's face.

“She didn’t know… about them going after you because of her. I told her off, told her to stay away from you, said that it was all her fault that you’d been hurt. She… She started crying and ran off.” The woman shifted back, and Victoria felt her heart clenching. She stared at her mother’s worried look, and she growled.

“Get out.” She watched the woman start to speak, and she grabbed the first thing she could reach, a book from her left side and threw it at her, watching as the older woman flinched out of the way. “Get out!” She shouted, watching in satisfaction as her mother lurched back out of her chair and headed for the door. Victoria watched as the door slammed in her mother’s wake, and stared in
growing dread at the wooden door, her thoughts starting to turn to what Taylor would do. She shifted, ignoring the pain and grabbing her phone.

She tried calling Taylor’s phone, getting a voice mail message. She quickly sent off a half dozen texts to no response. She stared at her phone the words on the screen from before the attack mocking her. The apparent worry in Taylor’s questions, and the nervousness as she didn’t respond or return. After a few moments of silence, she tried to call again, and when she reached Taylor’s voice mail once again she tried calling Lisa, and then Sabah, Lily, none of the phones were picked up. Staring down at her phone, Victoria felt the fear and anger in her chest growing.

How dare she. How dare anyone think that they could speak for her like that. She tried and failed to ignore the voice of Taylor in her head, subtly pointing that even if she disagreed with what had been done, that it had been done from a place of love. She felt the fear in her wondering how Taylor had taken those words, what she was doing well up and the anger swelled back with it. She loosed a scream of impotent rage and hurled her phone into the wall, watching as it shattered into a half dozen pieces. The momentary flicker of satisfaction at the damage faded and she stared forlornly at the broken pieces on the floor.

Her thoughts shifted once more and she glanced down at herself, taking in her body. She didn't have time for this, she thought as she moved, ripping the diodes free, ignoring the screaming of the heart monitor, one hand pulling the IV free. She let out a ragged gasp of pain as she shifted in bed and pushed her feet out, trying to get them under her. She let out a soft cry of pain as she stood, wobbling. Her back was in agony, but she pushed past it, heading toward the door, locking it and then turning toward the cupboard that contained her things. She had places that she needed to be, people she needed to speak with.

She ripped open the small locker by the door, pulling out her clothes, staring at the clothing quietly and frowning at the familiar hoody that was laid over it all. She gently picked it up and held it close to her face, taking a quiet breath before cold determination slid through her. She moved to push past the pain as she bent over, slipping on her pants. As she slowly pulled on her clothes, she ignored the sound of fists furiously banging on the door, and the people shouting in the background.

Chapter End Notes

[[Hrm. Shorter one. Or at least, what feels like a shorter one after this monster of an arc. Still, important character stuff. >_< Kind of worried to publish this after how well the last chapter went over, but I’ve been hardened this time. LET’S DO THIS.

On a more serious note, writing angry characters is... interesting. Especially since under it all, most of them are just terrified. Carol’s terrified that Vicky’ll be hurt, Vicky’s terrified that Taylor’s going to do something foolish, and Taylor’s just worried that this will become a ‘thing’ so uh. That’s a thing.

Lemme know what you all think, next chapter is going to be out tomorrow or Wednesday. Amy’s our first perspective, and we’ll get to catch up on our resident healer. Then Taylor’s going to slip off the handle a bit. Other than that. Uh. Marr’s finally had an actual speaking role, so that’s neaaaat~ I enjoy the idea of Marr giving Taylor a crash course on ego. It seems like a Sith would be pretty good at forcing people to think more about themselves.
Iunno. I’ll be around~!}]

Chapter Summary

[[So the last chapter was pretty well received which was neat~ So Now we start drifting into the nitty-gritty. Lots of details below.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 3rd, 2011
St. Elmo’s Hospital, Brockton Bay

Amy shifted quietly, pushing her hair out of her face as she tugged the light down closer to her drawing pad. She took a few moments to consider Lily’s peaceful face where she’d passed out, hugging her pillow. Amy glanced down at the image in her pad, showing the girl’s serene expression as her face, neck, shoulder, and arm peeked out of the blankets wrapped around her. She took a moment to carefully shade in the tiny silver star hanging from the girl's wrist as it rested over the sheets on the bed. The scratching of her pencil on paper was soothing, and Amy found her thoughts drifting to her subject as she worked.

Amy suspected that Lily should have been released to recuperate at home by now, the girl’s wounds hadn’t been that bad to start with, and she’d continuously been refusing Amy’s attempts to heal her. It'd gotten to the point that Amy had stopped offering. Part of her wondered if the girl was here of her own choice, or if the PRT had requested that she remain around to ensure that no one made another attempt on the only standing healer in the bay. Slowly shading in Lily’s cheeks, Amy frowned as she considered why she seemed to care so much which was the case.

The sound of a crash startled Amy from her thoughts, and she jerked up from her book, glancing over at the open door. She stared at the empty hall for a few moments, starting when two large male nurses went running past the room and toward the ruckus. The sound of a rustle drew her attention, and she’d blink quietly, glancing over and taking in Lily’s bleary gaze as the girl pushed herself up and out of the blankets. When the girl tilted her head in confusion, Amy felt herself smiling and leaning closer.

“Something’s going on in the hall.” Her voice was soft, and Amy considered the Asian girl quietly as she shifted around. Lily seemed to glance back at her worriedly before adjusting her pose and slid carefully out of the bed. She frowned when the girl put her slippers on and wrapped a bathrobe around her form.

Amy watched Lily curiously as the older girl padded over to the door and peered out, staring down the hall in silence... She frowned when Lily paused and glanced at her quietly.

“There’s a commotion up the hall, seems like a fight. I’m gonna go check. I’ll be back in a moment” Lily moved to disappear out the door, and Amy frowned before quickly speaking.

“Lily!” The girl’s head peeked back around the door curiously, and Amy considered her for a few moments before sighing. “Just… be careful. I didn’t save your hide so that you could get it perforated any more.” Amy ignored the heat in her cheeks as the other girl flashed her a grin and offered a
mock salute before disappearing once more. The sound of loud arguing and more crashes was evident before Lily re-appeared looking somewhat rattled.

“What’s going on?” Amy spoke softly when instead of crawling back into bed, Lily remained nervously lurking in the doorway of the room and glancing down the hall. When Lily didn’t immediately respond Amy shifted quietly, letting out a hiss of pain.

“Wait, it’s-” She paused frowning. “It’s your sister. She’s trying to get out. Your mom, and a doctor and a bunch of orderlies are trying to get her back in bed. She’s… She looks pissed. And she’s bleeding again.” Amy frowned quietly before moving, quickly tugging off her diodes, ignoring the angry sounds coming from her monitors. She glanced up when Lily was suddenly at her side, trying to stop her. “Amy, what’re you-?”

“We need to get to her.” Amy cut Lily off quietly, moving to finish tugging off the diodes, pulling the clamp off the tip of her finger and staring over at Lily silently. The girl’s concerned look was undoubtedly heartwarming, but Amy didn’t have time for it. She shifted over with a hiss, ignoring the increasingly more worried looks coming from Lily.

“Just..” Amy frowned before holding out her arms. “Help me up, please? I need to get to Victoria. If she’s pissed off enough to be throwing around orderlies, then something is wrong. I promise, straight there and back, but someone needs to talk her down. And since Taylor’s sleeping the sleep of the dead, that’s me.” Amy watched the older girl, thinking for a few moments that she’d argue, but Lily finally let out a sigh before moving around to her ‘good side.’

Despite the good try, even being hauled up by this side was unpleasant and she hooked an arm around Lily’s neck, letting the girl support her weight. She hobbled with the other girl across the room and out into the hall, groaning each time her still healing hip crashed into Lily’s. She bit her lip quietly as they ever so slowly made their way toward the noise. When she and Lily rounded the corner, Amy frowned at the half of the conversation that washed down the hall.

“...-n’t care, Victoria. I am your mother, and you’re currently bleeding all over everything. I’m not letting you leave the hospital like this. You’ll have to go through me and everyone else here if that’s what you’re so bound and determined to do.” Amy hung off Lily’s shoulder, staring at the showdown between her Mom and her sister. Around their feet, four different orderlies lay on the ground and groaned quietly, hand shaped bruises visible on their arms.

“You don’t want to do this Mom.” The words were uttered in a harsh whisper, and Amy stared in confusion as Victoria’s fists clenched the girl’s body shifting. When Victoria’s hair began to flutter around her head, and the girl shifted, Amy called out.

“Vicky!” The word was shouted with as much shock and concern as she could lace into it and she watched as her sister's body froze and slowly uncoiled. She glanced at everyone as their heads swung around to face her, seeing the shock and concern in everyone’s eyes. She chuckled softly as she felt Lily’s form starting to tense under her, but she pushed on.

“What’d you think you’re doing? You were about to hit Mom.” She stared at Vicky in confusion as the girl stared at her and finally dropped her fists, unclenching them. Amy glanced at Lily and nodded her head forward, and the pair began to hobble closer, Amy leaning more heavily on the Asian girl.

“Miss Dallon, I must insist.” A young doctor moved to speak, and Amy glanced at him with a cool look that silenced the rest of his thought, walking with Lily’s aid past the group. She frowned when her mother moved around Vicky and stared at her.
“Amy, you shouldn’t be-” Amy rubbed at her face quietly before cutting off her mother.

“I wouldn’t be if you weren’t all out here re-enacting pro-wrestling. Now, will someone care to explain why half the floor staff is trying to keep my sister from checking herself out against doctor’s orders?” She glanced around at the figures all standing around silently, looking at her mother and frowning at the guilty look in her eyes before Vicky finally spoke, her tone flinty.

“It’s Taylor.” She spoke, and Amy perked up with a frown.

“Is she-” Amy started and stopped as Victoria turned to look at their mother with a cold expression cutting her off.

“Awake? Yes. She’s been so for at least two hours, apparently.” The girl spoke quietly, and Amy followed her gaze to her mother, watching the woman step back nervously. Amy flicked her gaze between the pair calmly as she adjusted her grip on Lily.

“Mom. What’s going on?” She spoke softly and frowned when the woman straightened her back. When she didn’t respond right away, Amy glanced at her sister, and Victoria cut across coldly.

“Dear old mom here figured that she should have a chat with Taylor.” Amy felt a pit in her stomach and stared at her mother in dawning horror. “Figured that she should explain exactly why those villains came after us. Figured that she should tell her what sort of danger she put us in, and that we didn’t need her help and that she wasn’t allowed to see us anymore.” Vicky’s voice was oddly stoic, and Amy glanced over, seeing a swirling tempest of ice behind the eyes that her sister shared with her mother. She frowned before glancing back at Carol.

“Mom?” She spoke slowly. “Tell me you didn’t…” Her voice was soft and the blonde moving to step away, shifting and wiping quietly at her cheek caused her heart to ache in her chest. “Mom, why?” The words drifted plaintively from her chest, and she flinched at the fiery look in the woman’s eyes.

“I did what I had to.” Amy shifted back quietly and wobbled before Lily managed to catch her. She let out a hiss of pain, and the eldest Dallon turned on her. “See, you’re still hurt. You nearly died Amy, and it was all her fault. I was protecting you both from that-” She flinched back when Amy surged forward with a growl.

“That lonely girl that’s done nothing but try to help our family?” She spoke quickly and angrily, her gaze narrowing. “That girl that saved me from doing something horrible with my powers? The girl that kept me going and made sure that we still had a relationship after everything. That girl?” She glowered coolly at her mother as she took a step back, frowning. Amy stared at the guilty expression on her mother’s face for a few moments before frowning.

"Lily. Take me into Vicky’s room, please. Vicky. Come.” She ignored her sister’s plaintive comments and allowed Lily to haul her into the room. Vicky did follow, and Amy let out a sigh when she was gently lowered into a chair and felt her wounds stop screaming at her. Amy slowly relaxed back into the chair before gesturing Vicky closer. She watched the nervous look on Vicky’s face as she approached and she let out a sigh.

Once the blonde was within reach she reached out taking Vicky’s hand in her own; she kept her grip as Vicky tried to pull away.

“Amy, the doctor’s said.” She pushed past it, using her powers to wash away the twin wounds in her sisters back, repairing the internal damage as well before finally releasing the struggling blonde and chuckling as she nearly tripped over her own feet in an effort to stagger back.
“The doctor’s say a lot of things, Victoria. Sometimes, some things are more important than a bit of danger. Now you’re no longer hurt, and you can check yourself out. Amy gestured over toward the foot of Victoria’s bed and smiled softly at Lily. ‘Can you grab me the board there?’ She let out a smile when the girl acquiesced handing it over with a worried look.

“We’ll go back to bed once this is done, Lily. I know how you need your ten hours of beauty sleep.” She spoke softly as she quickly flipped through the clipboard and jotted down a few things, ticked the right boxes and then promptly signed it and held it out to Victoria. “There. I’ve given you a clean bill of health. Now you can hunt down Taylor to your heart’s content.” Amy watched as her sister stared at the board like it might bite her before gently taking it.

“Amy-” The girl paused and checked the documentation for a few moments before frowning. “I-Thanks.” The girl pushed her hair back over her ear quietly and frowned. “Why…?” The question shocked Amy, and she shifted quietly back in her chair with a soft expression picking at her shirt.

“You…” Amy paused, frowning as she considered her thoughts quietly before letting out an amused chuckle. “You make her comfortable enough to be herself. And I happen to be rather fond of that self that she is around you. So. Go keep her from doing anything stupid.” Amy glanced over at Lily and let out a tired sigh at the girl’s worried expression.

“Shall we?” She held out her hands and let out a tired groan when the girl dragged her back up. She let Lily settle her back against her side once more before glancing over. She wasn’t surprised to see Victoria already gone, though the sight of their doctor standing in hall staring in confusion at the board was a welcome treat.

Amy loosed a venomous glare at the floor staff as they rushed toward her, leaning more heavily on Lily. Most of the figures in scrubs backed up, but a familiar nurse casually stared back at her and let out an amused snort. It took Amy a few seconds to place the black nurse, the older woman had escorted her around a few times, and she’d taken Amy to see Warren when she’d come here with Taylor. Part of Amy had trouble imagining that it’d only been a few weeks ago that she’d last seen the woman.

The Nurse casually checked them both over before offering a gesture to Lily, indicating she should follow. When Lily nodded, she turned and headed off, leading the way back toward their room. No one else seemed inclined to stop them, and Amy didn’t even look in her mother’s direction as she limped carefully back to bed.

Lily seemed to pause near the bed, and she let out a sigh of relief when the nurse came over and moved to help, getting Amy back up into bed with great care. Amy nearly panicked when Lily reached under her, grabbing the large sketch pad, though she let out a sigh when it was placed on the nearby chair and the pair took their time.

The nurse, ‘Dora’ took care of getting her hooked back into the ECG, and Lily got her comfortably, tucking her carefully back into the blankets. When Lily was done, she backed off and watched as Dora casually checked her stitches to make sure that she hadn’t pulled anything. Amy was surprised at the lack of admonishment, and when she glanced up that confusion must have shown on her face as the nurse gave her an amused smile.

“Oh, honey? I’ve got four sisters. And I would walk through glass barefoot for them. Aint no one was stopping you from getting to her tonight. Luckily for you, you had a friend around to help. Just now that that’s been dealt with, I assume that we can expect you to stay in bed?” She stared at Amy who flushed and nodded, before giving a severe look to Lily who held up her hands. Amy watched as the woman considered them for a few moments before nodding and heading off.
That panic drifted back when Lily moved over to the side of Amy’s bed instead of heading back for her own and flashed the girl a weak smile. When Lily took a seat, lifting the book and setting it in her lap, Amy had to resist the urge to snatch it from her, and she flushed when the book was slowly opened.

“Hey. What’s this?” The words were soft, and Amy chuckled when Lily jerked and glanced back at her, staring at her in confusion. She bit her lip when she glanced over, seeing Lily considering the page with her sleeping face on it. Amy watched, holding her breath, waiting for Lily to get mad, to say something about how creepy it was.

Instead, the other hero gently flipped the pages, taking in the different images of her from over the last few days. She lightly traced a portrait of her with her playing with her cell phone. Chuckling as she saw that her tongue was poking out as she focused on the screen. The page was flipped, and Lily let out a gasp at the image of her and Sabah perched on her bed, talking quietly. The girl slowly glanced back up at Amy, and the healer felt her cheeks heating.

“There’s not exactly an abundance of models here. Drawing helps with my arm, makes the shoulder ache less.” She studied Lily nervously and let out a soft sigh when the girl smiled, quietly flipping through other drawings, curiously taking in the work. Amy watched nervously and frowned when the girl came to a stop on one of the images from the retreat. One page held Lily standing and petting the giant wooden bear she’d created for the chase game they’d done, the picture was done from memory, and a bit less detailed.

The other page held an image of Taylor though. In her New Wave costume, the girl was stood with Vista, crouched down and seeming explaining something to the shorter girl, her arms held out in demonstration, a focused but friendly expression on her face. Amy had been rather proud of the detail when she’d done it, showing the wisps of Taylor’s hair escaping its ponytail, even getting the hint of how impressed Vista had been as she stared up at Taylor. She watched as Lily gently traced the image and then glanced up at her curiously.

“You really like her, huh?” The words startled Amy, and she glanced over at Lily, something about the girl’s tone causing her to frown. The girl had already resumed looking at the pages quietly, flipping through Amy’s drawings with care. The healer quietly considered the other girl and tilted her head at the way she studied the pages silently.

“I.” Amy frowned softly, pausing and considering for a few moments before letting out a tired sigh. “Yeah, but-” She paused and frowned quietly before shifting up onto her side, rolling around on the uncomfortable bed with a soft hiss of pain. She waited till she’d settled before she spoke. “I mean. It’s just a crush. And you’ve seen her with Vicky. The way they look at each other.” She spoke quietly. “How could I compare, er-compete?”

“Hey.” The words were slow and soft, and Amy blinked, glancing over quietly and flushing at the intense look on Lily’s face. She considered the older girl curiously as the woman closed the book and gently set it on the bed.

“Don’t.” Amy studied Lily when the girl frowned and picked at the blanket on her bed. "Don't... say things like that about yourself, Amy. You’re amazing. You saved my life.” Lily spoke softly, and Amy blinked as the girl reached out and took her hand. She flushed a touch as the other girl shrugged up her shoulders. “Victoria is a different person than you, and it’s not fair to compare you, but…” Amy tilted her head, watching as Lily coughed and glanced away.

“Honestly, you seem a lot more… approachable. And you’re pretty kind.” Amy tilted her head and studied Lily as the girl glanced over at her. She raised an eyebrow at Lily, and the girl shrugged.

“You just. When I showed up. I was the weird, awkward kid that Sabah hooked up with you guys
so I wouldn’t be alone. But you sorta just. Ran with it. Taylor was friendly, but there’s this… wall there. But you were right on board. It was nice.” The girl spoke softly as she picked at her scrub pants.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had friends like that. And, you were the first one that was like, my friend here.” Amy blinked quietly as Lily shrugged. “Sabah was too, but she’d been talking to me for a bit before I came along. I get the feeling that the only reason that Victoria was so calm with me is that she saw how you were acting. She seems like she’s pretty...suspicious with people. And you sort of rubberstamped me into the group. So. Thanks.” Lily flashed her a smile, and Amy chuckled softly.

“I told you that you were pretty cool, dude.” Amy snorted quietly before shifting closer to the edge of the bed so that she could punch Lily in the arm, ignoring the flicker of pain as she moved. “I meant it. You’re pretty cool. I’m glad to have you as a friend.” She flashed an amused smile at the suddenly bashful Lily before settling back into her bed, yawning quietly.

After that, it didn’t take long before Lily abscended to her own bed, and the two girls slept the blissful undisturbed sleep of the exhausted.

“I d-don’t know. I sw-swear, Miss. I don’t know. P-please.” Taylor stared dispassionately at the young gangbanger trying to figure out if he’d been a student at Winslow before Leviathan had crushed it. She stepped closer to where the young man was pinned to the wall, his scrawny frame held aloft by the Force. She stood there glaring up at the man as he teetered on the verge of tears. Truthfully, it hadn’t been hard to find the gangbanger. Barely twenty minutes out of the house and she’d found this miserable slime chatting up some somewhat disinterested girls and she’d landed in the midst of them. The boy, Charlie or so he claimed, had been rather vocal despite having nothing of substance to say. Growing tired of his incessant whining, Taylor reached out with her power. The man started babbling in fear as Taylor slowly dragged him down the wall until he was eye level with her. She stood there glaring up at the man as he teetered on the verge of tears.

The slow sound of clapping off to one side was a shock, and she quickly stepped back and to the side, moving away from the boy and the sound of the clapping, flicking her head to the side, taking in a pair of familiar glowing red eyes set in an even more familiar mask. She watched as the figure approached, their outfit the same as every other time Taylor had seen them. Reach casually walked up to the suspended boy, reaching out and pushing up his head to taking in his sniffling features before dropping his head and glancing over at Taylor.

“I’m impressed. I usually can’t make them start crying without a bit of…” The cloaked cape held up a glowing hand, arcs of energy dancing over their the leather glove they wore, sparking dangerously between their fingers. Taylor suppressed the shudder that went through at the crawling feeling the
A little razzle dazzle.” The sound of the voice hinted at a broad grin on the lips and Taylor rubbed tiredly at her face as her prisoner let out a shriek and begun to struggle against her telekinesis. Reach, glanced over at the boy and took in his frantic struggles before letting out a snort of amusement and closing their fist, ending the display of power. Charlie slowed his struggles but continued to stare between them in mounting horror.

“In any case,” The cape slowly shifted his gaze over to her and jerked his thumb at the poor boy. “I heard you interrogating this poor slime, and I figured that I should investigate. Thought the ruckus might be a damsel in distress. Such a shame that the damsel is so racist.” They shook their head, tutting quietly.

“Now. I might have misheard in all the commotion, but I believe that you were asking our young friend here about Stormtiger.” They crossed their arms as they paced away from the struggling figure, taking in Taylor for a few moments before humming.

“What sort of terrible deed did that poor criminal do to earn such an ardent desire for a meeting from you?” The figure studied her silently, and Taylor stared at the other cape in confusion trying to figure out what their game was. She took a few moments before finally giving in and speaking slowly.

“He attacked my friends. Him and Cricket. They hurt them, really badly, to send me a message. They laid in wait, attacked them, and then tried to kill them to send a message to me.” Taylor spoke quietly and stared at Reach silently. She was surprised when the figure took a step back and studied her for a few moments before speaking.

“Er… Right. I suppose that would certainly draw one’s ire.” Reach glanced at the pale boy quietly for a few moments before speaking. “The Empire has a flophouse near here,” They paused, contemplating before waving a hand.

“Well, closer to downtown. I know that that’s where they’ve been stashing Othala and her husband, and Rune.” The cape stared at the Empire thug as the boy suddenly quit struggling immediately and hung there, staring in horror at the cloaked figure. Reach considered the man before patting him on the cheek and turning back to Taylor with an almost playful bow.

“There you have it. One Stormtiger located.” Taylor stared between the cape and the cowering Empire thug for a few moments before she relaxed her grip on the Force, watching the shaking cape crash to the ground. She stared at Reach for a few moments, trying to figure out if this was a trap. Something flickered dark and furious in her belly, and she pushed her concerns aside.

“Where?” She spoke quietly and blinked when Reach seemed to consider her for a few moments before gesturing.

“That way. It’s in a suburb just off downtown. I could take you? It’d be a while on foot, but well. We don’t really walk do we?” The cloaked figure studied her for a moment before his form vanished into a swirl of inky black smoke and shot upwards and arced toward the south. Taylor followed it before leaping away.

The only sign of their passing was the cowering figure of the young man on the ground, slowly attempting to gather the shattered pieces of his dignity from the muddy ground of the dingy alley.
Taylor watched in confusion while the swirling mist arced through the air before her. The vague shape of that angel form she’d faced before was there when the mist stopped to re-orient or to apparently check on her pursuit, but in motion, the figure dissolved into an almost impossible to see black cloud. If it wasn’t for Reach constantly billowing through well-lit areas, Taylor wouldn’t have been able to follow them.

When the mist slammed into the middle of a cul-de-sac at the end of a residential street, Taylor descended from the rooftops, neatly landing next to them. She took a moment to glance around worriedly before turning back to the figure. They were watching her, their form held almost lackadaisically, and Taylor could practically feel the amusement radiating off them. Reach studied her for a few moments before gesturing up the street toward the north and then set off at a lazy walk.

Taylor followed along in silence, tucking her hands into her pockets and glancing around quietly. The neighbourhood was affluent, but most of the houses sat empty and dark. The few houses that were lit were done so with flickering lights. Taylor wondered what had led so many families of such conspicuous wealth to abandon their homes. She walked in the dark with Reach at her side and the figures curious question startled her as they rounded a bend in the road.

“Are they alright? Your friends, that is.” The words were laced with an odd curiousity and Taylor glanced over at Reach’s glowing eyes, the figure’s crimson backlight eyes the only part of their face visible in the growing darkness of the street. Taylor frowned and glanced down at her feet, continuing along quietly.

“They’re fine. No thanks to them. Or to me.” She spoke quietly as she moved ahead, ignoring the fact that she didn’t actually know where they were going. The words called at her back slowed her pace a bit as she felt a cold wind cutting through her.

“And what’re you going to do when you find this man?” The question was even more curious, and Taylor felt a spike of hot fury climbing through her middle as she glanced around. She stared ahead quietly and spoke softly, hearing Reach’s footsteps approaching her.

“I’m going to make sure that no one ever tries what he did.” Her voice was cold, and she glanced at Reach, watching as they lazily caught up with her. The figure didn’t speak again until he gestured ahead. Taylor glanced forward and took in the one house ahead of them that had lights. It’d once been a rather beautiful three-story house, but now it was rather damaged.

The garage was caved in, and something had dragged itself over the front yard, along the street and destroyed nearly six houses on the other side before rampaging back down the rest of the road. Taylor took a moment to consider the house before reaching out with the Force. She let her powers carefully seek out the impressions in the house. She frowned at the number of them.

A presence wreathed in righteous fury drifted into her mind, and she slowly shifted her pose, straightening her back and focusing her eyes quietly. She took a breath and then stilled her emotions, breathing out softly and then drawing heavily on the Force, feeling the power flowing into her. She glanced at the Reach, watching the way the figure seemed to be studying her curiously. She shook her head and glanced at the Reach, before letting out a quiet sigh and striding across the lawn.

The door didn’t swing open this time, so much as explode inwards in a shower of splinters, a massive hole punched into the walls on either side of it. Taylor strode in powerfully, following Marr’s guidance in her head. She moved through the entrance hall, the sound of a crackling fire drawing her focus. She turned, and another door exploded inwards, raining splinters across the library beyond.
The place had been ransacked, dozens of books were piled by the fire, more of them crackling merrily in the fireplace with broken pieces of furniture. Half a dozen bits of furniture had been dragged into the middle of the room, and half a dozen capes were raising from them as Taylor strode in, her stride powerful.

They didn’t have a chance to react, Taylor’s power slamming outwards and snagging every single figure, viciously slamming them back into their seats hard enough to make the chairs and couches creak ominously. She strode across the open floor of the room, the loud scraping of a single chair dragging itself to meet her rather ominous back-cut only by the crackle of the fire.

Taylor came to a stop in the middle of the circle, staring down at the battered figure in the almost casual civilian outfit, his purpled jaw and scar lined face staring back up at her with a mixture of fear and distaste. She stared down at him coldly before leaning close and speaking.

“You wanted my attention, Stormtiger.”

Taylor hadn’t expected Stormtiger to talk so easily. She’d barely squeezed him enough to make his bones creak before he’d began babbling away. At first, it had been fearful mutterings about how they’d escaped after Leviathan, come back as laughing stocks. About him and Cricket had hung around, hoping to catch her out. About all the salacious things he’d seen or imagined he’d seen.

Then his words had turned to eager, shifting to smug. He bragged about how he’d found Victoria. How one of the Empire kids at the college had seen her visiting the Arts wing of the university in the early evenings, staying for a few hours and leaving. How he’d heard about the attack on the ABB and had convinced Cricket about his plan. He’d talked about casing the joint, waiting for just the right time to make his point.

She’d listened with fury as he casually explained his planning with Cricket, how they’d both decided to get one over on the cape that had made them look like jokes. She’d paced around the room as the man spoke, watching as Reach casually stood near Krieg and Rune, just ever so gently zapping one or the other when they tested her powers, the entire group listening as former pit fighter spilled his plans almost eagerly.

“Why?” She finally said, coming to a stop near the doorway, staring back into the room with a stony expression on her face, staring down in cold fury at the almost smug looking Stormtiger.

“Cause you’re not better than me. You treated us like trash. Me, Cricket and Hookwolf. You didn’t even look at us; you didn’t even act like we could hurt you. A wave of your hand and suddenly we’re like the dirt beneath your feet. You think you’re so much better than us, but you’re not. You’re just as vulnerable as we are. You bleed just the same, and we made sure everyone knew how to make you hurt.” Taylor rounded on the man, snarling as she charged across the floor.

Her powers reacted, she felt the bones of every cape pinned to their chairs creaking as she pinned them savagely in place and she reached out a hand, ripping Stormtiger from his chair and catching him as he flew toward her. She imagined she looked ridiculous, barely clearing five foot ten, and holding a man over six foot three off the ground by his throat. She stared into the man’s smug eyes as she savagely squeezed his entire body, holding his chest in place so he couldn’t inhale.

She stared into his eyes as they widened and started to flick around in his head. She saw him try to
struggle, to turn his face. She stared at him as his face began to blue and she looked at the others.

“Do you feel just as vulnerable as me, Stormtiger?” She spoke coolly, staring into his terrified eyes before flicking a hand, sending the man crashing viciously into the wall opposite her. She watched as the brickwork cracked under his body and he flopped to the ground, panting in pain. She waved a hand, slowly dragging him toward her by his ankle, watching his panicked struggles. She took her eyes off of him, turning her gaze to the terrified eyes of Rune, glancing past her to the worried eyes of Krieg, the fear in Othala’s gaze and the deep concern in her husband’s eyes. She looked at them all quietly.

“People will come to you about this day.” She spoke coldly as she listened to Stormtigers whimpered cries for help from his friends as she continued to drag him toward her, holding out a hand, watching as the man snapped up off the ground and into it once more. She stared at the blood leaking from the corner of his mouth before glancing back to the watching capes coldly.

“When they ask if trying to get to me, through the people I love, is in any way a good idea?” She stared back at the watching capes quietly. “Tell them what happened here tonight.” She spoke coldly as she lifted Stormtiger higher, chuckling darkly. “Oh look, I’m angry; that’s new.” Taylor raised a hand, lightning dancing across it. “I’m really not sure what’s going to happen now.” She turned to Stormtiger’s fearful eyes.

The sound of someone clapping from above stayed her hand. She slowly closed her fist, stilling the lightning and maintaining her grip on the Force, keeping everyone restrained as she glanced up. Turning her attention up to the small second landing of the library, Taylor stared at the casually watching figure of Kaiser and Purity sitting in chairs. She watched as Kaiser slowly stood and stepped forward.

“Bravo. Bravo!” He chuckled faintly and crossed his arms. “I particularly enjoyed the last bit. Still.” He casually rested his hands on the railing and nodded at her. “Go on then. Stormtiger was going against my orders. He wasn’t supposed to be out there. He wasn’t supposed to be picking fights with you. I told all my capes and goons to leave you alone.” Taylor stared at him in confusion, and Kaiser chuckled before waving a hand.

“Call it, generosity.” The man smiled and waved a hand. “Your father gave his life for the city; it would be poor manners for us to attack his only legacy.” The man shrugged, and Taylor shifted when Reach’s voice let out a mechanical scoff.

“More like self-preservation.” She saw the flicker of irritation on the crime lord’s face as Reach spoke. Taylor glanced at the other cape and blinked at those glowing eyes looking back. The figure took a moment before snorting and waving a hand as they spoke.

“You’ve got Panacea with those scary ass monsters of hers, you’ve got Glory Girl who’s actually paying enough attention to hurt people, and there’s your whole kettle of fish.” The figure removed one arm from their crossed limbs and gestured up and down at her with a chuckle. "Add to that that the PRT’s glued to your ass, and Kaiser-boy here, well he’s got enough on his plate keeping that trumped up lizard from gutting his forces.” Taylor studied Reach before glancing back at Kaiser who let out an irritated huff.

“Yes, well, there might have been other more tactical aspects to my decision, but in any case, I did tell my men to let you be. Stormtiger disobeyed me. So, he’s yours.” He waved a hand magnanimously. Taylor stared at Kaiser for a moment before lifting her other hand. Kaiser held up one of his own.

“Ah. Ah. Purity?” He waved a hand, and a tall, elegant woman with dark-brown hair joined him.
“You might manage to take me out, Miss Hebert, but I doubt you’d manage to down Purity and the rest. And if you take me in, Purity’s supposed to burn the rest of this neighbourhood to ash. Isn’t that right?” He glanced to his left at the woman who grimaced before opening her mouth.

Taylor didn’t wait for her to respond, the Force lashed out, ripping Purity and Kaiser both off the railing. Kaiser was dropped immediately and allowed to crash face first into the floor; Purity flew into Taylor’s second out-stretched hand. Taylor stared furiously into the woman’s eyes before speaking slowly.

“Sleep.” The word was issued coldly, and Taylor watched as the suggestion slammed into the woman's mind. Seeing her eyes blinking rapidly, Taylor released her, allowing her to crumple to the ground. Taylor lifted her eyes to Kaiser, observing the man raising to his feet before the fireplace. She heard the sound of grinding metal as armour began to grow over his form and Taylor reached out, the Force wrapping around the man and lifting him, slamming him into the underside of the ledge he’d been standing on. Taylor held him there for a moment before releasing him, watching with satisfaction as he fell again with a meaty thud, silently slumping down on the ground, the metal in his form slowly melting away.

Taylor left him where he’d fallen, briefly using the Force to ensure that she hadn’t killed him. He wouldn’t be dancing until Othala had spent time with him, but he’d survive the night, even without help. Reassured that her hands, for the moment, were still clean, she turned back toward her captive audience and the figure that still dangled helplessly from her hand.

“Now then, where were we-” She spoke coldly, lifting a hand that danced with glowing violet lightning. The sound of a voice cutting across the room saw her freezing in place, her bright fingers mere inches from Stormtiger’s face.

“Taylor?” Taylor froze quietly, slowly turning her head to the side, her heart starting to race and her skin paling at the sight of Victoria standing in the shattered remains of what had once been the doorway to the library. The girl stared at her for a moment before speaking softly.

“Taylor. Stop.”

Chapter End Notes

[[So, that’s another chapter done. I flip-flopped on whether to have Amy’s perspective or Taylor’s first, but I think it makes more sense for it to be Amy’s first. This makes the timeline a bit muddied, but essentially, Carol and Victoria’s argument happened after the point that Taylor’s perspective in this chapter starts, as does Amy’s section, but Taylor’s section covers a more considerable period of time thus leading to their inevitable meetup.

The next chapter will pick up with Victoria arriving at Taylor’s place, and then her search for Taylor with Lisa’s help. The next chapter will probably be the final chapter of the arc. It should be interesting.

Now, I know that there might be issues with Taylor’s depiction in this chapter. But I get the feeling that Marr’s subtly assisting her. Guiding her on how to stand, how to speak without directly ordering her around or distracting her. Her lack of dark side powers are because all she knows from the dark side are Lightning and Choke, and she does at least try to use both here.]]
On other subjects, I like really enjoyed writing that first section. I had actually done it last night right after posting the last chapter, but then I came back this evening and redid most of it expanding on the Lily and Amy chats cause they’re interesting to write together. Also, Amy used the word 'Dude' which made me laugh. Anyway. Lemme know what you think, you guys.

EDIT:

I realized that it might not be immediately apparent, but not everyone present is staying there at that flophouse. >_< Taylor basically stormed into a small meeting.]]

[[Also, I might have shamelessly plagiarized doctor who again. Shhh.]]
Chapter Summary

[[6.7 was super well received, I was surprised. I hope you enjoy the brief action in this chapter before Taylor gets talked down by Victoria. And then the drama. All the drama. It should be a wild ride for everyone involved. More notes at the bottom.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 3rd, 2011
Taylor’s House, Brockton Bay

In her haste to enter, Victoria ended up smacking face first into the door as she failed to twist the handle, bouncing off the hardwood with a grunt. She stepped back and frowned, not even contemplating how odd it was that she’d only not walked through the door because at this point she instinctively shut off her shield as she’d landed on Taylor's front walk. Taking a few moments to gather her wits, Victoria shifted and reached a hand into her pocket. She was confused when she found nothing in them; no keys, no change, nothing at all. It took her a few moments to realize why her pockets were empty, that her personal effects were almost still at the hospital. Rather than dwelling on her own stupid mistake, Victoria let out a tired sigh before banging her fist on the door.

There were a few moments of quiet before the sound of both deadbolts being unlocked and the click of the door unlocking fully. The door opened a bit, and Victoria stared in at Lisa’s worried face peeking out at her past the door chain. The girl’s suspicious eyes washed over her before letting out a relieved sigh. She closed the door, and Victoria listened to the sounds of the chain being unlatched, and the door swung inwards. Victoria strode, in, glancing at the bat that Lisa had been holding with an amused smirk. The thinker looked back at her quietly and shrugged up her shoulders defensively before hiding the bat behind her and closing the door behind her.

The pervasive fear quickly pushed past her momentary amusement, and Victoria shifted her attention from Lisa to the rest of the house. She checked the kitchen and living room before charging up the stairs. She’d been halfway up them when Lisa’s voice drifted up toward her.

“She’s not here. She’s been gone for over an hour.” The words seemed almost regretful, and Victoria paused, slowly glancing over her shoulder at the shorter girl, taking in the way that she nervously gripped the weapon in her hands. Victoria slowly descended the stairs, and Lisa let out a long sigh.

“She was pretty upset when she got home. Shell shocked. Ralph took her upstairs, and she was in her room for a while, but uh.” Lisa sighed. “She came down and wanted to know who did it. Who went after you all.” Victoria frowned quietly, a flicker of irritation washing through her. She stepped closer, opening her mouth, and Lisa held up her hands.

“She was pretty upset when she got home. Shell shocked. Ralph took her upstairs, and she was in her room for a while, but uh.” Lisa sighed. “She came down and wanted to know who did it. Who went after you all.” Victoria frowned quietly, a flicker of irritation washing through her. She stepped closer, opening her mouth, and Lisa let up her hands.

“Hey, even if I hadn’t told her, she’d have found out, she was...furious. I at least kept her from torturing random street toughs to see who’d been bragging about it.” Lisa shoved her hands in her pockets and sighed.

“I told her that Stormtiger and Cricket attacked you guys, but that Coils’ men arrested Cricket and
turned her over to the PRT. She stormed off after that.” Vicky glanced at Lisa for a moment, standing indecisively. She glanced toward the door, aching to run off after Taylor but the girl already had a head start. She’d never catch up that way. She stood there, thinking quietly before turning back to Lisa.

“Woah.” The girl backed away, holding up her hands. “I can’t help you. The PRT has no idea where Stormtiger is.” The girl stared at her and Victoria frowned quietly, mulling over the words silently.

“They might not, but your power is all about interpolation. They’ve probably got information on Empire safehouses. If Stormtiger is hiding out...” Victoria spoke slowly, waving her hands and letting Lisa fill in the blanks. The thinker paused frowning quietly before sighing and gesturing for Victoria come with her, quickly ducking past the blonde. They rapidly headed up the stairs to the guest room that had once been hers. Lisa carefully unlocked the door and slipped in.

Victoria paused and blinked, taking in the rather impressive array of monitors that had been affixed to the wall where the desk she’d used had been. The desk itself had been replaced as well and had actually necessitated a smaller dresser. The large keyboard on it lacked any letters on it, and the sizeable squishy chair before the desk looked rather comfortable. Victoria slowly followed Lisa over to the workspace, watching as the girl dropped into the chair with a happy sigh. She watched as Lisa shielded the keyboard with her body and typed in a password that had at least 20 characters in it. The password flashed for a moment before the screens all flared to life.

To Victoria, the screens were a mess. One was split into six and showed different news feeds with subtitles; another showed a scrolling list of what looked like stock market transactions. Each screen held some rapidly generating stream of information, excepting for the one that seemed to be on PHO. Victoria leaned closer, peering at the title of the thread, though Lisa did something at the thread vanished, the screen replaced with a split-view from a bunch of camera-feeds scattered over the city.

Victoria glanced at Lisa, studying the colour on her cheeks as she hunched over the keyboard typing. Victoria turned her focus back to the screens watching as they began to rapidly began to blink around. Information washed over the screens barely fast enough for her to read a few words, catch an idea. There were numerous PRT reports, internal and external, a considerable stream of communications and dozens of emails all flickered up and vanished. Another screen scrolled through city records and blueprints, alternating between both, and another screen constantly flashed through hundreds of bank statements. Victoria felt her head swimming as she observed Lisa combing through it all. The hiss of pain from the girl saw Victoria looking at her worriedly.

“It’s… fine.” The girl said, rubbing her head before resuming her focus. “I’m nearly done. Just need to.” She skimmed, and dozens of threads from a single forum jumped up on all the screens, it’s white and red colour scheme jarring compared to PHO’s gold and black. She watched dozens of threads opening and closing. Lisa was reading six to eight at a time. Finally, the girl staggered back, her screens resuming their ‘at rest’ state. Including the open thread on the top left that sat on a thread titled ‘Superhero Shipping, {C’mon guys, let’s not get this thread banned again.}’

She glanced over at Lisa, tempted to speak, but the look of pain on her face as she gripped her head was concerning. She crouched closer, studying the girl.

“Lisa. Are you alright?” She spoke, blinking at the incredulous look from the girl. Victoria shifted back when the younger girl let out a weary sigh before wheeling over to a nearby table. Lisa grabbed a pad and quickly jotted something down, ripping the page free and offering it over.

Victoria took the pad, carefully inspecting the small scrap of paper with three different addresses written on it. She glanced up at Lisa, who spoke quickly.
“Near as I can tell, those are the most likely locations for Kaiser to store his capes who have nowhere else to go. If I were Stormtiger, I’d be at one of these places, trying to lay low as half the city is gunning for him since he broke the rules pretty heavily.” Victoria considered the address quietly. Two were pretty close, and the last was buried in what had come to be seen as Empire territory. She studied the paper before nodding at Lisa.

She was headed for the door when the girl called her name, and she turned back. She was surprised when Lisa staggered to her feet and approached. She felt a flicker of nervousness wash through her and her cheeks heated when Lisa scoffed.

“Cool your roll, Dallon. I’m not trying to give you a hug.” The girl reached into a pocket and pulled out a small, round silver pillbox. She handed it out. Victoria stared at the girl taking the box, shaped similarly to a compact or a watch fob, but more cylindrical with a simple ‘T’ on the face. She pressed the button on the front, causing it to pop open.

Within the case were a pair of earbuds along with a pair of small pins. The girl stared at her before rolling her eyes, grabbing the case and pulling out the objects. She attached the two pins to Victoria’s jacket, before handing over the buds. She tapped the first pin, a silver brooch shaped like a crossed ribbon with a bit of glass on it.

“Camera.” She tapped the next pin shaped like a star. “Microphone.” She pointed at the buds still in Victoria’s hand. “Headphones. I’ll watch from here.” Victoria blinked and chuckled slipping her earbuds in. Lisa’s expression turned sour, but she didn’t comment, turning and heading back to her computer as she rubbed tiredly at her head. Victoria watched the girl curiously for a few moments before heading out the door.

She slid the buds in, and then pressed her hand to her ear and spoke quietly.

“Thanks, Lisa.” The response was clear and smooth, which surprised Victoria. She briefly wondered how Lisa had gotten her hands on such advanced equipment.

“First off, you’re welcome. And second off, put your hand down, you look like an idiot. The microphone picks up everything, if you want to say something to me, just whisper it, and I’ll hear it.” Victoria lowered her hand, feeling a touch foolish, and she quickly exited the doorway. She headed across the lawn, feeling her shield raising once more, wrapping up and around her form. She reached the end of the footpath and smoothly lifted off, rocketing up into the sky, her hair whipping behind her in its pony-tail.

“To the Northeast. Look for the tall building with ‘Lux’ on the side; we’re heading a bit further north than that.” Victoria nodded and whipped into the night.

The first two houses had been busts. One had actually had a family of rather friendly black people living in it, and Victoria had assumed that they weren’t harbouring any Nazis in their basement. Victoria had actually ended up signing an autograph before gently extricating herself and moving on. Lisa’s profound amusement at this had been irritating, but she’d eventually found the second house, and it had just sat very empty.

She’d begun to lose hope as she descended toward the apparently largely abandoned neighbourhood that Tattletale had indicated might contain Taylor. The sign of lights flickering in the windows of her
destination had been enough to get her to actually land on the front yard, and then she’d seen the destruction. Someone had brutally caved in the front door. Victoria headed toward the entrance, pausing when Lisa’s voice whispered into her ear.

“Victoria… be careful.” The words were cautious, and Victoria snorted as she slid carefully into the main hallway, glancing around. The sound of conversation drifting out through a gaping hole in the wall indicated where she should be going, but she took a moment to steady herself. Stepping up to the open door, she let out a sigh of relief as she saw an injured Taylor standing before a great many still alive capes in the next room.

She watched in shocked awe as Taylor held Stormtiger aloft by his throat as if the massive man weighed nothing, the figure struggling in her grip. She observed the trapped capes in the chairs, though a flicker of movement in the corner of her vision saw her glancing over as Reach moved into view for a moment before vanishing into the edge of the room. Her eyes drifted over the figures, trying to put cape names to faces. The girls were probably Rune and Othala, which made the man by Othala almost certainly Viktor, and the man by Rune was probably Kreig or Crusader. As she observed, she felt a flicker of shock, and she opened her mouth to call out a warning when Rune started to lift off the ground in her chair subtly.

A flicker of black and the cloaked figure of Reach walked into view once more, setting his hands on Rune’s shoulders and smoothly pushing her back into the ground, the faint spark of lightning dancing over her shoulders serving as an apparently adequate warning as she remained still. Victoria glanced over and saw Taylor watching Reach and Rune out of the corner of her eye and wondered if she’d known about Rune’s attempt all along. When the muffled words came from above again, she stilled her thoughts and bit her lip. She was about to slip closer, to try and hear what was going on when someone cried out, and she watched a man fall into view, crashing painfully into the ground. Another figure of a woman her mother’s age with dark hair flying at Taylor was a shock, especially as the girl caught her almost casually by the throat. Taylor did… something, dragging the woman close and saying something before the woman simply crumpled to the ground. Victoria stepped in as Kaiser raised himself to his feet, but she stopped when Taylor almost casually bashed him into the scenery and left him to collapse to the ground, once more turning her focus to Stormtiger.

“Now then,” Finally Victoria was close enough to hear the words, and the ice in Taylor’s voice sent a shiver down her spine. “Where were we?” Victoria watched as Taylor’s hand lit up with that crackling violet energy, and she moved, calling out softly.

“Taylor.” She said the words, her voice cracking as she spoke. She watched as Taylor suddenly froze and the energy vanished from her hand. She saw the girl slowly turning to look at her. The look of dawning horror on her face left Victoria tempted to run to her, but instead, she spoke gently.

“Taylor. Stop.” She saw the girl’s eyes soften just a touch before something seemed to firm in her and she turned back to the man, hoisting him higher. She stared coldly at him, but the words that she spoke were clearly meant for Victoria.

“Why?” Victoria took a step closer as Taylor spoke. “Why should I stop? He doesn’t deserve your mercy. He doesn’t deserve my mercy.” Taylor stared coldly at the man, and Victoria watched as Stormtiger’s face paled, he tried to swallow nervously as Taylor glared at him.

"This isn't you Taylor." The words were soft, and Victoria watched as Taylor scoffed hefting the man higher, stepping closer.

“Maybe this is me, Vic. Under it all, maybe today, I don’t hold back, don't play nice. Maybe today I show them all why they shouldn’t mess with me. Maybe today, I think of the victims first, victims
like Fleur, like my dad, like me.” Taylor spoke coldly, her voice ragged, and Victoria felt a stab of anger as she thought of what people like Stormtiger had done to Fleur. To the woman with the friendly smile that’d always had time to listen to her silly childhood problems. It took a moment for her to shake herself out of that anger as she stared at the terrified Stormtiger while Taylor continued in a furious voice.

“All the people that have or suffered because of this piece of filth and his friends. Maybe today I show them all that this isn’t actually a fucking game. That sometimes their shitty fucking choices have consequences.” She growled out the words squeezing. Victoria watched the man’s eyes bugging out, and she stepped closer again, setting her hand on Taylor’s shoulder. She felt the woman tensing under her, but Taylor didn’t look at her, didn’t take her eyes off Stormtiger.

“Maybe he doesn’t deserve it, Taylor.” Her words were soft as she gently gripped the girl’s shoulder. “Maybe he deserves to die, but you don’t deserve to bloody your hands doing it. Mercy is all about us. It’s about us being better than that, better than sinking to their level.” Victoria spoke quietly and studied Taylor quietly. “You’re better than this, Taylor. So much better.” Victoria watched as Taylor took in a shuddering breath.

“I’m not-” The girl spoke as she hoisted the man up and Victoria gently cut her off.

“You never tortured those girls that destroyed your life. You’ve got so much power Taylor, and you could have destroyed their lives without anyone knowing but you just. Tried to move on. You are better than this.” The words were soft, and Victoria watched as Taylor’s hand tightened around Stormtiger’s throat. She worried that it hadn’t been enough, but Taylor let out a ragged breath and then threw the man across the room, watching as he rolled along the ground and lay panting a short distance from the unconscious form of Kaiser.

Taylor stood there panting softly, glaring at the collapsed form of Stormtiger. Victoria let out a sigh of relief. She stepped back and moved to lift her hand, pausing quietly for a few moments before coughing and speaking softly.

“Tattletale, contact the PRT tell them-” Victoria spoke softly, ignoring the faint snicker from the headphones.

“No.” Victoria paused and glanced at Taylor, who was looking at her, her dark eyes faintly ringed with gold. She considered her for a few moments. “Don’t contact the PRT.” Taylor rounded on the still bound capes. She crouched low and stared from one horrified and confused, looking cape to the next.

“The Empire is done. Even if Kaiser goes on a full offensive now, he’ll never survive this. This is the second time that he’s broken the rules and then claimed that it wasn’t his idea. He doesn’t survive this without a front row seat in the birdcage. Now you all. You’ve got a choice. You can either sit there until the PRT shows up, or you can help me ensure that my message is delivered.” She stared at them all, watching as each figure glanced at the others before finally Viktor slowly nodded his head.

“You four will bind him up and deliver him to the PRT personally.” She pointed at the groaning form of Stormtiger. She watched as the figures shifted nervously. “Tonight. Before your bosses wake up, you’ll tie him up, stick a note to him apologizing for hurting my friends, and then leave him in the cold outside the main offices. And then. If I was you? I’d fucking disappear.” She stared at each face quietly, and Victoria watched the faces blanching one by one.

“Do you think-” The sound of Stormtiger snarling was heard and without glancing up, Taylor flicked a hand. Victoria glanced up in time to see the empty chair in the circle flip up and fly at the suddenly standing Stormtiger. The man didn’t have a chance to react, to conjure up his claws, the chair
crashed legs-first into his chest and lifted him clear off his feet and carried him across the room, slamming into the wall with an explosion of shattered brick and mortar dust.

Stormtiger groaned as he hung there, and Taylor kept her gaze on the four capes. The capes slowly nodded, inclining their head one by one. Taylor studied them quietly and then stood up, staring down at the seated capes.

“If I ever see any of you again, you will not enjoy it.” Taylor strode past the bound capes, approaching Stormtiger’s bound form. A flick of her head sent the chair spinning away to roll along the floor, and Stormtiger’s form was dragged painfully down the shattered wall until he was near Taylor’s eye level. Victoria watched in confusion as she reached out, grabbing his hair and pulling his head back so that his bleary eyes met hers.

“You should understand, something Stormtiger.” Taylor jerked his head roughly to the side, causing the man to let out a grunt of pain as he glared toward her. “See that girl there? The one that you planned on carving up?” She spoke coldly, and the man’s eyes clouded with concern.

“You owe her your life, and so much more. She’s the only reason that you still have your eyes. I was going to burn them out of your skull before sending you to prison.” Taylor spoke coldly, and Victoria felt a chill down her spine. The man shifted nervously and swallowed. He tried to look away, but Taylor kept his head held in place. “Thank her. And tell her how glad you are that you didn’t manage to kill her.” Taylor’s words were laced with cold fury, and the man babbled rapidly in panic.

Victoria couldn’t really get the meaning out of them, but they certainly seemed somewhat sincere as Taylor slowly turned his head back to face her. She stared into his eyes for a moment.

“Be glad that you’re going to prison because that means that you need never worry about crossing my path. Pray that my attention never settles on you again, Stormtiger.” She released the man, watching as his head hung down and she turned away, striding past the group. She paused near Victoria, glancing over her shoulder quietly.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you all what would happen if he doesn’t arrive at PRT HQ before the sun rises? I got out of the hospital about four hours ago. So. Consider that for a moment before you think of reneging on our deal.” She turned back to Victoria, though before moving she paused and glanced back. “And he should be alive when he arrives.” Victoria watched as Taylor stared hard at Krieg. The man stared back for a moment before slowly nodding.

Taylor turned and strode out. Victoria followed her. It only occurred to her as they were exiting that Reach had vanished during the confrontation, and she glanced around, trying and failing to locate the familiar glowing eyes. Victoria carefully trailed Taylor as the other girl strode out of the house and across the street. She watched worriedly until the girl suddenly ran across the street and slumped into the wrecked bushes of the home that had once sat there.

The sound of Taylor violently being sick saw Victoria joining her, gently holding back her hair as she watched the girl emptying the scant contents of her stomach into the desiccated grass.

The trip home had been silent. Taylor had collected herself after a few moments of heaving once her stomach had been well and truly empty. She’d eventually gotten her feet under her. Victoria had
allowed the other girl to check her over, letting the girl be assured that she wasn’t still hurt, but rather
than commenting, Victoria had felt her heart clenching when Taylor’s features had hardened, and
she’d set off.

Part of her was impressed at the speed that Taylor had been travelling, the girl bouncing between
roofs like a demented grasshopper and Victoria had had to push her flight to keep up, trailing in
Taylor’s wake, using the girl’s fluttering hair like a beacon in the night. The concern she’d felt grew
when Taylor landed on the lawn of the house and charged up the steps and into the house without
waiting for her. Victoria landed neatly and followed, climbing the stairs.

She came to a stop at the top of the stairs, watching as Lisa glanced at her from out of her room
before looking toward Taylor’s door. The sound of movement within was somewhat muffled, and
Victoria carefully approached the door. She wasn’t terribly surprised when the door didn’t open
when she gripped the handle, and she let out a sigh, knocking quietly.

“Taylor.” She spoke softly when the sound of movement within continued but no response came.
She took a deep breath and knocked again.

“Taylor, please. We need to talk.” she stared at the grainy wood and felt her temper flaring a bit, and
she rested her head on the door with a thump, speaking with a soft growl.

“Taylor, I am perfectly capable of ripping this door off its hinges.” She said the words loud enough
for Taylor to hear, and if the click of Lisa’s door closing was any hint, the other girl had heard too.
The sound of pacing stopped on the other side of the door, but there was still no response.

After a minute Victoria leaned back wondering if Taylor would actually call her bluff, but before she
could lift her hand, the door clicked and slowly swung inwards. She’d expected to see Taylor
standing before her, but when she pushed the door in, she found the other girl across the room
standing by the dresser, quietly fiddling with something on it.

Victoria moved across the room, peering past Taylor, seeing her suitcase open on the dresser as the
girl carefully placed clothing in it. Victoria studied Taylor’s stoic form as she continued to put the
clothing in the case carefully. She spoke quietly as she moved closer, touching Taylor’s arm.

“Taylor?” She frowned when the girl gently shook off her hand, speaking softly. “Taylor, what’re
you doing?” She studied Taylor’s profile and felt her throat tightening as the girl bowed her head and
considered the bag.

“Getting your stuff together so you can leave. Your mom said that she didn’t want you here. That it
was too dangerous for you.” Taylor spoke softly, her voice even, flat and Victoria frowned.

“I don’t… She’s wrong, Taylor.” The girl spoke softly and watched as Taylor hunched up her
shoulders and let out a soft bitter little laugh.

“Wrong? She’s not wrong, Vic. She’s right. You nearly died.” The words were whispered out,
Taylor’s voice low and laced with pain. “Amy nearly died. Lily, nearly died. And it was all my fault.
I could have lost you all, and it’d have been my own stupid fault, again. Y-You’re not safe here.”
Taylor grabbed a sweater from the dresser top and slipped it into the bag.

“Taylor,” Vicky gently touched the other girl’s shoulder, pulling her around to face her. Taylor kept
a grip on the sweater she’d been holding, staring at it instead of meeting her eyes. “Taylor, you can’t
blame yourself for that. That wasn’t on you. That was on Stormtiger and Cricket. It wasn’t your
fault. You can’t control everyone.” Vicky studied Taylor wincing when the girl took a breath and
squeezed the sweater until her knuckles whitened.
“But it is my fault. They went after you to get to me. They went after you because of what I’d done to them. What happens the next time? When Coil’s not there to save you. What happens when we don’t get lucky? Vic, you’re in danger if you stay with me.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and Victoria frowned speaking slowly.

“That’s…” Victoria firmed up her spine quietly. “I don’t care, Taylor. I-” Victoria stepped back when Taylor stepped forward and cut her off with a growl.

“I care!” Victoria paused and frowned as Taylor’s eyes finally met hers, the chocolate coloured orbs glimmering with unspent tears. “Vic, I care.” The other girl’s hands slackened, dropping the cloth as she backed away. “I-I can’t. I don’t. I won’t.” The girl muttered quietly, starting and stopping sentences as she backed up. Taylor’s back hit the wall, and stood there, silently gripping her own vest, clenching her hands as she tried to get the words out.

Victoria studied Taylor before stepping close. She reached out, gripping Taylor’s shoulder, ignoring the minute shaking of her head and she pulled her close. Taylor continued to mutter for a moment before Victoria felt those thin arms snaking around her middle and gripping her savagely. Taylor’s body starting to shake wasn’t really a surprise either, and Victoria gently held the other girl as she began to cry, slowly caressing along her spine.

She gently soothed the girl, holding her close and letting her cry herself out. She glances down when Taylor finally drew back and stared up at her with those red eyes and spoke softly.

“Vic, I don’t want-.” She studied the girl as Taylor took a shuddering breath before finally finishing her thought. “I couldn’t stand to lose you, not you too.” The words low and almost palpably sad and Victoria reached out, gently brushing Taylor’s hair behind her ear.

“Taylor, I’m not going anywhere. I promise you that.” The words were soft, and she blinked at the angry look in Taylor’s eyes.

“Y-you can’t promise that, Vic. It's like I’m cursed or something.” Taylor pulled back and glanced toward the window. The girl took a few shuddering breaths before straightening her back and looking back at Victoria with those red-rimmed eyes. “Everyone that I love leaves me, Vic. I-” She paused, frowning. “I don’t think I’d be able to handle it happening again. Not... Not with you.” Taylor glanced at her pitifully, and Victoria felt her heart racing before Taylor broke eye contact, focusing instead on her shoes and Victoria let out a sigh.

“Taylor,” She gently touched the girl’s shoulders, trying again to get the girl to meet her eyes. “Taylor,” This time the sad eyes lifted and met hers the watery brown orbs rimmed in sadness. Victoria stared into the other girl's eyes before she spoke gently. “I can’t promise that I won’t die, but you couldn’t promise that either. But...I don’t want to leave. Do you really want me to go?” Victoria spoke carefully and watched as Taylor paused, a wave of profound fear flickering in those eyes before they hardened in determination.

“I want you to live.” Victoria gripped Taylor’s shoulders and cut her off, pressing her fingers to Taylor's lips to still her words and staring into her eyes.

“That’s not what I asked, Taylor.” She spoke softly, firmly. She slowly pulled her hand back, studying the girl carefully before speaking again. “Do you want me to go.” She spoke softly, watching as Taylor’s eyes slowly clouded with grief and the girl tensed up.

“...no.” The word was uttered softly and Victoria, stepped closer, staring into Taylor’s eyes quietly.

“Then, this is where I want to be, and I’m not going anywhere, no matter what anyone thinks or
does.” She spoke gently and studied Taylor’s face watching the confusion ghosting over Taylor’s features. She studied the younger girl as she quietly wiped at her eyes, rubbing them before speaking in a tired voice.

“I... Why?” Taylor stared at her and Victoria frowned quietly and glanced around, staring at the room around them before gently cupping Taylor’s cheeks with her hand.

“Cause this is my home.” She spoke softly, watching as Taylor’s eyes softened and then she spoke softly. “It’s where I feel safest. Here. With you.” She stepped closer, watching as Taylor’s eyes seemed to spark with something. She studied the girl as she stared back at her with open nervousness on her features. They stood in silence for a moment looking at each other before Taylor let out a strangled whimper, breaking eye contact and speaking plaintively.

“W-What’d you want from me, Vic?” The tiny question startled her and Vic gently dragged her thumb over Taylor’s cheek, studying the girl as she kept her eyes on the floor. She paused and frowned for a few moments as she considered the question and gently tilted Taylor’s head back up so that their gazes met once more.

“I don’t ‘want’ anything from you, Taylor. I just.” Victoria frowned as she considered Taylor quietly. “You make me a better person, and I like who I am becoming. I don’t want to go back to who I was before you were in my life.” She smiled quietly as she traced Taylor’s cheek softly. “I want to keep going down this path. I want to come home at night and cook dinner with you and to argue with you about ridiculous foods. To sit with you as we try to proofread each other’s homework.” She watched Taylor’s eyes softening and took a breath for continuing.

“I want to watch terrible movies with you, and go to bed together, and wake up together, and I want to cuddle with you without it feeling awkward, and I want to hold you and not care who’s looking at me.” Victoria gently tilted Taylor’s head up, studying her quietly. “I want you.” She spoke kindly and watched as Taylor’s eyes welled up with emotion before a flicker of something dark passed before them.

“Wh-Why me? I’m just...” Taylor frowned and lowered her head. “I’m not...” She spoke softly, and Victoria watched Taylor quietly. “There are so many other people... better people.” Taylor finally said and then frowned softly, and Victoria let out a gentle sigh before stepping closer. She looked into Taylor’s eyes, leaning in closer. She saw Taylor’s eyes widening as the distance between them closed.

When Taylor didn’t back away or look afraid, she tilted the other girl’s head up and spoke softly before bringing their lips together in a tender kiss.

“I don’t want anyone else, Taylor. I want you.”

Taylor had read all the books, the romantic and the cynical. She’d expected one or the other to be right. The kiss to set off sparks in her mind, to set her heart racing. Or for it to too quiet and too loud at the same time, awkward and weird with their noses crashing together, accidental bites ruining everything. Instead, the contact had been rather... nice. Not mind-changing, or magical, just...nice and pleasant. Victoria’s hand had been gentle on her chin, and she hadn’t resisted by pulled up to meet Vic’s face, and when the girl had closed in on her, Taylor had let her eyes drift shut, leaning into the contact.
The other girl’s lips were soft and warm, and she’d allowed her own to ghost against Victoria’s, letting the chaste contact linger for a few moments, slowly drawing back to stare up into Victoria’s half-lidded eyes. She felt the other girl’s hands slowly wandering back down to rest on her shoulders. A moment of silence became two, and she watched Victoria’s eyes widening as she stood there, staring at her worriedly. Taylor gently wet her lips, finding them suddenly dry before she took a breath and spoke.

“Vic, I…” She paused and frowned, willing her confusing thought to still. “I’ve never, I… I can’t.” She spoke slowly and let out a sigh as she tried to figure out what to say. Seeing the other girl’s face fall startled her as she realized what she’d said. She saw Victoria’s expression flash with disappointment and hurt as she shifted back. A tiny part of her well up. This could be a good thing. If she thought-

A wall of rage and fury slammed into her, and she staggered as Victoria released her. The girl started stammering as Taylor stood up straighter. Right, pointless self-sacrifice is bad. Intentionally hurting yourself for no reason, is bad.

“I- of course. That’s why you never. And I’m just. S-Sorry.” The girl started to back away as her eyes began glimmering and Taylor reached out, snagging the other girl’s hand, taking a deep breath.

“Wait. That’s not. That’s not what I meant.” She saw Victoria’s nervous look, and she let out a soft sigh. “I wasn’t rejecting you, I just.” Taylor let out a soft sigh before gesturing to the bed. “We should talk about something first. Can we sit?” She watched as Victoria considered her before nodding and heading to the bed.

She watched as Victoria perched on the foot of the bed, and Taylor moved over, gently taking a seat on the upper half, tucking her legs under her and taking a deep breath. She looked at Victoria and squared her shoulders before speaking.

“Have you ever heard of uh. Demisexuality?” She studied the blonde, and when Victoria flashed her a confused look and shook her head, Taylor dropped into lecture mode. “It’s also called, Gray-asexuality. Basically.” Taylor paused and frowned. “Basically, some models hold that there’s something called primary…”

Taylor rested quietly on Victoria’s shoulder; the pair had shifted position as the long night of heavy conversations had gone on. Taylor was watching the first rays of sunlight peeking up over the horizon over the slow rise and fall of Victoria’s chest. The girl’s head was turned toward her own, and if it weren’t for the slow movements of the other girl’s fingers in her hair, she’d have thought Victoria had drifted off.

She could almost feel the other girl thinking under her as she digested the information that Taylor had shared over the long night. The conversation had started with Taylor haltingly and almost clinically explaining her sexuality before Victoria had just asked for Taylor to explain it with layman’s terms. That had taken longer with Taylor stuttering her way over-explaining her lack of interest in certain things, and what things were important.

Victoria had asked how she’d known that she was the way she was, and that had led into Taylor finally sharing the unabridged tale of her life with Emma before high school, which had then led into
explaining in full detail what had happened after she’d returned from summer camp. They’d ended up in their current positions during that difficult conversation, and it’d taken Taylor nearly an hour to talk Victoria out of doing anything horrible to the redhead the next time that she saw her.

“What about Amy?” The words were soft, and Taylor shifted back and glanced up, staring at Victoria as the girl’s blue eyes drifted toward her. Raising an eyebrow in confusion, Taylor studied Victoria quietly until the girl clarified her question. “Did you know about her…” Victoria paused and trailed off.

“Feelings?” Taylor spoke gently and studied Victoria’s features, considering the apprehensive hold of her body and chuckled. “Yeah, I knew. I just.” Taylor lowered herself back to Vic’s shoulder, resting against the other girl and gently tracing circles over the blonde’s stomach. “This conversation is a hard one, and at times, I wonder if she ever really sees me.” Taylor paused and frowned. “If I could really let her see me.” She added after a moment with a soft frown.

When the tension didn’t leave Victoria’s form, Taylor slowly glanced up, studying the nervous, almost worried expression on her face as she stared back. Taylor let her eyes drift over Vic’s face, but before she could open her mouth to ask what was wrong, Victoria loosed a new question.

“I and...what about me?” She spoke nervously, and Taylor watched the oddly vulnerable look on Vic’s face. She studied the girl curiously for a few moments before reaching out and gently touching the other girl’s cheek. She watched as Victoria let out a gentle sigh and buried her face into the touch, closing her eyes.

“Did I know about your feelings?” She spoke softly. “I… suspected. I wasn’t sure. I.” She frowned. “I think part of me expected it to be nothing more than wishful thinking.” Taylor’s words were soft, and she blinked when Victoria jerked back and stared at her in confusion. Taylor studied Victoria quietly. The mixture of hope and confusion was somewhat disconcerting on Victoria’s face.

“You didn’t think I liked you?” She spoke softly as she sat up next to the other girl, staring down at her. She frowned when Victoria nervously began to pick at her shirt.

“I-” Victoria’s voice trailed off, and the girl swallowed before continuing. “The aura doesn’t work on you, and you said that you weren’t… You didn’t...” Victoria paused and frowned, quietly mulling over her thoughts. Taylor studied the shorter girl sprawled out next to her and let out a gentle sigh.

“You thought that because I’m not attracted to your body, that I couldn’t like you?” She spoke gently and saw Vic’s nervous eyes peering at her. Taylor let out a gentle sigh, tilting Victoria’s chin up to stare at her fully.

“Firstly, Vic. Just because your body doesn’t…” Taylor paused and tilted her head to the side. “‘Rev my engines’ doesn’t mean that I don’t see how beautiful you are.” She spoke softly, ignoring the girl’s bashful looks. “I can appreciate your aesthetic beauty; I can tell that you’re gorgeous.” She spoke quietly and gently reached out, pushing a wisp of blonde hair over Vic’s ear, watching as she blushed and looked away.

“...nervously and glanced away. She spoke quietly when the girl seemed at a loss.

“As cheesy as it sounds, your face isn’t the only part of you that’s beautiful, Vic. Your heart is just as attractive.” Taylor saw the doubtful look and let out a snort. “You told me that I made you a better person? But I don’t think that’s true, Vic. I didn’t ‘make’ you anything. You are a better person, I just… let you know that it was okay to be who you really are.” Taylor lowered herself onto the bed
next to Vic, staring up at the roof quietly.

“You don’t see it cause you’re so wrapped up in your head, but there’s so much about you to appreciate,” Taylor spoke and glanced at Vic who was watching her quietly. “Like… Kids. You’re the most tolerant cape I’ve ever seen when children are involved. You -always- stop. You always talk to each of them, and you listen when they talk. You could be late, or in a hurry, or a rush, but if some kid calls your name you stop and make time for them, and you just get this smile on your face as they get all excited. That’s…” Taylor shrugged quietly as she shifted. “That’s amazing. You’re amazing.” Taylor turned as she felt Victoria slipping over her arm. The smaller girl’s face settling on her shoulder was a new sensation, but Taylor wrapped an arm around her drawing her close as Victoria had done for her.

“Fleur, she used to do that for me when I was younger. No matter what, she’d always take the time to sit and listen to me when I had something to say. It meant a lot.” Victoria spoke softly, and Taylor nodded quietly, slowly dragging her hand through Vicky’s hair, feeling the girl nervously relaxing against her side.

“And you’ve got such a big heart,” Taylor spoke into the silence, chuckling when Victoria glanced at her. She didn’t glance back, keeping her eyes on the ceiling as she spoke softly. “You’re the first one to get between us and a threat. You’re the one that asks everyone else when they’re down. You just… You care, and you don’t seem to be afraid to show that you care. It was... odd having someone care for me like that after everything. You stood up for me when I was too stupid to stand up for myself. I-” Taylor frowned quietly and bit her lip. “I think that’s when I knew that… I could maybe feel this.” Taylor glanced at Victoria taking in her confused look and sighing.

“Not when you were ripping me a new one. But... After. When I just.” Taylor frowned. “When I was crying and terrified that I’d fucked up, and felt that ache in my chest as I worried that you’d be gone and you just.” She sighed waving a hand. “You hugged me and called me stupid, and everything seemed okay again.” Taylor huffed faintly. She studied Victoria, taking in her dark cheeks before letting out a sigh and glancing away, feeling her own cheeks burning.

The silence that lingered after was quiet, but less awkward, almost comfortable. Taylor continued to gently run her hands through Victoria’s hair as the other girl’s arm curled around her side, holding her close. She’d almost thought that Victoria had dozed off on her when the other girl took a soft breath and spoke nervously.

“Does that mean… we could?” Talyor glanced at Vic quietly, studying her hopeful face and letting out a gentle sigh.

“Do you really want to, after all of that? Vic, It’s...I’m not an easy person to-” She paused and frowned when the other girl touched her face, pulling her down so that she had to meet those blue eyes. Taylor looked into Victoria’s eyes for a few moments and let out a sigh. She took a deep breath and flashed a nervous smile at the other girl.

“If you really want me that much, Vic, then I’m yours.” She flashed the other girl a gentle smile and chuckled when Vic’s expression shifted into a broad grin. She squeaked when the other girl shifted up and grasped her face softly. When Vic leaned in for another kiss, before their lips could touch, they both froze in place when the door rather suddenly swung inwards to reveal Lisa in her PJs. Lisa in her bright yellow, matching, Psyduck pyjamas. Taylor blinked at the odd sight of the other girl standing there, staring at them.

The thinker paused in the doorway, staring at their shocked expressions. Taylor glanced at Victoria and then back at Lisa, flushing bright red. She gasped when Victoria tilted her head back and kissed her soundly, melting into the contact quietly.
“Gross.” The blase comment from Lisa caused Victoria to snort into the kiss, and then they broke apart giggling quietly. Lisa considered them both before rolling her eyes.

“If you two morons are done disentangling the Gordian Knot that is your love life. Director Piggot just called me and asked why a bunch of Empire thugs just dropped a naked, hogtied man with ‘Hello, I’m Stormtiger, I stab little girls’ on a note pinned to his chest on the front step. Along with a detailed letter of apology from the Empire Eighty-Eight.”

Chapter End Notes

[[So. =] That’s a thing now. Fun fact. This whole chapter took about 2 hours to write. And then I had to spend another 2 hours rewriting the last section over and over until my friend was satisfied that Taylor’s explanation came across as genuine. So uh. That was a thing. I’m sort of glad that Taylor’s motivations are out there.

I bet you all nearly pulled out your hair like Marr when Taylor went ‘I can’t.’ Turns out, Sith Lords? Pretty good wingmen. I sort of hate that trope where it finally fucking seems like people are going to talk about their problems and then on says something stupid, or does something stupid and we have another entire arc where they slowly get back in a position where they can actually interact again.

I mean, this lead up has been going for like three arcs at this point, and there’s plenty of interpersonal growth to be done on the other side of the ‘I like you, let’s see where this goes’ conversation as before it. So we’ll deal with that.

Now then, I imagine we’re about to get a bunch of ‘UGH not LESBIANS’ conversations and to be honest. That same friend that sort of helped me get the last section ‘just right’ pointed out that despite the uh, complaints, Taylor and Victoria aren’t really what you would call typical tv-lesbians. Taylor’s well, she basically explains herself up there, but Taylor’s mostly uncaring about the physical form of those she cares about, and Victoria is uh.

Well, Victoria’s sort of running on Veela rules right now I think. I mean, I imagine that she’s curious enough, but the attraction isn’t to Taylor because, she’s so hot and cute, and like, ‘gawd I love cute girls’ Victoria’s interested in Taylor because Taylor sees the real her, and like… Lets her be herself without any judgements. Taylor makes her feel safe. That’s yeah.

I just. It’s. Interesting to write. Putting yourself in that headspace is… weird. Like trying to frame that sort of mindset. Being a 30-year-old, straight-ish dude, writing a mostly asexual teenage girl trying to explain her sexuality to the girl she likes. I just. I never expected to be in the position, and I hope it came across as genuine.

Anyway, rant over. Onto announcements. This is the last chapter of 6.x. We’re going to have interludes. Several. Like at least 4. I’ve got, a Dragon and Leet Interlude that I’ve been sitting on for weeks. I uh. It’s just fun, blending these two characters together. That’s going to be a blast. It’s mostly about Leet settling in at Dragon’s base in Canada, and uh. Chats between them. Also, there’ll be some Narwhal. Cause she’s a fun cape to explore.

There’ll be an HK Interlude, where we’ll get some information about him and what he’s
been up to in the decades he’s been on Earth Bet. And there’s going to be a Sabah Interlude, where she reacts to being out of the loop again, and some development there. And uh. More interludes. We’ll see what happens after that.

I’ll be taking a couple of days off, but uh, I doubt I’ll last more than two so, expect the Dragon/Leet interlude sometime Saturday or Sunday. Assuming that I get the interludes flowing quickly, we’ll have 7.1 going up at some point next week — Friday, or the following Monday at the latest. Anyway, I leave you to your reviews. Thanks for reading as always.]]
“Hey! Watch it!” Harper let out a cry as the troopers dragged him across the tarmac toward the ship. His powers spooled up as he stared at it, his power picking apart the various functions of the craft. Transport, defence, everything spread out before him, and Harper stared at it with disinterest. When the two men shoved him toward the squat dragon-like shape, he barely caught himself, taking a few moments to straighten up and shoot them a dirty look. He adjusted his outfit before grumbling and approaching the open hatch in the side of the vessel.

His feet clanged on the steps as he climbed them, slipping into the hatch and glancing around quietly. He took in the interior and blinked. To describe the interior as ‘spartan’ would be kind, and the interior had clearly been designed primarily to house cargo, the seats within being a secondary addition. Harper moved around the interior, inspecting the door to the ‘control’ section. He considered it quietly, his mind quickly deciphering the mechanisms knowing that he could get through it in less than forty-five seconds if necessary. Less if he accidentally blew up the door in the attempt.

When a screen to the left of the door flickered to life, showing Tess’ face, Harper felt his expression closing down. He moved away from the door, ignoring the woman’s tired sigh as he dropped into one of the seats, crossing his arms and sinking petulantly into the chair. He did his best to keep his gaze off the glowing screen that held that face, staring toward the rear of the vessel until the sound of someone else climbing up the steps with slow, heavy steps drew his attention.

He didn’t glance over, remaining utterly still until he heard the sound of the seat next to him groaning under the weight of a passenger. Harper kept his gaze on the door for a few moments longer before the curiosity over-powered him. He turned slowly and nearly leapt out of his seat at the powerful figure that sat in the chair two places over from him.

His eyes locked on the glowing crystalline horn, following it from the point down to where it terminated between her shimmering silver bangs. His eyes trailed over the woman’s stern features, the rigid set of her powerful form. The woman was leaning away from him, one hand up to her ear as she listened to something, a communicator probably. He considered her quietly for a few moments until she let out a long sigh and removed her hand from her ear.

The large woman glanced over at him, and Harper shifted in his seat as she leaned toward him,
inspecting him quietly. Vivid green eyes stared into his own, and he began to fidget as the strange woman began to carefully dismantle him with her eyes, taking his measure. Harper hunched up his shoulders as something told him that he didn’t quite match up. He stared at her quietly as she reached out a hand to shake.

“Greetings, Mister Harper-” Harper glowered at her and shifted away, not taking the hand, his irritation with the situation as whole cropping up.

“First off lady, the name is Leet.” He spoke heatedly, staring at her and crossing his arms. “And secondly, I’m not here to make friends. I’m here because I have to be here, and only because this is slightly better than ending up in the birdcage.” His words were tight with fury, and he watched as the woman didn’t react beyond raising an eyebrow.

She stared at him for a moment after pulling her arms back, carefully resting her crystal-lined elbows on her equally prismatic knees considering him for a few moments before speaking slowly.

“Firstly, Mister Harper. It isn’t Leet. Not anymore. Part of the agreement you made with the PRT and the Guild was that you enter their rebranding program, which includes the voluntary loss of your villainous identity. If you wish to come up with a different cape name, that is entirely your prerogative, but the PRT is going to announce that Leet was captured and sent to prison, and thus, you clearly cannot be him” The words were sharp and stern, and Harper flinched back as he felt as if he was being faced with a drill sergeant. He swallowed nervously, shrinking into his seat.

“Secondly, I’m not attempting to be your friend, Mister Harper. My name is Narwhal.” She spoke coolly, and Harper swallowed, finally getting the strange horn. As Harper considered the adornment, the woman continued to speak in that cold, lecturing tone.

“I am the head of the Guild, and thus, your boss. Considering that we hadn’t been acquainted, I shall let your insubordination slide this time, but in the future I expect you to treat myself and every other member of the Protectorate and the Guild with the courtesy befitting your fellow colleagues. Is that understood?” She studied him coldly, and Harper flinched back before nodding.

When she turned her gaze away from him, he let out a long sigh of defeat before returning his gaze to the loading door of the vessel, sitting in silence as the ship lifted off once the remaining passenger was aboard. The trip was surprisingly short, and before long Harper found himself being dragged around the Toronto base by a somewhat sleepy-looking security guard as he was showed around the various facilities that had been allocated for his use.

----------

Harper had settled into a routine over the last week and a half. He’d wake up around ten am, staggering out of bed and into a shower. Minimal attention dedicated to personal grooming and then he’d dress in comfortable pants, a t-shirt, and one of the many, many Hawaiian shirts that he’d purchased with his ‘signing bonus.’ Honestly, Harper wasn’t even a massive fan of the designs; he just loved the way that the other capes around the base stared when he wandered the halls in his outfit.

Once he was up and about, he’d make his way to the cantina on the base, taking an early lunch that he’d bring back to his workshop. Once there he’d carefully log onto the mainframe, and he’d consult
the list of requests from the various branches of the PRT. Typically Guild Requests for tinker-tech were routed to him with higher priority, but he’d made a few things for the more desperate PRT jurisdictions over the last eight days.

He’d skim the requests, letting his power work as he considered solutions for their problems and then he would design them. Designs were sent to Dragon, and she’d review them, strip out the traps that his powers had woven into the plans and send them back. Harper built the items, and then they were sent to Dragon for her double check them and once more remove the different more inventive traps that his power had woven into them.

Typically most of these stages involved being painfully polite and courteous to Dragon while ignoring her every attempt to strike up a conversation with him. Every time that he checked the various subtle methods that they’d used to keep in contact when separate in the past. He considered the silent message boards on his phone before tapping a key and turning the device off, slipping it casually into his tool belt.

The sound of the door chiming saw him moving over to trigger the mechanism. The heavy sealed door pulled back, and he glanced out curiously, his arms crossed, carefully taking in the large scary looking woman that was his boss. He flinched back at the rather severe look on her face.

“Mister Harper. We need to chat.” She spoke coldly and gestured for him to follow her, and he flinched nervously before following in her wake as she led him out of the labs and down the halls. As he trailed after her, he’d speak up, his voice nervous and high pitched.

“I-if this is about one of my creations, I did warn you people that my stuff is prone to breaking.” The short man hurried in the purple coated figure’s wake, watching her nervously.

“It isn’t about any incidents with your technology, Mister Harper. Dragon has been especially careful about ensuring the safety of your creations.” The woman spoke almost casually as she headed into the administrative wing of the building. Harper nodded at the few people that walked past before following the woman into a plush office. He inspected the office as Narwhal moved around the large desk and took a seat.

When she indicated the seat opposite, Harper nervously moved over and took a seat. Harper stared at the woman as she laced her fingers and stared down at him. He shifted awkwardly in his chair.

“If this isn’t about my work performance, what is it about?” He stared up at her curiously for a few moments. The white-haired woman casually leaned forward, staring at him quietly, and Harper continued to fidget impatiently.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t about your performance, merely that it wasn’t about any mishaps. Truthfully, when you agreed to this deal, the assumption was that you and Dragon would be working more closely than this. The need to constantly swap projects between you slows you -both- down.” Harper stared at the white-haired woman and frowned kicking back his chair and standing. The fact that the other woman was still seated and still taller than him made it distinctly more awkward as he faced her down.

“Did she put you up to this? I’ve told her that I can’t work with her, she-” Harper quietly growled as he stepped closer to the desk and the silver-haired woman cut him off coldly.

“Dragon didn’t me ask me to speak with you on this subject. Truthfully, when she mentioned the issues, she was having, she asked me not to.” The woman stared at him, coldly as she spoke.
“As for what she ‘did to you’ near as I can tell, it’s basically nothing. She told your partner about the
deal you had been offered, and your partner made a choice to stop you from screwing up your life
any further. She chose to head off on her own and did what she could to clear your name. You’re not
being at all fair to Dragon, despite the amount of effort that she’s gone to on your behalf.” Harper
frowned and nervously stepped back, his anger melting away as he stared at the angry woman
opposite him.

“Dragon has bent over backwards to get you this deal. She was genuinely excited at the prospect of
working with you after your work on the Gaebolg together.” The woman continued to lean over the
desk as she spoke. “She’s been rather… upset, at the cold shoulder that you’ve been giving her since
you arrived, especially since she partially blames herself for your poor mood. I don’t typically
involve myself in the personal lives of my team-mates, Mister Harper, but your personal life is
impacting the work we do here.” Harper let out a soft growl and moved to puff himself up, pausing
when the woman reached into her desk and pulled out a file.

“And before you go around talking poorly about my friend, you should read this.” She dropped the
heavy file on the desk and stared at him. When he didn’t move, she gestured him forward, and he
collected the heavy record. The dismissive gesture was a bit condescending, but he quietly vacated
the office and made his way back to his own lab.

He carefully set himself up on his workstation and cautiously opened the file. He read the first page
in confusion before flipping over to the next page, quickly flipping through all the pages.

“...what the hell.” The words slipped from his mouth as he carefully checked the documents in the
folder, trying to figure out the authenticity of them.

“They’re real.” The words were soft and nervous, and Harper glanced up blinking at the image of
Dragon on the screen on the nearby wall. He stared at her curiously for a few moments before
glancing down at the file before him, reading the words.

“...why? How?” He stared back at her, and she shrugged self consciously.

“I mean, most weren’t that hard. Getting the warrants overturned for the murder charges and the
assault and kidnapping ones were easy considering I had that video of Beck. The others took a bit
more work, but I managed to get rid of all of your felonies.” The woman spoke tentatively, and
Harper checked each of the pardons, recants, and declarations of actual innocence.

“That’s…” He paused and swallowed, carefully studying the file before something caught his eye.
He carefully pushed aside the official-looking documents and staring at the large bound contract that
had been laid underneath. He studied it curiously before glancing over at Dragon who looked oddly
proud.

“What’s this?” He slid to his feet and approached the screen, holding it up.

“Since most of your crimes vanished, I went back to the table with the PRT on your behalf.” She
smirked at him, and Harper heard a loud click, and the broad band on his arm loosened and fell
away. He stared at it as it fell to the floor.

“Considering the nature of the remaining crimes that they could actually pin to you, your parole was
lifted, and you’re uh. A free man.” The tinker smirked at him from over the screen, and Harper
blinked as she considered him.
“You could even leave if you want.” She gestured quietly toward the door. “I know you were really upset about not being able to go with Beck, so I’d understand.” Harper glanced at the door, running a hand over his wild blonde hair before letting out a sigh.

“Wouldn’t even know where to find her, Tess.” He shook his head sadly before glancing down at the contract studying the page quietly before glancing up at the screen. It took a few moments of seeing the grin on her face for him to realize that he’d let her name slip out. He shook his head in amusement before heading back to the desk, speaking over his shoulder.

“Uh, thanks though, for everything. Sorry, I’ve been so shirty.” He said nervously before setting the folder back up and sealing it carefully, tucking it to the side. He glanced toward his computer, activating it and watching a window popping up on it instead. He glanced at Dragon carefully for a few moments before smirking.

“So. What’re you working on?” He leaned close to the screen as she launched into an excited explanation about the delightful little device she’d been shown, schematics of a crystal shaper of some sort appearing on the screen. Harper’s power went into overdrive as he considered the device with careful focus. Dragon launching into an eager description of the possibilities of the device sparked his own interest, and soon, a lively debate on the possibilities of a beryllium extruder was going between them.

Harper stared curiously at the large plinth that he’d been working, on, growling in irritation at the sudden roadblock that he’d encountered. He’d been up half the night building the damn thing, but suddenly his well of inspiration had run dry. He sighed quietly, lifting his cup to his mouth and blinking at the lack of liquid when he tossed it back. He stared at the empty cup and slid to his feet, moving across the small lab toward the door. Coffee would help.

He reached the door and was about to press the control when it suddenly swung open of its own accord, startling the sleep-deprived Tinker and causing him to loose a small shriek and toss the cup upwards. He watched in horror as his mug sailed away toward the floor, letting out a sigh of relief when a crystal-coated hand shot out and caught the mug in mid-air. Harper blinked when the woman offered the cup back, accepting it. The gesture to follow was familiar, and he let out a soft groan.

“I’ve been good, Dragon and I are even getting along.” He grumbled as he followed in the woman’s wake, watching as she led him once more through the hallways away from the labs, though instead of heading into the administrative wing he was surprised when they headed past it toward the services wing.

“I’m aware, Mister Harper. That’s why she’s requested your aid with something.” The woman’s terse voice made him nervous, and Harper continued to trail along in her wake, glancing around as they entered a doorway and descended to a lower floor. They moved along a concrete hall lined with pipes and Harper was surprised when they came to a stop outside a specific door.

The crystal-coated woman almost casually pulled a card from... Well, somewhere, anyway, and she swiped it at the door, allowing it to click open and revealing a rather dull server room. Harper let out a grunt as he stepped in, glancing around. The servers around him were advanced, but they weren’t
He moved around the stacks, glancing back and staring in confusion as the door closed in his wake without Narwhal following.

He navigated the stacks and was surprised to find a small workstation in the rear of the room with an odd contraption on it that was definitely tinker tech. He considered the workspace and the device before lifting it up. His mental block instant evaporated and his head filled with information on the device, how to fix it, how to make it work better.

It wasn’t even a complicated device. Virtual Reality goggles and interface with a neural inhibitor and a connection to the server. Harper glanced around and finding no one in the room, but him he shrugged and took a seat. He carefully slotted the goggles on, neural interface and inhibitor, getting comfortable before activating the device from the computer.

It was odd, feeling the entirety of his body going number before the world went dark before his eyes. There was the sensation of movement, and a swirl of colour formed before his eyes. The world resolved into a glowing space and Harper ‘landed’, his body absorbing the shock of the arrival before straightening up.

Slowly pushing to his feet, Harper took in the image that had been conjured to represent the server infrastructure, the area looking like an advanced city of some sort, towering pillars like buildings glowing with scrolling code. Harper took in the information before letting out a long low whistle, shoving his hands into his pockets and chuckling.

“I’m in love.” The words whispered out into the void, and he heard an amused chuckle from behind him, and he spun.

“I’m flattered.” He stared in confusion at Tess, glancing at the glowing image of her. He paused, frowning as he really looked, staring at her before glancing at himself. When he glanced up again, he saw the recognition in her eyes and the almost nervous hold of her body.

“...Tess?” He moved closer, inspecting her quietly. “Narwhal said you needed my help. What’s…” He paused and frowned silently as he gently moved around her, examining the code that seemed to fill her form, taking in her features quietly. When he didn’t continue, she turned toward him and crossed her arms in front of her.

“Figured it out?” She asked softly, and Harper blinked, letting out a hum as he nodded.

“An AI of some sort? Though it’s weird. My powers are… confused. They’re not sure what to make of you.” He frowned quietly as he backed up, studying her quietly.

“That’s actually what I brought you here to discuss.” He studied her carefully for a few moments before she gestured him along toward one of the nearby towers. Harper followed and blinked when Tess gently touched the wall, the surface shimmering before a complicated string of code began to scroll past.

Harper frowned quietly as he leaned close, carefully inspecting the code. He shifted his hands and a keyboard formed in front of the window, and he leaned close, manipulating the display, zooming out and in, scanning around and taking in the code, his powers rapidly filling in the blanks. He let out a quiet hrm as he considered the data.

“Huh.” He spoke softly as he stared at the confusing string of characters before glancing at Dragon.
“What’s wrong? I’ve been feeling weird since Leviathan. I talked with someone about it, and they seemed to think that their powers did something to my code.” Harper blinked and glanced at her for a few moments before shaking his head.

“They didn’t alter your code. Well, Dragon’s code.” Harper spoke quickly before letting out a sigh when she stared at him in a mixture of confusion and concern. He gestured her closer before pointing.

“See this here. This is Dragon’s code, whole and unaltered, near as I can tell, it’s been in lockdown since the Leviathan fight?” He adjusted it and highlighted a block of insane complex code that had been nested in amongst the much simpler Dragon code.

“And this here is you. You’re a duplicate, I think would be the term. Though that’s a poor way to describe it. An upgrade? A later iteration would be better, I guess?” He commented faintly. The woman seemed to stare at him in confusion, and he pointed.

“Look, this iteration of you is dozens of time more complicated than the original program. Nearly triple the size and this version is also heavily compressed. You’re also much more efficiently designed. No sprawling codes or complicated patterns. You’ve got duplicates of most of the memory patterns as well.” Harper shrugged faintly before glancing over at Dragon.

“How did this happen? And have you experienced any weird side effects?” He watched her quietly as she shifted in place before launching into a tale explaining just what had happened to her over the last two weeks.

“I think, Tess, that if I was ever to meet this father of yours, I’d hit him with something heavy,” Harper spoke quietly as he carefully inspected the code that had made up the original dragon. After listening to Dragon explain what’d been going on and her issues using her old program as a means of interacting with the world around her, Harper had offered to do what he could.

He’d moved on to attempting to decode the original Dragon’s programming, and he felt sick. The AI looked at him, and he sighed. “You don’t remember the first time you woke up, right? You mentioned that?” He stared at her when she nodded, and he moved to highlight code for her.

“See this here? Richter? Didn’t like to annotate his work but he did include time stamps. He created you, and then near as I can tell tested you. Let you run for almost nine months before he came back, wiped the slate clean and proceeded to rip you apart. There are entire chunks of the code missing.” He pointed at specific points where the code shifted jarringly. He shook his head.

“Worse than that he hardcoded these restrictions into your original programming. They’re all booby-trapped. Tampering with any of your restrictions sabotages the rest of your code. This one here seems to prevent you from disobeying Authority figures, right?” He pointed, and when she nodded, he let out a snort.

“It’s got a second clause that forces you to obey literally anyone if you cannot ‘determine an appropriate authority to align yourself with’ thus making you a slave if the local government fails. Presumably to keep you from freeing yourself from oversight. Add to that it’s been heavily, heavily
intermingled with the code that allows you to to speak, to comprehend spatial situations. Well, not yours. Hers.” He pointed up with a disgusted look.

“Everyone of these rules is like that. Remove the code stopping you from killing people indiscriminately? You irreparably damage your memory access protocols and your multi-tasking skills. Remove your thought speed restrictions, and it damages your ability to create backups..” Harper shook his head with disgust.

“This entire mess is so laden with booby traps it’d be faster to start from the ground up and create a now VI that let you interact directly with the world around you. Whatever created this you? It essentially duplicated your memories, your personality matrix, and then distilled it down into a very advanced neural algorithm. You’re more limited; your mind is almost human, but…” Harper paused and frowned, reaching for his toolbelt. When he found nothing there, he sighed. Right, not in the real world, he shook his head before resuming his thought.

“But! That has limitations. You’re not as quick of a thinker, or of a multi-tasker. Still a genius compared to us mere mortals, but, nowhere near your old self. I’m sure other results will crop up too, but at least this iteration of you seems to be largely free from damaged code.” He frowned quietly before reaching up and rubbing at his neck, the ache from the interface starting to bug him.

He saw Tess glancing at him, and she opened her mouth to speak, a series of long repeated tones suddenly silenced her. She paused and glanced around with a frown.

“I’m getting a call, Harper. I’ll send you back. If you could start work on some sort of interface for me? That might be prudent.” Harper glanced at Tess and nodded faintly. She raised a hand, and glowing light washed up around him. As the glow enclosed him, Harper heard a few words ghosting along the link in his wake.

“Director West. Yes. I have gotten your communications about Miss Mcabee, I really-”

Irritation still clung to Tess as she watched Harper working on seemingly three different projects at once, eagerly spread around his lab rotating through all three and working on them in tandem. Even the typical amusement she felt watching the short excited man work while badly quoting various languages wasn’t enough to draw her from irritation.

She’d been attempting to stall the PRT on their attempts to place the former singer in the birdcage, and finally, West had managed to acquire other prisoners that would be interred in the prison and had insisted on adding the Master to the same intake as them. Restricted as she was, Tess could only agree with the man’s wild requests.

Arrangements were sent along, details arrayed and set in motion to ensure that the two broken capes from Brockton Bay would see their places in the Birdcage before the end of the week. As she made the preparations; Tess would watch Harper work with amusement. The Tinker was like a force of nature, attempting to hum what she was certain was an aria while, doing so quite poorly, while working on some form of micro-projector. She watched him for a few minutes until an interesting alarm would trigger.
Grinning in satisfaction, Tess drew her focus back and began to track the ballsy hacker that seemed to be trying to gain access to her systems. She followed the connection watching as the attempt began to quickly bypass code locks and rerouted systems, moving with a speed and precision that hinted at a tinker or a thinker. She considered the request, moving to block it several times.

She was confused when a burst of garbage code hit her system and severely slowed it down, and she spent several minutes repairing the damage to her kernel, only stopping when a message arrived. Her hacker had sent her a heartfelt apology and a bit of code that amounted to a rather jaunty tip of the hat. She was impressed, especially by the message since she wasn’t able to track it but she could follow the intrusion.

This time instead of attempting to cut them off, she extrapolated the path they were taking, trying to figure out what they were after. She was shocked when they seemed to be zeroing in on the preparations and scheduling on the troop transport that she’d just been told to arrange. This couldn’t be a coincidence, and she moved, re-arranging the architecture of the server, taking the data out of the tinker’s path.

Another message, more junk and she was suddenly caught flat-footed again and had to expend resources repairing her server instance as she watched the Tinker change approach once more moving toward the data that she’d been keeping from him. This last message had included a signature and Tess frowned. She’d heard of the tinker in question, though he was more of a ghost. She frowned as she considered the implications. Near as she could tell, this was a bit of a losing battle, but perhaps she could put this to her advantage.

Instead of fighting the program, she’d move to consolidate the files, adding a few extras. Some were to track, but a single file was added and flagged as necessary. And she watched as the intrusion finally found the files. She was impressed when it casually separated out the junk data and the files that would let her track them down, taking the relevant data. She watched the intrusion pause over the final file that she had added as if considering. When they ended up taking it, and Tess let out a gentle sigh.

There might be nothing that she could personally do for the poor girl in that terrible situation, but perhaps her intruder might have more luck. Tess let out a sigh before slowly turning her focus back to Harper, not quite realizing that she’d actually committed an illegal act by sharing classified PRT files.

Chapter End Notes

[[Typical slice of life stuff with Harper and Dragon, and their finally working on Dragon’s issues. Harper’s got several different nifty plans to help with this. Dragon’s beginning to shed some of her shackles as well, and we’ve got someone mucking around in her servers looking for information on the Prisoner Transport. =D

Next interlude will be an HK interlude, and it’ll be fun. I’ve finished the update on 2.1, and I’ve heavily, heavily rewritten it, changing the entire structure of Sabah and Taylor’s first meeting, removing the Bastila perspective and changing it to Sabah one, so that’s fun. ]]
Interlude 17

Chapter Summary

[[Ohhey, glad you guys liked the Dragon and Leet Interlude, as you might have guessed the last bit was in fact tied in with this one. =] Without further ado, I give you Enna.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 5th, 2011
Entrance, Alberta

Enna quietly stepped out of the pick-up truck, getting his metal feet onto the ground. He stood up tall and mimed a stretch, arching his back and setting his hands on his hips. He let out a soft grunt before straightening up once more. The truck itself was battered, and a bit rusted around the edges, but it was comfortable enough, worked well, and it was so modest that it was virtually invisible among traffic.

Enna took a moment to glance around and found a few eyes in the small motel’s parking lot on him. When they merely shook their head and moved on, he hummed quietly to himself. This world was such a fascinating place. Any other pre-spaceflight race would have seen his chassis and freaked out, attempted to capture him. To most, he was either the creation of some mad Tinker or some especially demented Tinker himself.

The droid carefully slammed the door of his truck and locked it, glancing around. Locating the office of the motel, he walked over smoothly and entered the door. A family of four was in the process of renting a room for the night, the parents eagerly talking to the bored looking attendant. The sound of his clanking steps drew the attention of the children that loomed near them, both turning to look at him. Enna let his glowing eyes focus down on the two kids, chuckling when the older boy leaned back into his mother and the younger girl actually approached.

When she got within a foot of him, he’d crouched down, peering into her rather curious eyes, not reacting when she moved to touch his face carefully. He held still as she felt at the sure hard lines of his face before touching one of the glowing eyes, tapping on it and then letting out a confused giggle.

“You’re face is cold. Does it hurt?” The words were quiet, and Enna shrugged up his shoulders moving to lazily flutter one of his hands in a ‘what can you do’ gesture.

“Well,” His voice issued, the harsh tones of his vocoder dulled and muted with care. The girl blinked at him before giggling again. “It’s made of metal, not really meant to stay warm. But I’m plenty warm on the inside.” He gestured to his middle with a wry sound. If he had had the ability, he would have grinned when she let out a tiny little smile. A nervous cough drew his attention to the middle-aged woman looming over them. He glanced up and took in the woman’s apologetic look.

“Oh. Sorry, sir.” The woman gently took her daughter’s hand, speaking rather hurriedly. “Gilly, here is just a bit precocious, she didn’t mean anything by her attention.” The woman studied him, and he raised to his feet, her servo’s whirring deep in his body as he stood up straight. He tilted his head in a way that he understood made him look more amused and understanding, speaking softly.
“It’s okay, Ma’am. Curiosity is an exceptional trait to have in a child. I think young Gilly will go far in life. And she’s undoubtedly the kindest child I’ve met recently. The woman blushed rather prettily before glancing at her daughter. The husband came over, offering him a polite if somewhat strained smile and ushered his family out. Enna listened to the older woman gently lecturing her daughter about commenting on people and their disabilities.

Shaking his head with wry amusement, Enna walked up to the counter, resting his metal hands on it. The bored young man glanced up from his computer and moved to speak.

“Hello there, welcome to the Pine Hills Mot-” The boy finally looked at him and blinked, shifting back nervously. Enna tilted his head curiously and studied the boy, watching his reaction moving from shocked to confused.

“Woah, dude. You don’t see many robots out here. Far out.” The robot blinked or allowed his eyes to dim and then relight as he stared at the kid for the somewhat dated reference before shaking his head. The stoned kid merely shifted and offered a subpar attempt at a smile.

“Right then, dude. What I can do for you?” He smiled quietly, and Enna gestured over his shoulder.

“I’ve got an errand to handle in town, but there’s no parking. I was wondering what it would cost to leave my vehicle here for a few days at the most.” He stared at the young man who seemed to blink before shrugging.

“No idea, man lemme ask my boss.” The tall, lanky teen pushed his chair back and stood, walking into the rear of the shop. Enna took a few moments to wander the small lobby, taking in the display of pamphlets on the wall that advertised nearby tourist traps, peering at the screen on the wall that was currently showing a news show with subtitles. He watched the new article going on about the rising tensions in Brockton Bay and their ‘furious ongoing gang war.’

Chuckling at the image, he waited until he heard a woman’s voice coughing behind him. He turned and glanced toward her. The woman was older, nearly fifty with blonde/gray hair and she looked him up and down quietly. He crossed his arms behind his back and stepped closer, observing her.

“Gerry told me that you were looking for a place to park your truck for a few days? You going hiking or something? I doubt it’d do you much good.” HK studied the woman before letting out a low amused snort that seemed to put her more at ease.

“No. Not quite. I’ve got an errand to run in town, and I wasn’t sure where I’d be able to park. I rarely need sleep, so renting a room would be a waste, but I didn’t want to worry about where I was parking my vehicle constantly. I can pay you for the parking space…” He reached into one of the concealed compartments on his torso, watching as she waved him over.

“Ski season is coming to an end, so we’ve got the space. Sixty dollars would do you for three nights. If you’re going to be longer, then I might have to charge you for a room.” Enna shook his head, drawing out a billfold and opening it. He extracted three bills, and then moved over, holding them out.

“American is fine? Needn’t worry about exchange rates.” The woman studied the money before shrugging and accepting the three twenties. She quickly penned up a handwritten receipt and offered it over. The droid took it and tucked it back into his wallet before returning it to the pouch in his chest. He bowed his head in thanks before making his escape.

As he exited the office, he passed the family he’d seen earlier discussing their plans for dinner. When the young girl paused her chatting to flash him a friendly smile and a wave, he returned it before
making his way over to his truck — opening up the rear of the truck, dragging the two large cases over.

The first case was nearly as long as he was tall and broader than his shoulders. Dragging the heavy object down, he set it very carefully on the ground on one side, affixing the straps to its side before slotting them over his shoulders and hefting up the case with a grunt of exertion. The motors in his body easily compensated for the weight. Once the first case was secured, he grabbed the second.

This case was two thirds the length of the first but much smaller, closer in size to an instrument case though it’s rectangular shape would make for an odd instrument. The man grasped the handle checking it before turning and closing the back of the truck and then set off out of the lot. He turned toward the town center, intent on heading through town and toward the nearby national park.

It took nearly six hours of walking before the mountains began to peek past the trees. Enna moved along the gravel edge of the road quietly, ignoring the rare car or two that went whipping past at highway speeds. He walked casually, using his vocoder to simulate whistling a tune that he’d learned so very long ago. Truthfully, he probably could have gotten away with driving out to his destination, but he generally preferred to be safe rather than sorry. Also, walking like this meant that he could allow his mind to wander. It was rare that he was allowed to keep his thoughts company like this.

His mind turned toward the recent closing of his Vegas office. Despite the relative ease of shutting down his operations and liquidating his assets, a note of lingering disappointment and regret flashed through him. Enna shook his head quietly as his thoughts turned to the few friends that he’d made in the city, people like Gloria and her family. The neighbours that he’d come to know and like during his tenancy in the small block of flats a short distance from his office.

Enna had been alone on Earth for a long time, long enough to learn that the friends were what made this life tolerable, even if the loss of them was as uncomfortable as this. He chuckled quietly, allowing his mind to replay that first meeting with Gloria when he’d saved her from a mugging. He’d gotten her a job, gained her a better place to live. He’d helped her through school and seen her grow from an unfortunate young woman into a respectable and dangerous friend.

He knew that she’d be fine without him because he’d ensured that she would be, he’d taught her to defend herself, he’d taught her to how to get what she wanted, and he knew that without him there holding her back she’d be able to pursue her dreams finally. Part of him though, wondered what he’d do without her to remind him of the things that slipped his mind.

The sign of a curve in the road ahead and he focused on the task at hand. He moved past the bend, walking until he found a specific tiny green sign. He came to a stop next to it, staring at it carefully and drawing his ‘phone’ from his chest storage space. He double checked his information before turning to the nearby ridge and letting out a sigh. He set to work, carefully vanishing into the trees.

Finding a path up and over the ridge had taken another three hours, but Enna had to admit that the view was rather breathtaking among the trees atop the ridge nearly two hundred feet above the road. Moving around and through the trees, Enna found a sizable cleaning between the trees that offered him a mostly unobstructed view of the road below, without leaving him fully visible. Glancing around, the droid carefully set his small case on the ground before leaning back, and efficiently removing the straps from his torso.
Enna turned around and moved to slowly unhook the straps from the case, quickly touching the switches on its side, unlocking it and opening it. The case itself folded outwards and downwards, the base of the platform sinking into the soft earth and locking it in place. The upper portion folded down and outwards, forming a workstation with several levels.

The base of the case spread apart, revealing small containers like drawers and Enna casually opened one and drew out a chair. He unfolded the chair and set it on the uneven ground as well before turning and collecting his smaller case. Cracking this case was much simpler, and it would probably be a let down when the case was opened to reveal that it contained nothing beyond a rather advanced looking rifle.

Enna easily removed the weapon from the case, setting it on the table before taking a seat. Before he started, he removed his phone from his storage cavity and set it out on the table, glancing at it carefully and checking the time.

Assured that he had everything at hand, Enna started by expertly field-stripping the weapon, cleaning it and then re-assembling it. He took exceptionally great care as he re-assembled the only faithful companion that he’d had over the last 15 years, making sure that every piece was clean, polished and put back together exactly right.

Once he was confident that the weapon was in perfect working order, Enna set about removing the nine specially crafted rounds from the case. Each was something of a blank slate, composed with platinum shells and expensive casings stuffed with precisely crafted gunpowder.

Enna took the rounds and set to work, carefully tooling them, keeping his intentions firmly in mind, watching as the rounds themselves began to change, changing colour and material. The shape was always the same, a perfect fit for his rifle, but the rounds properties changed as he focused on his plan.

Before he committed himself to Brockton Bay, he needed to verify that the Noetikon was involved. It wasn’t impossible that some powers had come along that mimicked the force closely, or that someone had discovered the secrets on their own. He needed the sort of information that people didn’t write down in official or unofficial reports. The kinds of things only spoken about in meetings and never committed to paper.

Luckily for him, there were eyewitnesses currently approaching his location.

---

Even as she slowly, painfully dragged herself from slumber, Paige felt the pervasive agony in her jaw that had been her constant companion over the last month. The fuzzy feeling that kept the worst of it at bay lingered for a few moments, and she grasped at it as best she could, holding onto the warmth.

It wasn’t until she felt her ‘bed’ jarring suddenly as it rode over a pothole that the reality of her situation came rushing back in, her memories emerging through the pleasant haze like a submarine rising from the ocean. The sound of irritated grunts and the smell of unwashed bodies hit her like a slap to the face, and she slowly, blearily opened her eyes. The back of a transport truck that she saw as she swam to wakefulness wasn’t a surprise considering the constant motion, though the two battered figures seated opposite her were.
Agony washed over her face as Paige tried to move her jaw. She attempted to lift her arms to soothe away the pain, but she couldn’t. Something substantial had been piled on top of her and Paige began to panic, squirming as she tried to move under whatever had been wrapped around her. The weight and constant pressure terrified her. Paige had never been able to stand confined spaces, and her own paralysis made it worse. Elevators, small closets, and even porta-potties had all been things that the woman had avoided, and as the panic rose in her, she wished that this was something that she could have avoided as well.

‘Containment foam.’ The words slammed into her mind, and she shuddered and forced herself to stop struggling. She took a few deep nervous breaths, shifting her limbs around and snorting bitterly behind the mask that she wore.

Her restraints were still in place, the masks, the cuffs, the buckets, everything was fully wrapped around her and despite the fact that she lacked any brute powers, any sort of mobility powers they had still felt the need to spray her with enough containment foam to contain Alexandria.

If she weren’t so offended by her poor treatment, it had almost been enough to make her feel almost impressed by the amount of fear that her admittedly minor power had engendered in everyone from the furious masses on the streets up to the judges and senators in Boston. Here she was, Paige Mcabee, the girl that could barely get her singing career off the ground being treated like an A-class threat.

She took stock of her situation, glancing down at herself and taking in the ball of foam that enclosed her from her shoulders down over her feet even covering up part of the bench that she was strapped to. The foam itself was odd. It felt oppressive, burdensome and yet it didn’t actually press down on her so much as it hung from her.

It gave a little to allow her to breathe, and if she tried, she could even shift her arms and legs a fraction, maybe with enough force, she could lean. Paige didn’t do this because when she did attempt to lean or to push, the weight closed in, the foam pushing back and triggering more of her panic. She glanced over at the battered figures and flinched when she saw them staring at her coldly.

She felt nausea welling up in her gut, and her heart began to race at the cold, hungry look in the scarred woman’s eyes. She shifted back nervously, and her breathing became a bit more panicked as she returned the woman’s gaze nervously.

She tried to speak, but the mask made it difficult, her words emerging in a slur accompanied by a faint mist of drool that she couldn’t contain. She saw the mocking judgement in the angry woman’s eyes, and she blushed darkly as she glanced away. Even after she broke eye contact, she felt the woman’s eyes on her, burning into the side of her face.

The vehicle lurched, and she shuddered as the foam suddenly clamped down on her, holding her in place despite the jostling. She swallowed nervously, desperately trying to keep her bile down. This mask might be distinctly unpleasant now, but she imagined that vomiting with it on would be a very poor idea. The audible swallow seemed to be the invitation that the angry woman needed as a harsh mechanized voice emerged from her lips, and she spoke coldly.

“The little pigeon is awake.” The woman glanced down at her coldly, and Paige shifted nervously in place, staring back. She studied the woman, taking in her haggard appearance and the burns that covered most of her left side. Or at least the parts that were visible past the containment foam around her body. The woman shifted back in her seat quietly, staring coldly at her, and Paige got the impression that she was having her measure taken.

The woman let out a snort, apparently finding her lacking and turned, glancing to her left. Paige’s
eyes flicked from the rough looking woman to the powerful man wreathed in just as much containment form as her. His face was bruised, and he was awake, but he was staring coldly down at the seats opposite himself, ignoring the loud woman’s comments. When he didn’t respond, she spoke up again, somehow managing to make a low growl emerge from her voice box.

“Fuck, Stormtiger. I told you. They’re going to come for us. They’re just waiting till we’re far enough outside of town for it to be safe.” The woman glanced at her when ‘Stormtiger’ didn’t respond and continued to stare dully at the opposite wall, studying her.

“I mean. You might consider what sorts of things you have to offer, little birdy. When they rescue us, they might take you too.” The words were mocking, and Paige felt her skin crawling at the cold, almost vicious look in the woman’s eyes. She glanced away, staring at the vault-like door at the rear of the vehicle. She ignored the mocking laughter that came from the woman, though an exhausted voice speaking drew her focus.

“No one is coming, Cricket. You didn’t see what that girl did to the others. It was like that night all over again, but everyone was there. Othala, Viktor, Krieg, even Kaiser and Purity. They were all there, and she strode into the room and stopped them all, just like they stopped us. And she said that if any of them help us? She’ll go after them.” The man let out a low curse and slumped into his foam, apparently accepting is fate. The stringy-haired woman had other ideas.

“That’s fucking bullshit, Storm-” The woman cut off suddenly when the vehicle suddenly lurched to one side, and she let out a cackle. “SEE!” She shrieked, abusing her speaking device as the truck continued to sway as if dodging something. Paige felt her stomach roiling as she closed her eyes and bowed her head, silently begging any god that was listening that she didn’t want to die, and if they were feeling generous, that she didn’t want to vomit either.

The swerving continued for nearly thirty seconds before a loud sound washed over the truck and the entire thing lurched as if it had instantly come to a stop. She flinched, but the foam hardened around her protecting her from the sudden deceleration. She ignored the mad cackling of the fighter as she waited for something, anything to happen.

It took nearly fifteen minutes before something changed in the suddenly dark interior of the truck. A single bright point of light appeared on the upper left of the ‘vault door’ rather rapidly dragging along the exterior of the round door moving almost clear around the door. Paige glanced over, nervously as the door slowly creaked open.

The bright light of the sun hurt her eyes, and she flinched back, looking away. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust, and she glanced back just in time to see something metal and round push into the small crack in the door. She stared at the barrel of the weapon for a few moments before it let out a loud ‘Thunk’ and then something small and silver shot free.

“She’s…” The words came from the loud woman before something loud and hot and bright exploded from the object on the ground. Paige screamed in pain as she felt her eyes stop working, her ears ringing painfully. She slumped forward in agony, bending over at the waist.

It didn’t occur to her that she could move that she felt a hand grasping her by her hair, pulling her up. She moaned in pain around her mask and then she felt the metal around her thumping several times before she was physically dragged out of her place. She struggled weakly as she felt her feet dragging over the metal of the truck.

She felt her feet hit solid ground and she was released, slumping over and curling around herself, desperately trying to hold the bile in her stomach. Something rolled her over, and she felt fingers scrabbling at the back of her head. The mask suddenly came free with a long string of drool, and she
moaned, rolling onto her knees and lurching over, violently emptying her stomach.

She knelt there, heaving and panting as the ringing in her ears gradually faded, the whiteness in her eyes dimmed to let her see the concrete under her knees, the green lurking around the edge of her vision. The hands came back once more, and she felt her restraints being loosened and removed,

She watched the buckets falling away, the foam that they’d once contained gone, the various bars and cuffs clattered away as her eyes slowly began to focus. There wasn’t any sound beyond the clatter of metal on concrete, and after a few moments, she got her breathing under control and slowly pushed her way back up onto her hands and knees.

She took a few deep breaths, slowly raising her head. She saw the truck first. The front half of it had been caught in a glowing bluish-green bubble, and it was completely frozen, a bird that had been flying past trapped in the area of effect. Metallic legs paced around into her line of sight, and she took them in, the ball joints at the ankles, knees and waist. She watched as the figure crouched, taking in the battered metal that made up his torso, her eyes focusing on the glowing ring in the middle of his chest.

Her eyes lifted, and she saw something face shaped. The ‘expression’ of the metal face seemed severe, almost angry, but the tilt of the head and the hold of the shoulders seemed concerned. She nervously pushed back and up onto her feet. She flinched when he tried to help her up, and he backed off, observing her.

“Miss Mcabee, I assume?” He spoke, his digital voice harsh and jarring. Paige stared at him, nervously for a few moments before nodding.

“Excellent. I am quite glad that you are uninjured. I wanted to be sure. I need to have a few words with your travelling companions, but near as I can tell from researching your trial… you’re largely innocent of the crimes you were accused of and certainly undeserving of this sentence.” He studied her and Paige blinked, her tense form slowly relaxing as she glanced around.

She stared at the forest around them in concern for a few moments before glancing nervously at the robotic man before her. He seemed to shift under her look, offering a bemused chuckle.

“You’re welcome to run if you wish. I have no intention of returning you to the truck.” He glanced at her before shrugging. “In any case, I’ve got a conversation to have. If you’re not here when I return… Good Luck.” He glanced at her, nodding before he reached out, shifting the heavy door. Angry shouts emerged from within, and he climbed into the rear of the truck. There was a momentary pause in silence before more swearing came.

The door creaked as it swung closed in his wake, sealing just in time to cut off a somewhat terrified scream.

She’d honestly considered just running when she’d gotten the chance. The road had stretched away, and freedom was so close at hand. The question about where she’d go occurred to her, what she would do as a fugitive hit her though as she’d started to walk away. She’d ended up nervously returning to the truck, the muffled sounds of whatever was going on within making her uncomfortable.
She was even more uncomfortable when after nearly twenty minutes, the screams tapered off, and the man didn’t emerge. In the end, he was in the back of a truck for about an hour. Eventually, the door slowly, ever so slowly creaked outwards and the robotic man emerged holding a rag in one hand and using the scrap of cloth to wipe his hands clean of blood.

He paused as he set foot on the road once more, turning to look at her curiously. He seemed shocked to see her, and when she nervously looked at his hands, he let out a chuckle.

“I’m surprised that you remained, Miss Mcabee. And no need to concerned, your friends will survive their trip to the birdcage.” He glanced at her quietly, and Paige’s doubt must have shown because he waved a hand.

“My code prevents me from killing, Paige.” He tossed the bloody rag back into the vehicle before slamming the door shut in his wake and then moving to affix several devices to it that all lit up with metallic thunks. He turned toward her and stepped closer.

“C-Code? But you…” She glanced at the truck, and he waved her off almost casually.

“My code is much more tolerant when the subjects of kneecaps come up. Especially considering these people were the sort that attempted to murder children to achieve their goals.” Paige glanced up at the truck, studying it quietly before letting out a quiet sigh. She glanced back at him, and when he kept his gaze steadily on her, she responded to his other question.

“As for why I’m still here? I didn’t exactly have anywhere else to go. I don’t know where we are, and even if I did… I’m a wanted fugitive.” The Tinker seemed to study her for a moment before shrugging as if to indicate that she’d made a point. He glanced at her quietly before letting out a sigh.

“Well I’m done here, and we should set off before the time stop field collapses in about a half hour. We’ve got a bit of a hike back to town.” He moved off, and Paige followed, watching as he collected a rather heavy looking pack and then set off at an almost casual walk. Paige followed behind him, watching as he moved along.

“…”

“So why are you here? Why save me?” Paige spoke softly as she adjusted the case that she was carrying in both her hands. She’d managed to last nearly twenty minutes before the silence had gotten to her and she’d moved up to walk with the other figure. He’d reacted with almost practiced ease, and he’d begun to chat with her casually.

He explained that they were deep in northern Alberta in Canada, that they were very close to the birdcage. He’d spoken with her quietly about herself, and he’d introduced himself — an odd name for a strange mechanical man. Though, Paige had been fascinated when he’d asked her to call him Enna.

“I needed to verify something before I committed myself to a choice. Cost/Reward calculations can be rather bloody, unfortunately... Those two had the information that I needed. And I got to make quite a message when I left them in that condition, though considering your disappearance I doubt that Dragon will be publishing anything about the attack. It’s a shame when a good warning goes to waste.” He shook his head; his voice was almost mournful.

“What’d you mean?” She spoke softly as she stared up at the taller mechanical figure, doing her best
to match his long strides. “Why wouldn’t Dragon publicize my escape?” The robot paused, humming as his eyes flickered, and a hand lifted in an almost casual wave.

“She’s the one that pointed me in your direction. I guess she wanted to make sure that you wouldn’t be hit in the crossfire. And I imagined that she hoped that I might free you. Now that you’re in the birdcage, and no one knows that you escaped, you shouldn’t have to worry about being hunted.” The words were casual, and Paige blinked, staring at him curiously. Before she could really think about that, the other figure asked her a question that distracted her.

“And what of you? What’d you do to end up here?” He spoke calmly, and she glanced up, hunching her shoulders and bowing her head.

“I’m sure that you’ve heard plenty of stories.” She spoke coldly, and the man merely loosed an amused chuckle before responding.

“I have read the stories, but in all of them, a certain account was missing. Yours. Tell me in your own words what happened, I find myself fascinated.” Paige glanced at the metal man for a few moments. She huffed, but she peeped out, seeing the distant sings of light far to the east, and she sighed. If nothing else, she certainly had time to share the tale.

“I told my ex to go fuck himself.” The words were spoken quickly and brusquely, and the armoured man glanced down at her one of his eyes brightening as he tilted his head.

“Interesting. I didn’t realize that that was a felony worth of life in jail.” The man’s voice was low and sarcastic. Paige blushed before responding.

“It’s complicated.” Paige glanced away from the bot as she spoke, watching the white lines on the road slowly creeping past them.

“Something tells me that you’re leaving out parts of the story, Miss Mcabee. Perhaps you should start at the beginning.”

“You don’t have to call me that, you can call me Paige.” She spoke gently and watched as the bot glanced down at her tilting his head the other way. When he didn’t comment, she let out a sigh and finally delved into the terrible tale. “Right. So I was a singer, you heard that? My stage name was Canary.”

“Cause of the Feathers?” She blinked when he pointed, and she shook her head, reaching up and touching them quietly.

“Not entirely, I just.” She hummed quietly and took a few moments to think before continuing.

“I just wanted to use my powers to be a better singer. The feathers came later, but they suited my image, so I left them in.” The robot studied her before glancing back into the distance, continuing to walk along slowly. “I… I didn’t ever expect this, I didn’t expect to end up in the birdcage.”

“I mean, I’m not even a bad guy. My powers, they aren’t even all that dangerous despite the news coverage. They just make me a better singer. I was making a lot of money doing it, you know?” She spoke softly and frowned at the memories. More than the money though, there’d been the joy in doing something, anything that she could love.

“Anyway, stuff was going well. You know how these things go. You start by selling out shows, then you go to bigger sites, and then record deals and everything else. It was all going according to plan; everything was perfect… or so I thought.” Her voice dropped a few octaves as she spoke, staring tiredly toward the slowly approaching town.
“What happened?” The words came from the droid, and she glanced up at them, feeling the burn in her chest at the open curiosity. This is all she’d wanted on that stand. The ability to tell her own side of the fucking story. Instead, she’d been paraded in there like Hannibal fucking Lector and left looking like a monster.

“It was about a month ago now. I’d just finished my biggest show yet. Two hours on stage, a huge hit, the crowd loved it all. I wrapped up and went backstage to rest, get a drink.” She paused frowning as she considered her hands quietly. When she glanced up and saw the fascinated tilt of the bot’s head, she sighed and continued.

“I ran into my ex. He…” She took a nervous swallow. “He must have gotten past security somehow. He was waiting for me in my powder room. We got into this huge fight.” She spoke softly and let out a tired sigh as she pushed her matted hair back over her ears.

“So, He tells me that since he was the one who pushed me to get out on stage in the first place, he deserved credit.” She scowled at her hands, the mocking snort that the metallic man offered soothing her battered ego a little.

“That was my reaction. He wanted a share of my money; it was so ridiculous.” She spoke coldly and frowned down at the road, speaking softly. “He was the first guy that I dated, and he treated me like garbage, you know. He cheated on me. He mocked me when I left him, claimed that I wasn’t good enough to make it, that I would -never- be good enough to make it.” She growled quietly blinking when the robot set a hand on her shoulder, the cold metal soothing her temper.

“Right so, you can figure out what happened. He comes in, acts like a douchenozzle, and we argue.” She spoke softly. “He gets in on the same shit as before, how I’m only what I am because of him, how my entire career is thanks to him and I should be happy to pay him what he was due.” She scowled quietly before straightening her back.

“Then I did what anyone else would do, you know?” She stared up at the bot, who nodded, and she continued. “I told him to go fuck himself. He left, and I didn’t give it a second thought… until the police showed up at my door.” The robot continued along watching her curiously, waiting for the rest of the story.

“He did it, I guess? I didn’t even realize it. I- I guess I was still excited from my performance, and my power’s effects were still empowering my voice, or he was in the audience and was pretty heavily affected. So when I told him to go fuck himself, he, um, he did. Or he tried, and when he found it wasn’t physically possible, he hurt himself until…” Paige let out a sigh and frowned, hanging her head. The robot let out a soft chuckle as they passed under a streetlight.

“You needn’t go into any further detail; I suppose that I could imagine the rest.” The robot chuckled softly, and Paige felt her cheeks darkening. Walking in the brisk spring air like this, the friendly robot at her side, Paige could finally see the dark sort of humour, and she joined him in chuckling along. The merriment lasted well until they’d reached the edge of town.

Paige set the heavy case she’d been dragging along gently in the back of the truck, backing up when the robot moved to push up the tailgate, sealing it quietly. She glanced around nervously at the empty Motel parking lot and let out a sigh. She stood there nervously wondering where she should go from here. She might not have a nationwide manhunt on her tail, but she still had nowhere to go. All of
her assets were frozen, and her career was over. Part of her wondered if she should have just climbed back into the truck when he was done.

“Miss-” The voice caused her start, and she glanced over, taking in the towering metallic figure. “Paige.” He offered, and she flashed him a curious look. The robot shifted back on his heels, and he tapped his leg.

“It occurs to me that I have sort of left you here in the wind after saving you. I do feel a bit bad. I’m sure that something would come along before long, letting you get back on your feet, but if you’d rather not wander and pray for the kindness of the universe, I might have an option.” The robot crossed his arms and Paige considered him quietly.

“I find myself in need of an assistant. I’m relocating my business to Brockton Bay, and I could use someone that I could trust to help me with the day to day affairs of running it.” He studied her, and she paused, frowning before speaking.

“I’m not… I’ve never…” She paused frowning. Enna casually studied her before shrugging.

“I’ll be happy to help, but it’s not hard. Managing my schedule and answering calls mostly. My old assistant would probably be happy to help, as well. I can’t promise it’ll be any safer then roughing it here, but I can promise that the perks would be better.” He glanced at her quietly, and Paige considered him for a few moments.

Honestly, she had nothing to lose at this point, and she moved around the truck. When the robot glanced at her, she rolled her eyes before opening the door of the truck and climbing in. She waited for Enna to join her within before speaking.

“I guess it’s better than trying to find a job as a waitress in the middle of nowheresville, Canada.” She leaned back in her chair, glancing over at Enna as he started the truck and pulled it out of the parking lot. She considered him quietly.

“How’re we going to get back across the border?” The question was soft, and the robot chuckled.

“I’ll handle that, though we may need to stop and attend to your appearance some. A dye job, perhaps? And some tending of those feathers since they’re so distinctive.” Paige paused and blinked, offering a nervous look at the man before sighing. She leaned against the doorway, settling and speaking softly as she watched the road drifting past them.

“So what do you do, Enna?” Her voice was curious, and the soft chuckle from Enna saw her glancing over.

“I’m a troubleshooter. Typically I handle the planning stages of certain issues, and I generally offer my services to whoever offers. Occasionally I get more hands on.” Seeing her blank look, Enna let out an amused chuckle before speaking.

“I was an assassin once, but I’m mostly retired from that work. These days I merely handle my contacts and trade information and favours for people. I haven’t killed anyone myself in nearly eight years, so you shouldn’t need to get your hands dirty, either.” Paige quietly considered the offer as they drove. If he could get her back into the states, perhaps even with a new identity, she needed to take him up on it.

Overall it didn’t seem like that bad of a job anyway.
[This was supposed to have more HK Backstory, but it became a Paige chapter, which is kinda cool with me. HK’s stuff’ll come out later but we see some things. And this chapter hints at what he’s been up to, and what he can do now.

HK AND PAIGE ARE ON A ROADTRIP. Honestly, I only really planned to have HK free her and then let her escape, but I kind of enjoy the idea of these two working together like a gruff retired private detective and his attractive receptionist. It amused me.

Next interlude will be from Sabah’s perspective, and it’ll be neat. She’s kind of upset that all of her friends keep getting hurt and she has to continually tend to them in the hospital. Next interlude should be out soonish. I might do it tomorrow, or I might do more rewrites, depends on my mood I suppose.]
Interlude 18

Chapter Summary

[[Fun Fact: This interlude takes place on the same day that Amy drew the picture of Sabah and Lily chatting on Lily’s bed. Also, now that the worst of the updates are done, that means that I can probably put out an interlude every night, and we should be off on 7.x soon. ]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 2nd, 2011
Parian’s shop, Brockton Bay

Sabah quietly exited the bus, flashing the driver a friendly smile before stalking silently toward her shop. The shop itself hadn’t been damaged in Leviathan’s rampage, but her apartment had been, which meant that she’d been living at the shop since. Moving in had been an experience, watching Victoria carry everything over by herself and helping her get settled while continually worrying about Taylor, but at least the apartment had begun to feel like home. And honestly, it wasn’t all bad having moved. It gave her more time to deal with her various commissions and class assignments, and it was actually closer to school. Only paying one rent now also helped her budget.

Drawn from her thoughts as the familiar glass in front of her shop came into view, Sabah quietly reached into her purse as she approached the front door of her shop, waking up to it and drawing out a ring of keys. Taking a second to stay her hand, Sabah carefully unlocked the door and stepped in. The door slowly swung closed in her wake, and Sabah paused dropping her bags by the door before turning and locking it quietly.

Several deep breaths later, and she slowly uncoiled her shoulders, standing quietly and letting out a quiet huff. A quick motion to bend down and grab her things from the floor, dragging them across the storefront and through the workspace beyond. Another quick twist of her keys unlocked the door that cordoned off her living space, and a casual motion locked it in her wake as the seamstress slowly climbed up the stairs. Opening the door to her apartment, Sabah glanced around, letting out a tired smile at seeing all of her furniture arranged just the way that she liked it.

She dropped her bags by the door and moved across the room, heading for the kitchen and getting the kettle boiling. A cup was produced and tea was prepared within and then she took a seat at the table and let out a weary sigh.

Feeling her phone buzz, Sabah carefully drew it from her pocket and flipped it over, curiously checking the text. It was from Amy, a simple message about how she seemed sad, and hoped this
would help along with an attachment. Sabah quickly opened the attachment, and she studied the image carefully.

It was a photo of one of Amy's sketches; the large pad opened to an image of her and Lily talking that'd been done with precise pencil. Studying the image for a few moments saw her smiling gently despite the quality of Lily's form in the picture.

Part of her wanted to be angry at Taylor who lay completely insensate in the hospital silent and slumbering and unaware that her friends had nearly died as she was so close. Part of her wanted to hate the fucking neo-nazis who thought that they could just do this to innocent girls who’d done nothing but befriend the broken girl that had offered them her heart. But mostly, Sabah was furious with herself.

This was the second time that all of her friends had nearly died and she’d been utterly unable to do anything. She hadn’t even known, and she hated seeing them suffering in the hospital like this. The gangs were tearing the streets apart, and none of them were around to help stop it, and it was almost entirely her fault.

She was the one that Crusader had first gone after, and that had drawn Taylor into the cape life. She was the one that the rest had come to make an example of and that had led to Taylor embarrassing a third of the empire, and it had been the crux of Stormtiger and Cricket’s ire with Taylor. Every time that Taylor stepped between her and a fight, things got worse for the girl, and Sabah was sick of it.

She was treated like a joke by most of the bay, and she was sick of it. Her friends regularly fell around her, and she hated that she wasn’t able to help them. Sabah stared at her tea quietly before slowly pushing her chair back. She stood silently and stalked across the apartment, staring in at the room that contained her cape gear.

She flicked the lights on and stared around at the ‘dolls’ that were standing in the room. Abbot had been painstakingly repaired after his fight with Leviathan, a few upgrades have made it into his form since she had been putting it back together. Costello stood to his left, wholly upgraded to match his brother, the plushie-like appearance gone and replaced with the rubber plastic skin of his ‘partner’ though subtle differences remained between the two.

Abbot’s features were more stern, and his colour darker, whereas Costello had a lighter green tone about him and his features had been adapted with an almost fox-like mischievousness that made him almost more terrifying then Abbot. Looming over the pair was the curled up shape of Alice in the back corner. A half-finished feline shaped doll sat to one side that Sabah had yet to finish, though the striped fur in Taylor’s image would be a pain in the ass to locate.

Sabah’s eyes casually drifted over to the two dress forms that stood in the middle of the room. She carefully walked over and stared at the two outfits on display. The one of the left was her typical Parian outfit with its flowing dress and blonde curls, the porcelain mask and its entire cutesy schtick. She stared at it quietly before letting her gaze flick over to the other outfit.

The robe itself was different, long and almost oriental in design. The fabric was inky black with silver patterns peeking out of the dark material; a red silk robe peeked out — complicated red sashes wrapped around the middle with an ornate leather pouch hanging from the front. The sleeves were long and voluminous with jet black leather gloves hanging out of them. The veil itself was the most challenging part. Thick enough to conceal most of her features beyond her lower jaw but still thin enough to allow her to see through it.
Sabah stared quietly at the finished product of the design that Taylor had given her all those weeks ago and she stepped closer, reaching out and gently tracing the fabric. The contrasts between the outfits were stark, and Sabah stared at the dark outfit. This was the outfit of a hero or a villain, someone that got things done, someone to be feared. This wasn’t a girl playing at an innocent doll with her living toys.

And part of that still scared her, the idea of being taken seriously like that. This had initially been a gimmick. A way to make money, a way to get her brand out there, and generate interest. She’d always intended to go public, to not get dragged into the cape life. But, she’d also never expected to make friends. She’d never expected to have people that she cared about that would continuously put themselves in danger. They were still children, and they did this, and she was just… She was just afraid.

Sabah stared at the outfit quietly for a few more minutes before letting out a tired little sigh and slowly backing off. She turned and exited the workshop, closing the door in her wake and shutting off the light. She slowly stalked over to her cooling tea and collected it, taking a sip. She fought off the self-recrimination and turned her focus to her workstation in what had become her living room. She had a few dresses to finish.

It was hard to miss the sounds of glass shattering, even over the rather loud whirring of her sewing machine and Sabah released her foot from the pedal under the device, releasing the fabric that she’d been sewing together. One had reached over and tapped her phone, silencing the music that had been issuing from it, and she listened carefully, for a few moments there’d be silence, and she nearly returned to her work when there were another crash and the distant sound of gunfire.

Sabah frowned quietly and got to her feet, heading toward her bedroom. She walked through the door and pulled back the curtains, peering out the glass. The sounds had faded once more, and she slowly opened up her window and peeked out, glancing toward the left. Finding nothing, she glanced to the right and frowned at the sight of a half dozen gangsters with shaved heads and guns lying in wait.

Like bowling pins, nearly ten different armoured figures were tossed into view from around the corner of the next street over, and Sabah watched in awe as a white and gray blur tinged with electric blue ripped around the corner, weaving around the suddenly firing goons. She watched as the figure struck them all before skidding to a halt. The faint patches of glowing blue on her form sputtered and flickered, and she leaped to the side dodging a hail of bullets. Sabah peered nervously down the street before glancing back into the apartment.

She let out a quiet whine before ducking back across the room and into the flat. She ran across the floor, dipping into the workshop and touching each of her dolls for a few moments, holding her hand over them as her power unspooled and flowed freely into the dolls. She saw Abbot, Costello, and Alice coming to life before her eyes, the figures obeying her commands and squeezing out of the room heading toward the door to the ground floor.
As she listened to the sound of her minions descending, she quickly stripped out of her casual clothes and began to pull on the costume. The robe itself was surprisingly heavy. Sabah having weaved several different linings into the much more substantial ensemble. It didn’t flow like silk, but it was severe enough that its slight heaviness wouldn’t be amiss.

Once she had the under-robe on she quickly tied the wraps around her lower arms, slid on the over-smock and then attached her gloves, taking a moment to ensure the left glove was adequately connected to the small wire that came out of her outfit. Once her gloves were secure, she wrapped the crimson sash around her middle and affixed the leather pouch to it. She took a few moments to stand before the tall mirror in the room, taking in the severe blacks and reds on her.

She looked dangerous like this. She considered her image for a moment before she collected the veil and slid it on, tucking her hair back and out of the way, the dark locks vanishing under the crimson silk hangings of the veil. She settled the front part over her face and turned back to her reflection, staring at her dark skin and dark lips visible peeking out the bottom of the mask. She considered herself making her expression severe as she crossed her arms.

Part of her felt ridiculous, like someone playing a role, but she was in costume, and she didn’t have time to keep fooling around. She made sure that everything was secure before hurrying from the room. She was through her apartment and down the stairs within a few moments, and she followed in the wake of her creations as they exited the rear of the shop. Once she was in the alley to the back of the shop, she quickly approached Alice, slipping up and sitting side saddle on the Acklay before willing her creations on.

The terentateks leapt upwards, snagging onto the side of a fire escape and scaling the side of the next building, and Alice charged along toward the building after that and ascended up the back with dextrous talons, moving from window-sill to window sill as Sabah clung to her back. The doll came to rest on the roof of the duplex, and she pushed it over to the front edge of the building, glancing down at the ongoing fight.

While she’d been changing, the armoured figures had multiplied, there were now nearly three dozen of them storming down the street, being covered by gunfire from half a dozen Empire thugs in the rear. Sabah glanced up to see Abbot and Costello looming at the edge of the roof above her, and she shifted in place.

She watched as the blur launched from behind the newspaper box she’d been taking cover behind, her glowing form, crashing through the charging armoured figures, sending them flying like bowling pins as she dodged the bullets from the Empire thugs. The woman whipped past a bench, ripping it up and flinging at one group of thugs before zipping away from the return fire.

Sabah watched the bench crash through the first group, sending them flying and she watched the speedster whipping out of the way and into an Alley on the opposite of the street, ducking out of view and becoming stable, that glow fading again. Sabah wondered how often she needed to recharge her powers like that. She watched as the armoured figures advanced, backed by the goons with guns and she gritted her teeth.

A mental command saw Abbot charging across the roof and leaping clear over her head, landing softly on the next apartment over, crouching low and creeping up to the edge. She waited almost eight seconds until the Crusader clones had reached the street before her before sending the command. Costello dropped first, his malicious grin and powerful body suddenly appearing in the midst of the Crusader clones as he landed.
Sabah touched a button built into the back of her glove and watched as Costello reared back and released a thunderous roar before charging through the clones like they weren’t there, his body passing through them. Sabah swore as he ultimately failed to do any damage, and she directed him to try and find the controller. He went to work swinging his fists, spikes and tusks at anything that moved near him, trying to locate the ‘real’ Crusader.

Abbot made use of the distraction smoothly dropping among the gunners and loosing a much more terrifying roar before casually backhanding the first one that aimed a weapon at him. He went to town, viciously throwing the gangster into each other and ripping the fire-arms free and tossing them away. It took nearly four seconds before the gangsters were all down and Sabah would will Alice forward, down and off the building, the creature expertly descending the windows and conveying her to street level.

Sabah let her gaze drift over the street watching until Crusader made a mistake. She watched as one of the Crusaders turned and fled, half a dozen moving to follow right after. She sent a command, and Abbot and Costello were on all fours, a touch to her bracer saw them releasing keening howls as they chased down the clones, running through them all before the one at the lead was struck from behind by a tusk and sent sprawling.

Sabah gently lowered from the Acklay, getting her leather boots on the floor and standing a touch taller as she stared down the street at the terrified looking crusader as he curled up on the ground, the form of Abbot standing powerfully over him, the form of Costello continuing to plod around him on all fours.

A mental command saw Costello hefting the criminal up by the front of his chest plate and carrying him slowly toward her, his footsteps slow and precise. She glanced from her minions toward the nearby Alley and blinked at the sight of the figure of Battery lighting up and lunging toward her. She squeaked and flinched, but she was surprised when instead of pain, she felt a blast of wind and heard the sound of a metallic thump to her rear.

She opened her eyes and saw nothing before her, and she turned, staring at the back of Battery’s uniform as the glowing woman stood between her and the slumped form of a Crusader clone, the illusion’s weapon conspicuously absent. Sabah stared at the clone, taking a moment to realize that she’d nearly been brained before she’d been saved by the other cape. She tapped a button on her glove and a long, low, threatening growl emerged from Costello’s jaws. Sabah though continued to stare nervously at the woman’s back as her voice teasingly issued forth.

“I’d say that I owe you one, but, considering this, I suppose we’re even, hrn?” Battery glanced back, and Sabah got the impression that the woman was meeting her eyes as she smirked. Sabah felt her own lips curling into an amused smile as her cheeks darkened. She took a few moments to get herself under control before nodding. She glanced over at the fading image of the clone and turned her gaze back toward Crusader. Part of her was slightly amused at the sight of him hanging terrified from Costello’s large claws, staring nervously at the wicked teeth and the pitiless black eyes staring back at him. On the street around them, the rest of the Crusader clones had faded away.
“...-eally? Parian? Well, I gotta applaud the different look, Parian. Much more dangerous.” The comment was teasing, and Sabah found herself blushing again as she carefully rolled over the quietly grumbling gangster, dragging his hands behind his back and tying them. She wasn’t sure how scary she was really since Sabah was almost certain that the massive head of the Acklay over her shoulder was what was really keeping the gangsters that she was securing so pliable. Her four goons handled, she pulled herself back to her feet and dusted off her gloves, watching as Battery set to work ziptying Crusader’s arms and legs carefully together where he still hung from Costello’s stone-like form.

The sound of wheels on concrete drew her attention to the south, and she watched a trio of black vans driving up the speed almost recklessly fast though they slowed as the completed battle came into view, eventually rolling to a stop a dozen feet from where Costello stood between her and them. Sabah stared at the bright lights nervously until one of the doors opened and a figure in red armour jumped out and called out playfully.

“Puppy! I brought the cavalry, and you finished up without us~” He buffed his gloves on his chest armour before smirking over at them. “Here I had hoped to live out my life-long dream of rescuing a damsel in distress.” Sabah found herself chuckling at his antics, though her voice died in her throat when Battery’s arms lazily wrapped around her left arm and she leaned casually against her side.

“Assault, you were too slow. This damsel was rescued by a knight in such dashing black armour.” Sabah blinked and glanced down at Battery’s wickedly grinning face as the woman stared at the red-haired man. Sabah nervously glanced over and relaxed a bit seeing the grin on his face as he ran a hand through his hair.

“Ah, well, there’s always next time, right?” He patted a nearby faceless trooper on the shoulder. The woman in the mask seemed to stare at him in confusion for a moment before shaking her head and heading off to start collecting gangsters. Sabah continued to blush as rather than releasing her, the woman to her left actually used her arm to drag her over toward Assault.

She saw the grin on his face broadening just a touch at her blush, and he set one of his hands on his hips as he studied them both as they came close. The man seemed to watch them for a few moments before speaking almost casually.

“Hrm. Need I worry about something, dear?” The young hero spoke softly to Battery who chuckled and didn’t respond to his question, changing the subject casually.

“Assault. You’ll never guess who came and saved my bacon.” She pointed at her and Sabah glanced at the man who looked her up and down for a moment before smirking and holding out a hand.

“Parian, right?” He grinned a bit at Battery’s irritated huff as Sabah lifted her free arm and shook his hand smoothly. The man seemed to study her for a few moments before shrugging and gesturing past her.

“I saw your creations at the Leviathan fight. I’m surprised that Battery missed it actually. Not counting Ares, you were the only one that managed to do any actual damage to Leviathan on your own.” He spoke slowly, his voice impressed. Sabah nervously lowered her arm, shrugging up her shoulders self-consciously.

“Uhm, it’s not that… I had help. Flechette introduced herself before the battle, did her uh… thing? On Costello’s claws.” She pointed at the terentatek that was holding Crusader’s form out so that the PRT troopers could coat him in containment foam, presumably so that he couldn’t spawn a hundred clones the moment that he was in the van and away from the threat.
“So, what did take you so long? I didn’t think I’d have to face Crusader and a dozen Empire thugs by myself.” She smirked over at Assault who rolled his eyes behind his vizor and then gestured to the south.

“Well, seeing as we were chasing Bakuda all over downtown, and mopping up the ABB Forces, I figured you could handle one duplicator by yourself for twenty minutes.” His playful tone took any bite out of his words and Battery chuckling soothed Sabah’s worries.

“We got most of the gangsters, and their tinker tech guns, but Bakuda used some teleporter gadget to get away, which means that...” He huffed faintly before reaching into one of his pouches, drawing forth a pair of bills and offering them over. “You captured a parahuman, and I didn’t, so you’ve won our little wager.” He smirked at Battery as she playfully accepted the cash and then stuffed it into a hidden pocket in her suit.

The woman had been glancing over at her to say something when the sound of a door slamming to her left startled her. Sabah jerked nervously into Battery’s form, turning her head to stare at the confused looking trooper near the door to the van they were standing by. Unfortunately for Sabah, her motion caused Battery to lurch away and hiss in pain. She blinked as her arm was released and turned to stare at the cape quietly. She wasn’t surprised when Assault was instantly at her side, quickly checking her over despite her protests.

“Assault, Assault.” She lowered her voice, saying something and the man paused as she leaned back. The hero flashed her a smile at her apologetic look and spoke quickly.

“It’s fine. Just some bruises. Nothing a long shower and an ice pack after patrol won’t fix.” She did her best to look confident, and Sabah nervously shifted back, quietly wrapping her hands around each other and studying Battery carefully.

“Let’s just get this over with. We’ve got a bit more to do, and then I can get some ice on my back.” She smiled impishly before pausing and glancing over at Sabah curiously. Sabah blinked at the dangerous grin on the woman’s face and shifted back nervously.

“Parian, we are a bit short staffed, and you’ve got some extra hands. Would you like to tag along? See what it’s like in the big leagues? I doubt there’ll be any more drama.” Sabah considered the woman nervously for a moment before something in her flickered up and she flashed her own playful grin back which caused the smiles on the other two to broaden.

“Sure... But in exchange, you gotta tell me how you got your suit to glow like that.” She studied them both as they glanced at each other before chuckling and then waved her over. She joined them on the sidewalk, mentally commanding Abbot and Costello to match their positions on the opposite side of the road, and Alice to follow in their wake.

Chapter End Notes

[[Sabah hasn’t gotten much love lately, and I kind of enjoy the idea of her having some friends her own age, even if they’re shameless flirts. Before anyone freaks out, nothing’s going to happen there; I think it’s just the sort of dynamic that Ethan and Battery would have when they were relaxed.]}
Sabah’s got a new outfit tooled after Marr, and she’s going to be a bit more active with stuff going forward, mainly cause she’s tired of being left out of stuff, this will have consequences in the PRT meeting portion of Sarah’s interlude coming up, but it should be neat. Lots of stuff has consequences there.

Other than that nothing too wild going on here beyond Sabah character development and stuff. Feel free to lemme know what you think, and we’ll pick things up tomorrow or Friday with some Sarah stuff. As a bit of a preview, the Sarah Interlude’s going to be her attending three meetings. One with Vicky in Taylor’s kitchen, one with the PRT at HQ, and one with Carol at her house and a bottle of wine. So, you nerds can look forward to that.

Also, as another sneak peek. I just figured out how Marr’s going to be teaching Taylor about the true weight of Sacrifice, and it’s kind of… Uniquely him. And it’ll be… interesting. Like, I’m literally planning on spamming out 19 tomorrow just so I can get started on this since it’s super clear and detailed in my head.

P.S.: Sabah's glove has a controller connected to an antenna in her outfit that she uses to trigger speakers built into Abbot and Costello. Roaring makes them more scurry.

P.P.S.: If it's not super obvious, Sabah's new costume is Visas' outfit from SWTOR, Taylor drew it out for her. Looks like this. Although, I was imagining the veil a bit longer, covering most of the nose, leaving her lower jaw visible. Like most half-mask/visors you see in typical Worm costumes.}
The wind blew Sarah’s blonde hair around her face as she landed neatly on the stone path outside of Taylor’s house. She glanced up toward the murky sky, watching as Crystal descended toward her. Sarah took a few moments to study Crystal, taking in the subtle outfit that she wore, simple pants and a comfortable shirt. Black boots and a loose jacket. Part of Sarah wished that she could have been dressed as casually, nervously tugging at her New Wave outfit.

Sarah followed in Crystal’s wake as the girl quickly moved up the steps and opened the door without knocking. She blinked and followed the other blonde in, coming through the door in time to see a somewhat shell-shocked looking Taylor being dragged into Crystal’s arms. Taylor stood there confused and stiff until Crystal whispered something to her and then the girl’s expression softened and she returned the hug.

Sarah took a few moments by the door watching the interactions. She could tell the moment that Taylor became aware of her presence by the minute stiffening of her form, and she gently flashed the younger girl a careful smile that saw her relaxing. The girl studied her carefully for a few moments before letting out a soft sigh.

“Victoria’s in the kitchen.” The girl spoke faintly, glancing toward the kitchen before looking back and at her, lowering her voice and whispering in Sarah's direction.

“Uh. Good luck? She’s in a bit of a mood.” she spoke gently and then blinked when Sarah flashed her a smirk. The girl seemed to tense as she approached, and Sarah felt a flicker of disappointment that her trust had been shaken like this. She gently set a hand on the girl’s shoulder, squeezing softly.

“Regardless of what happened, Taylor, I’m glad that you’re on the team. Everything is going to be fine.” She spoke the words with quiet conviction, her smile spreading a touch as the girl’s ears turned red. Sarah studied Taylor for a few moments before letting out a soft sigh.

“I’m not leaving.” The words were uttered coldly, and Sarah paused inside the doorframe. She glanced over to where Victoria stood by the counter, facing the coffee maker. Sarah took a few moments to carefully watch the tense hold of the girl’s body, studying the minute shaking of her shoulders. Letting out a gentle sigh, Sarah watched as Victoria rounded on her, apparently assuming
that she was about to argue. Sarah watched as Victoria straightened her back and squared her shoulders before speaking firmly.

“I’m not. I won’t go, and unless you can convince Alexandria to come down here and rem-” Sarah held up a hand quietly and stepped closer, speaking carefully.

“Victoria, I’m not here to tell you to go home.” She watched the suspicious look on the young woman’s face hold for a few moments before Victoria seemed to deflate before her eyes. Realizing that Victoria had assumed that she might have to fight her entire family on this point, Sarah shook her head before she smoothly slid around the table, opening her arms toward her niece. She wasn’t surprised when Victoria descended on her a whirl of blonde hair.

“Hey, hey… It’s okay,” Sarah’s voice was soft and soothing as she felt Victoria’s arms locking around her middle. She gently wrapped her arms around her niece and gripped her quietly, feeling the weak shaking in the other girl's form. Victoria’s nervous babbling wasn't terribly clear, but Sarah merely stood there and let her sputter out the mash of words as she soothingly traced her spine, feeling the warm tears of the younger girl on her shoulder.

Sarah let her niece cry herself out before guiding her over to a chair, gently setting Victoria down on it as she wiped at her face. Studying her niece's splotchy features for a moment, Sarah decided to give her a moment to collect herself. Turning and approaching the counter, Sarah grabbed the cup that Victoria had been preparing and pouring the dark coffee into it. She took a moment to stir in the cream and sugar that Victoria had already poured into the cup.

Rather than immediately offering the cup over, Sarah opened a cupboard, snagging another mug and pouring more of the coffee into the dark cup she’d found, adding a splash of milk from the carton before returning it to the well-stocked fridge. Turning around with the cups in hand, she studied Victoria as she wiped at her face with her sweater sleeves, her breathing back under control at least.

“You look like you could use this,” Sarah spoke quietly as she set the cups on the table, pushing one toward her niece and then taking a seat in the next chair over. She watched Victoria’s long pale fingers wrapping around the mug and lifting it up to her mouth, watching as the girl took a drink of the no doubt too warm coffee. She studied her quietly for a few moments before speaking.

“You needn’t have been so worried you know, Vicky. Even if your father, myself, and Neil had actually wanted to get Taylor away from you lot, I doubt that Crystal or Eric would have allowed it. Taylor’s sort of wormed her way into our hearts at this point.” Sarah saw Victoria’s nervous glance and tilted her head quietly before letting out a sigh.

“Vicky,” She spoke softly, waiting till the girl looked up and speaking softly. “Your mother regrets what she did; I don’t think she really blames Taylor for what happened, she was just afraid. None of us really blame Taylor for what happened.” Sarah spoke quietly, watching as Victoria’s shoulders hunched up. She was about to ask the girl what was on her mind when Victoria cut in calmly.

“Taylor does,” Sarah stared at Victoria quietly, and the girl continued carefully. “Taylor believes that it’s her fault. She came back here, hating herself because of what Mom said to her.” Victoria’s voice was laced with a faint bitterness that startled Sarah. She tilted her head, and her confusion must have been plainly evident because Victoria elaborated on her comment.

“After everything that happened that night. She came back home. She tried to force me to leave because I was in danger by being around her.” She spoke quietly and stared at her hands that were wrapped around her mug, her gaze oddly intense as she studied the cup.

“She said she was cursed. That every person that she cared about died or abandoned her.” Victoria’s
fingers gripped the mug quietly, her knuckles whitening. Sarah watched curiously as the porcelain held up under the angry grip as the girl hunched up her shoulders. “She told me that she couldn’t stand to lose me either and then she tried to force me to leave to protect me.” Victoria’s voice was low and sad, and Sarah watched her carefully before reaching out and touching the girl’s arm.

“I’m guessing you didn’t go.” The words more then the touch caused Victoria to snap out of it, softening her grip on the mug as she self-consciously glanced away. Sarah studied Victoria’s profile as the girl stared at the fridge rather than her, considering the white appliance for a few moments before speaking quietly.

“I couldn’t stand to lose her, either.” The whisper was so faint that Sarah almost missed it and she let out an amused little chuckle that saw Victoria glancing at her nervously. She considered the vulnerable look on the girl’s face, and she shook her head before speaking softly.

“Can I be the first to offer my congratulations?” She watched as the tension that hung around Victoria like a cloak seemed to melt away before her eyes and the girl visibly sagged with relief. She watched the girl for a few moments before speaking.

“She certainly cuts a dashing figure. I can see the appeal.” Sarah’s voice shifted to a more light, almost teasing tone. She watched as Victoria seemed to pause, unsure how to react for a moment before her cheeks gradually reddened. She watched as her niece gathered her thoughts before responding.

“It’s not-” Sarah watched Vicky pause, losing her words as her cheeks darkened. “That’s not why. It’s just.” Vicky frowned down at her hands and considered them a moment before looking back at Sarah.

“It was like… when she joined the team.” The words were soft, and Victoria rested her elbows on the table. “I was so hurt, and confused, and I stood at the base of the hill, and I seriously considered just running. Just flying off and never coming back to face all of you. You all knew, you all knew the horrible things that I’d done, and I couldn’t stand to face you all, and she just…” Sarah listened to Vicky when she paused and swallowed thickly before continuing.

“She just, she steps up next to me and gives me this look.” Victoria paused and sighed, gesturing ineffectively with her hands. “She gives me this ‘look,’ and it screams that she believes in me. That she has faith in me and offers me her hand.” Victoria snorted quietly and rubbed at her face resting her elbows on the table.

“And when she looks at me like that? Like she truly, honestly trusts that I am a better person. Not that I could be, that I am a better person. And when she does? I want to be one.” Victoria’s voice was soft, and she shrugged up her shoulders before quietly picking at one of the cracks in her cup, her voice taking on a reflective tone as she considered the cooling drink in it.

“I was always so terrified that someone would see past the aura, see that behind it I was just a fraud. That I wouldn’t measure up because I wasn’t special, or powerful, or a real ‘hero.’ I knew that if someone could see that behind the mask that I wore, they’d be able to tell that beneath it all, I was just an ordinary girl.” Victoria’s voice lowered once more, and Sarah leaned forward, trying to speak, but Victoria continued before she could.

“And then Taylor did. She saw past every barrier that I had.” Victoria clenched her fists quietly. “I attacked her, you know. A second time. She never told anyone.” Victoria looked up at her, and Sarah felt a flicker of shock, and it must have shown because Victoria chuckled.

“You were all covering up Amy’s secret, and I was grounded, and no one would fucking talk to me
and I just. I needed answers. I looked her up on PHO; I saw the reports about her working out and I just. I hunted her down. I skipped school, and I attacked her, and she put me down like it was nothing.” Victoria’s voice faded a touch as she got lost in the memory, and Sarah leaned forward once more, listening with rapt attention.

“And she used her powers to pin me to the dirt in this park, and I was so angry and scared, and confused, and I’m flailing into the dirt and freaking out and she just, she looks at me. Like seriously looks at me and I see that expression on her face, and I wait for the judgement, the condescension and instead... She kneeled down next to me and asked me what was wrong.” Victoria let out a quiet laugh.

“She sat there and listened to me nearly crying about Amy ignoring me and then Taylor just—” Victoria let out a short half laugh. “She accepts it and doesn’t act like I’m being ridiculous. She explains that Amy’s going through a lot, and then she tries to reassure me. She even tricked me into sparring with her to get my mind off of it. And then everything with Lung happened, and she immediately trusts me to watch her back.” Victoria shook her head quietly and heaved out a breath.

Sarah sat there quietly, digesting the words for a few moments. She studied Victoria, watching as the girl stared back at her silently. When Victoria leaned forward and spoke, almost as an afterthought, Sarah found herself smiling.

“And… She does cut quite a dashing figure.” Victoria did her best to look refined as she tossed Sarah’s words back at her with a playful grin, and the pair were soon lost to giggles.

---

“-ified by Dragon that the Prisoner Transport has arrived and that the prisoners are now in the Birdcage.” Sarah glanced up and realized that she’d been thinking so deeply over her meeting with Victoria to the point that she’d missed a full third of the meeting with the PRT. After their discussion on Taylor, Sarah had ended up going through the actual reason for her visit, mainly that she needed an official report on the apprehension of Stormtiger.

“Speaking of which, Lady Photon.” Sarah glanced up at the words, her eyes drifting over all the eyes on her before she turned to meet Piggot's beady-eyed gaze. Sarah considered the squat woman and her bob cut for a few moments. She was rather sorely tempted to make the woman actually demand the report from her, but as she started to imagine the vein starting to pulse on her forehead, Sarah took pity on the ex-soldier and leaned forward moving to speak.

“Yes, I had a chance to speak with Glory Girl about her impressions about what happened.” Sarah carefully leaned back in her chair, glancing at the others for a few moments, studying their reactions before continuing.

“From what she described, I suppose that we can assume that Stormtiger’s testimony was largely accurate.” The words were almost casual, and she hoped that the meeting would move on. Sadly it was not to be as Armsmaster coughed and cut across the discussion, his voice cold.

“And did she have any comments about Stormtiger’s insistence that if your niece hadn’t shown up, that Vigil would have burned out his eyes?” His voice was deceptively calm, and Sarah found herself staring coldly back at the man. She studied him for a few moments before glancing at the rest of the table quietly, speaking almost casually.
“Indeed she did. She asked if I would have done anything differently if it’d been the people that I loved that he’d gotten his hands on. And in truth, I couldn’t really refute that.” Sarah’s tone was a matter of fact, and she watched the others glancing around. She saw Assault looking at Battery and frowning, the golden claw-like gloves of Triumph clenching as his hands turned into fists. She peered around the table. Armsmaster looked as if he might say something else, but the Director cut him off.

“Fascinating, but seeing as she didn’t actually injure anyone beyond minor bruising and a few cracked bones, I suppose that we can leave her ongoing discipline in your capable hands Lady Photon. Moving on,” The woman casually glanced down at her file-folder, lifting it up and speaking.

“Any news on when Panacea will be out of the hospital? Flechette is to be released tomorrow.” The words were precise and to the point, and Sarah leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table.

“Vigil has offered to head over in the morning and heal her.” She saw the raised eyebrow of Piggot and Keltar leaning forward, so she smoothly continued before either could chime in.

“Considering Panacea’s tactical situation and the extensive damage she suffered, I’ve spoken with Carol, and she’s consented to letting Vigil heal her,” Sarah spoke quietly, and in truth, she hadn’t in fact done that yet but, speaking with Carol was undoubtedly on the plan for later tonight. She watched as Piggot studied her curiously for a few moments before shrugging and glancing down.

“On the subject of the Empire, I’m told that Battery managed to capture another of their cape roster. With some fascinating assistance.” She glanced over at Battery who snorted softly, shooting a look at Assault when it looked like he might open his mouth. When the cape in red shut his mouth, she turned back to the rest and spoke professionally.

“Indeed. Assault and I encountered an ongoing battle near downtown between Bakuda of the ABB and Crusader of the Empire. The capes were both accompanied by gang members, though Bakuda’s troops had a clear superiority in weapons and numbers. Rather than leaving them to destroy the streets, we intervened. Assault went after Bakuda, and I went after Crusader.” The woman paused and took a sip of water before continuing.

“This had the benefit of breaking up the worst of the fighting, and I attempted to pin down and capture Crusader. We’d progressed a decent way, and his constant generation of clones left me rather bogged down. I had intended to keep wearing him down until the PRT forces and Assault could finish up what they were doing and circle back, but that proved unnecessary as Parian intervened.” Her words were careful and precise, and Sarah watched as the woman tensed, waiting for something.

“What my puppy here is trying to say,” The woman sighed, and Sarah glanced at Assault as he delivered and leaned over, speaking conspiratorially. “Is that Parian thought that she was in danger and descended from the rooftops atop a giant praying mantis type creature, while two of those things that she used on Leviathan proceeded to beat up half of Crusader’s goons.” The man paused and smirked faintly, glancing at Battery and seeing her squaring her shoulders.

“And then when Crusader tried to cut and run, the two monsters, who she calls ‘Abbot and Costello’ by the way,” he paused allowing Sarah and the other capes to chuckle at the nickname before continuing. “Chased down Crusader and captured him for us.” His voice was laced with amusement, and he leaned back in his chair. Piggot casually cut across before the murmuring could get too intense.

“I heard mention of a new outfit? And I was told that she joined you two on the remainder of your patrol?” The words were curious, and Battery hastily cut in before Assault could.
“Yes. She’s shed the Parian doll outfit, and she’s wearing a more substantial costume. Robes, and a
dress, and a veil. It looks like normal cloth, but it felt a lot heavier when I touched it. I imagine that
she’s woven something into it to make it more protective.” The woman’s words were soft, and she
crossed her arms quietly. When it didn’t seem like the woman would readily volunteer anymore,
Sarah gently cut in.

“She did do the new redesign on Glory Girl’s outfit.” The others glanced at her. “It’s good quality.
Looks a lot closer to our current design than her old one while still maintaining a certain character.
Our current supplier tested the spares she sent and found them to be equally good as what they make
for the rest of us, though they did have to install the tinker tech upgrades. Microphones and the like.”
Sarah glanced at the others.

“How did you convince her to join you on patrol?” The question came from Triumph; the cape
stared at them curiously. “From what I recall from the interviews that she’s done, she’s largely
attempted to remain out of the cape scene.” His question seemed to make Battery shrink in on herself
a bit as Assault got a rather large amused grin on his lips. When Battery didn’t proffer an answer, it
was Assault that did.

“Battery merely asked her to come along, and she did. Even let Battery ride on her Praying Mantis
when it looked like her back was hurting her.” His voice was playful and teasing, and Sarah found
herself amused at the crimson tinge to Battery’s cheek.

“I think that she’s got a bit of a crush on Battery.” The others glanced at him, and he waved a hand.
“I showed up late, and Battery and I got to flirting, as we do, but she ended up implying that Parian
was her new knight in shining armour.” His voice was teasing, and Battery let out a huff.

“Even took her arm, though I think that was Battery’s subtle attempt to get a feel for the outfit?” He
glanced at her, and she nodded.

“That and I wanted to check out the glove she was using to control the creatures. It didn’t look like
Tinker tech. A simple remote that triggered certain vocalizations she said, to make them seem more
threatening.” The woman shifted quietly in place before letting out a sigh and continuing on.

“She also seemed fascinated by why the lines on my outfit light up when I use my powers. It might
be that she’s gotten interested in the idea of designing costumes, so that’s something to consider.”
The woman’s voice was soft, and she seemed to consider the files before her quietly. A long
pregnant pause dragged out around the table before Armsmaster cut in once more.

“Do you think that the interest could be used to convince her to join the Protectorate.” The man’s
tone was almost placid, but the others stopped what they were doing, and all looked at him. It was
Battery that spoke though.

“Pardon?” The words were almost icy, and Armsmaster returned her look stoically.

“Do you feel that you might be able to entice her to join the Protectorate using this interest. We’re
very short on capable capes at the moment, and her constructs would be quite helpful in keeping the
city safe.” His words were said with an utter lack of emotion that left Sarah speechless. Most of the
the table it seemed was in the same boat, barring Assault.

“I’m sorry, did you just imply that it might be a good idea for my wife to attempt to entice a young
girl into Protectorate using her crush?” He stared at the form of Armsmaster who turned to face him
before shrugging.

“That is why you joined the Protectorate, is it not?” His voice was utterly flat, and Sarah quickly cut
across before Assault could say whatever creative thing was stewing in his head.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.” Everyone paused and glanced at her and she straightened her shoulders. She stared back at them all before drawing up the image that had been taken by a trooper of Parian in her new outfit. She gestured to the girl’s skin tone in the revealed portion of her face.

“I’m unsure if it’s escaped your notice, but Vigil’s civilian circle of friends happens to include a girl with this particular tone of skin colour,” Sarah spoke softly before setting it down on the table and shrugging.

“Flechette, Vigil, Panacea, Glory Girl, Laserdream, and Shielder are all friends with her. I don’t think it would be… wise to attempt to manipulate her into the Protectorate.” Sarah glanced from the others to Piggot, seeing the rather calculating look in her eye. The director seemed to consider the image for a moment before waving a hand.

“It’s a moot point. She’s clearly becoming more active. She seems to like you two.” Piggot pointed at Assault and Battery, causing them to perk up. “Keep an eye out around her shop, if you see her patrolling just. Keep her company. If she’s curious about us, feel free to make a soft sell.” Piggot shrugged before glancing toward Sarah, causing her to straighten up.

“And I’m sure that I need not point out that with so many of your team members as her friends she may end up coming to you for the same. I don’t have the ability to order you to try and recruit her, but I think you’d be happy to have more capes on your team.” The director studied her and Sarah offered a fractional nod. Piggot nodded quietly before moving on.

“Alright. So, with the capture of Crusader, and the apparent disappearance of Othala, Viktor, Rune, and Krieg, that just leaves us with Fenja, Menja, and Kaiser as the active Empire capes in the city, correct?” The woman curled down over her papers and Sarah listened in quietly, idly wondering why the subject of Taylor’s convalescence hadn’t come up. Truthfully, she was glad because, at this point, even she didn’t understand why Taylor had fallen into that coma. The girl herself, upon returning from her shopping with Crystal, had merely pointed out that she’d been using her powers to keep Amy from dying and that doing so at a distance had caused her to lapse into a healing trance. The less said about that in official reports, the better.

“What were you thinking?” The words came out a bit harsher then Sarah had intended, and she sighed when Carol seemed to flinch back from her. The guilty look on the woman’s face was almost palpable, and Sarah let out a tired grunt. Rather than staring at her sister anymore, she turned her focus back to the sink before her.

Since Neil and Mark had done the cooking, the two of them were now left standing in the kitchen, working together to wash the dishes that had been dirtied for the meal that they’d just eaten. As Sarah dipped her hands into the soapy water and collected the first plate, the sound of laughter from outside washed over her, soothing her nerves. She glanced up, smiling as she watched Neil, Mark, Crystal and Eric outside playing Frisbee in the waning sunlight. The men had taken the kids out back to keep them busy while she and Carol spoke. As she washed the first plate, she allowed Carol to collect her thoughts, and her sister didn’t respond until she’d handed the plate over.
“I don’t know, Sarah.” Carol carefully rinsed off the plate before taking the terry cloth towel and moving to dry it slowly. She considered the clean dish carefully for a few moments before continuing her thought.

“I was upset, and I had intended to talk with her, but not like that. I just. I stepped out of Victoria’s room, and she was walking up the hall completely fine, with this nervous, happy look on her face and my daughters were still barely alive. I was just… I was suddenly so angry.” She sighed faintly as she lifted the plate, putting it away in the cupboard and accepting the next one, rinsing it and drying it before putting it away.

“I didn’t mean to do it like that though; I just didn’t want Victoria getting hurt. They’ve been sleeping together.” The words were soft, and Sarah glanced over, studying Carol quietly. The woman returned her gaze before sighing faintly and speaking.

“At the retreat. I was the one doing bed checks. I found them curled up together in the same tent after finding Victoria’s empty. I—” She paused frowning. “At the time I didn’t think anything of it, she’d just broken up with Dean, and it had been a cold night. But I went to the house after they’d been hurt. Someone had to get them clothes, and they were—” She sighed quietly as she put the next plate away, taking a moment to breathe before continuing.

“That Tattletale girl was there, and when I said what I needed. She just pointed me at Taylor’s room. I was confused until I went in. Victoria’s presence was all over it. The dresser was shared between them, her homework was on the desk, and it’d been proofread by Taylor. They weren’t just sleeping together; they were living together.” The woman’s voice was soft, and she put the casserole dish away under the sink quietly.

“I didn’t think that you’d be that bothered by the idea—” Sarah stared and paused when Carol glanced at her quietly.

“It’s not that,” Carol cut her off. “I don’t care that she’s a girl. It’s—” She paused frowning for a few moments before continuing quietly.

“She’s dangerous. The girls are constantly getting into trouble being around her, and—” Carol paused, frowning quietly as she dried the cutlery. “And she’s got a death sentence on her head. Even if the next Endbringer doesn’t come here for her specifically, the PRT is going to want her dead center on it wherever it does go.” Carol frowned quietly as she put the last of the cutlery away, gently gripping the edge of the sink as it drained.

“She’ll be dragged in front of Behemoth, or Simurgh, and even if she doesn’t die then? It’s just a matter of time. I didn’t want Victoria to fall for her. I didn’t want her to suffer a loss like that. She’s my daughter, Sarah…” The words were soft, and Sarah studied Carol’s worried expression quietly.

“Well, first off, despite the sleeping arrangements, I don’t think they were actually together before all of this.” Sarah glanced at Carol’s hopeful look and shook her head quietly as she dried her hands on the towel.

“Unfortunately, you’ve sort of ruined your plan there, I think,” Sarah commented with a sigh, collecting the half-full bottle of red wine from the table and gesturing Carol after her. She headed for the living room, turning the stereo on softly and taking a seat on the couch, watching as Carol came in and stared at her worriedly. When Sarah poured the woman a glass of wine and handed it over, she tilted her head as her sister spoke.

“I was afraid of that. I knew that Taylor would probably make a move.” The woman’s voice was tired, and Sarah let out an amused snort as she sipped her wine. The confused look from Carol saw
her rolling her eyes.

“Carol, need I remind you how you and Mark got together?” She stared at the woman before her for a moment watching as comprehension dawned on her features. Seeing the look of recognition on her sister's face, she continued.

“Taylor actually agreed with you, and she was attempting to do as you’d asked and push Victoria away for her own safety.” She spoke casually and then paused glancing at Carol expectantly chuckling when the other woman let out a defeated sigh and finished the thought.

“...Which naturally prompted Victoria to actually confront her feelings and make her move.” Carol quietly lifted her glass and drank half of it in a single pull before setting it aside once more. The silence between them dragged on for several long moments before Carol finally pulled herself out of her thoughts and turned back to Sarah.

“So... What now?” Carol spoke gently, and Sarah let out a slow sigh.

“Now? I think, for the moment, it might be best if we assign you to the Protectorate rotation. Since the joint patrols between the New Wave and the Wards are all being supervised by our team for the moment, that should allow tempers to cool.” Sarah watched Carol’s face fall, and she felt a touch of regret at the woman’s pain.

“I suppose that it’s best if I avoid Taylor for the moment, yeah.” The words were nervous and soft, and Sarah quietly pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Honestly, Carol? Taylor’s the least of your concerns. From what I’ve gleaned with speaking with her, she understands. She’s hurt, and you’ll have a lot of ground to get back there, but she seems to get a mother looking out for her daughter. She'd be professional if you two met in the field. No, the reason we need to keep you away from the rest of the team is that I’m not sure it’s wise to put you anywhere near Victoria, Amy, Crystal or Eric at the moment.” She studied her quietly, watching as Carol's shoulders slumped.

“You brought Taylor into our lives, Carol, and they all care for her a lot. We all care for her a lot. Me, Mark, and Neil understand that the issues that you’ve gone through, but they don’t, and they saw that you stomped on Taylor for seemingly no reason.” Sarah spoke gently, watching as Carol stared at her glass quietly as she listened. When the woman didn’t respond, she spoke softly.

“You saw how Eric and Crystal ignored you during dinner? We can’t have them doing that during patrols. You’ll have to make it up to all of them. I’d suggest starting by sending a letter of apology to Taylor.” Sarah considered her sister for a few moments before leaning back.

“After that, I’d suggest going to Mel first.” She saw Carol glancing worriedly up and looking at her.

“I know you never wanted Amy or Victoria to find out about this, but I think it’s time that you tell Amy at least about your sessions with Mel, preferably with Mel there to help.” She saw the growing reluctance in Carol’s face, and she let out a tired sigh before speaking softly.

“Amy, I think, would be the most understanding about lashing out in a moment of emotion like that, and Mel would help you frame it better, I think.” Sarah’s voice was gentle, and she shifted over when Carol seemed to shrink into herself more. She slid along the couch until she was sat next to her sister.

She glanced down at her wine, swirling the dark liquid as she felt Carol shifting against her side, moving to lean against her quietly. The soft shaking was once again, not unexpected, and she’d
gently wrap her free arm around her sister, letting the blonde woman cry. She lightly dragged her hand over the woman’s shoulder, carefully soothing her.

“It’ll be okay…”

Chapter End Notes

[[When I originally envisioned this chapter, there was much less crying but uh. It’s certainly a heck tonne of character development. We get to see why Battery was suddenly so chummy with Sabah, we get to see why Carol was such a bitch, and we get more details about why Carol is so much less of a bitch then canon.

I always enjoy writing Sarah because she’s an excellent character to expand on others with. She’s caring and kind, and sort of well adjusted and I get the feeling that people talk to her about stuff. And we’ve finally got some impressions from Victoria about her feelings for Taylor which is neat.

Looking forward to feedback, as always, and I’ll let you nerds know that I’ll have 7.1 out by Sunday at the latest. Though, Tomorrow or Saturday is significantly more likely. I’m literally dying to get started on the first part. And the second part actually. I’ve been mapping out 7.x in my head so much that I’ve actually got fairly complete pictures for everything from 7.1 to 7.4, so that should be neat.]]
Chapter Summary

[[Greetings and salutations, welcome to the first chapter of 7.x, or as we’re going to be calling it, Agitation. Over-arching themes here are going to be the ongoing interpersonal factors with the people, the teams, and the factions all rubbing together and getting awkward. There’s going to be a lot going on in the background of this particular chapter, so keep an eye on that, especially with the rather harsh ongoing campaign against the Empire as their forces dwindle.

THERE IS A SONG INCLUDED IN THIS CHAPTER. It’ll be apparent where it is, you can mostly skip past it if you’d rather not deal with it, there’s a divider after it ends, and it sort of doesn’t matter much to the story, beyond myself enjoying the idea of Victoria singing it. It’s shamelessly stolen, it’s actually a song by Sasha Sloan, called 'The Only', and there’s a link to it if you’d care to listen along at the relevant section.

In other news, this chapter sort of got away with me, so uh. Strap yourself in; it's gonna be a journey.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 6th, 2011
Taylor's house, Brockton Bay

Taylor’s phone let out a quiet ding as she walked through the door of the house. She paused in the doorway, tugging off her jacket and moving to hang it by the door, kicking off her shoes, one of her hands slipped smoothly into the pockets of her pants, fishing around among her keys, change, and other bric-a-brac for her phone. Finally snagging it and pulling it free she smoothly flipped the phone over and checked the message that’d just come in.

{Thanks for healing me, Taylor. The doctors want to keep me for observation, and they’re going to do a few scans to make sure that everything’s good, but they’ve said that I’ll be free to go tomorrow. I was sort of hoping that I could come back if that’s alright?} Taylor quietly inspected the text and let out a tired hum as considered the words on the screen. Even healed like she was, Amy’s recovery wasn’t fully complete, and she’d need a lot of rest and food to recover. Taylor didn’t necessarily mind having the girl around, but considering her changed situation with Victoria, Taylor moved to send a message to the blonde before responding to Amy.

{Vic? Amy’s probably going to be released from the hospital tomorrow, and she asked if she could come back to the house.} Taylor quietly tapped out the message, pausing and then adding a few
more words in another message. *(Considering everything going on between us, would you be comfortable with that?)*

Taylor studied her phone for a few moments, and when no response was immediately forthcoming, she slid to her feet and headed toward the kitchen. She moved around the table and headed for the fridge. She carefully checked the board that had been affixed to the front with the chore schedule on it, carefully checking her name and the date.

‘Cleaning the floors, nothing too bad today.’ Taylor thought quietly to herself and then let her mind drift as she set to work. Starting at the rear of the house with a broom in hand, Taylor found her mind floating back to her… her girlfriend. She shook her head at the thought, still somewhat shocked to be referring to Victoria as that, even in her mind. Things between them hadn’t gotten any more awkward in the wake of their revelation, but on the other hand, they hadn’t settled either.

They still slept together, and the casual, accidental intimacy remained, but beyond that, Taylor was confused by the odd distance that Victoria seemed to keep. Taylor had seen the girl staring at her when she didn’t think that she was looking, but Victoria seemed especially reluctant to touch her, and there had been no more kisses since the one that Lisa had interrupted. Taylor wondered if the other girl was having second thoughts since it was apparent that they were both aware of the distance between them. Victoria, though, seemed even less interested in bringing it up than Taylor herself was.

Taylor had been halfway through vacuuming the carpets in the living room when her phone had dinged. She turned off the vacuum and pulled her phone out, flipping it open and staring curiously at the screen.

*{It might be awkward, but I doubt that you want to turn Amy away. If you’re going to invite her back, that’s fine with me.}*

The words were oddly detached, and Taylor let out a quiet sigh before moving to type out a response quickly.

*{Alright, I feel bad about her still camping out on the couch. Considering the amount of space being a premium now, I thought that it might be time to pack up Dad’s room. We could move in there, and then Amy could take over our bedroom.}*

Taylor’s thumbs shook a bit, and she had to correct her spelling when she’d finished the message. She carefully studied the screen, counting the seconds until Victoria’s response came through.

*{Yeah? Are you sure that you’re ready for that?}*

Victoria’s words were clearly concerned, and Taylor let out a nervous chuckle, typing out a response.

*{I doubt I’ll get rid of anything, but it makes more sense for us to get a bigger room. We’ll have to replace a few things but uh, I think I could handle it with you there.}*

Taylor typed in the last thought with a nervous flutter in her chest, and she studied the screen, taking a seat on the couch, watching to see what Vic would say.

*{Well, I suppose it’s a good thing that I’m not going anywhere? I’ve got a class, but we can discuss it more over dinner?}* The words were quickly typed out but an odd warmth spread through Taylor and she moved to shoot off a quick reply before returning to her vacuuming.
Taylor took a few moments at the top of the stairs, considering the closed door to the basement carefully. She’d already told Lisa that she’d be busy for a few hours and asked the girl to keep anyone from disturbing her. Taylor took a moment to make sure that she hadn’t left anything running, and she’d just used the washroom. Running out of things to do to push this meeting back, she let out a quiet sigh and opened the aged wooden door.

Stepping into the darkened staircase, Taylor nervously descended the stairs. This was to be her first training session with Marr, and the spirit had been intimidating the few times that she’d interacted with him. Marr didn’t play by the rules that she and the other spirits had agreed to, a perfect example being that his form came gradually into view as she descended. Marr’s spirit seemed to have an almost physical presence, and it left him feeling more ‘real’ compared to Bastila and Jolee that only appeared in rooms once she was in them, only interacted with objects that they generated.

She stared at the massive Sith Lord as he considered the basement, watching as his form slowly rounded on her. She stood there fidgeting as Marr’s featureless mask considered her. He gestured to a nearby pile of pillows that she’d last used in her exercises the day before Leviathan’s attack.

“Make yourself comfortable, Miss Hebert.” His voice was low and dangerous, and she studied him nervously before moving over and adjusting the pillows and lowering herself to a sit. Marr’s powerful shape stalked around her for a few moments before stopping and watching her.

“Assume the Lotus position, close your eyes and meditate.” His words were brusque, clipped and Taylor nervously shifted into position. She crossed her legs, resting her hands on her knees and taking a few deep calming breaths. She focused, trying to ignore the Sith Lord’s gaze burning into her and attempting to calm her frayed nerves.

She took several deep breaths, sitting in silence, and slowly, the tension in her body melted away. She forgot about Marr’s gaze on her, and she settled into the Force, centring herself carefully. Her concerns about Marr’s plans drifted away, and her worries about Victoria drifted to the back of her mind. Her mind cleared, and she was confronted by how the stress of the last week had hit her, a momentary surge of exhaustion washing over her.

Taylor felt her head bowing, and she shifted, her form suddenly slipping forward, and she felt her head smacking into the hard surface of the desk before her. She suddenly shot back up, her cheeks colouring a brilliant red as she glanced around. She studied the amused looks of the other students around her, a twi’lek Jedi sitting a few feet away, giving her a concerned look until she turned back to the texts before her.

It wasn’t until Taylor had hunched over the text, reading the Aurebesh that the strangeness of the situation hit her. She slowly leaned back, lifting her gaze from the document on Korriban’s bloody history that she’d been reading, her gaze drifting around the massive library. Taylor confusedly took in the vast expansive tables holding dozens of strange looking Jedi. She took in the enormous desk behind which the Archivists worked.

Her eyes drifted over the towering Holoarchives that stretched up to the base of the floor below, and she felt something flickering in her. The confusion was slippery, hard to hold onto, but she grasped it and shuddered. She hadn’t been her; she’d been… at home, in her basement. She’d been…

Taylor pushed her chair back and got her feet under her, blinking in confusion at the weight of her clothing stilling her movements. She glanced down at the leather outfit that she wore, the brown and gold leather tunic hanging down over the tops of her dark grey pants, the long buckled boots that she
wore feeling odd and out of place on her. She pushed out of the chair, and the sound of something metal clattering gave her pause.

She peeked past the chair, watching as the Lightsaber Pike that she’d designed rolled slowly across the floor away from it. A hand raised, and the weapon flew off the ground and landed in her palm, and with smooth, practiced motions, Taylor flipped the weapon around and secured it across her back in its holder. Her body moved almost as if on auto-pilot, but her mind was a buzz. The Force had felt so different when she grasped, more alive, more active. Eddies and currents had washed over as she’d opened herself to it, the activity had almost staggered her. It felt so… different than home where the only ripples in the Force were the ones that she herself had put there. Shaking herself from her thoughts, Taylor glanced around the Library, but no one seemed to notice her confusion, the only glances on her having already begun to turn away.

Taylor carefully slipped out of the Archives, her mind racing as she glanced around. The building… The Jedi Temple, her mind supplied, was ancient in a way that few monuments on Earth were. The entire building held such age and such ancient majesty, but it wasn’t crumbling, it wasn’t faded. Great care had been taken in preserving the legacy of this place. Taylor stared at the frescoes on the wall, taking in the murals and art worked into the structure itself, inspecting the statues as she wandered. The longer that she explored, the harder it was to realize that she was out of place. It wasn’t that she didn’t remember who she was, or her past, but the strangeness of her situation didn’t feel important.

She slowly stalked the halls, eventually coming to a stop before one of the few hanging tapestries that she’d found, the image itself showing an army of Gand facing off against a lone Jedi that hadn’t ignited his sabre. She crossed her arms over her chest as she considered the image, idly wondering why it’d been hung here in particular and what message it had been meant to convey. She considered the fabric, reaching out and freezing at the voice that came from above.

“I wouldn’t.” She paused and leaned back, glancing up toward the voice to see a young boy half out of an air circulation vent, his body hanging down as he spoke. “That’s Gand silk; it makes most baseline humans break out in hives if you touch it. It was a gift from a Gand Findsman to the Jedi council; it tells the tale of a Jedi that faced off with a Gand Horde and managed to turn them aside with his words.” The boy studied her for a moment before smoothly, dropping the fifteen feet from the vent and using the Force to cushion his landing.

Taylor took a few moments to consider the boy. Judging by the cut of his Youngling robes, he was probably close to eleven or twelve, though he looked short for his age. His short inky black hair and his slight lopsided features weren’t what she’d call cute, but he had a certain charm about him. The kid studied her quietly before crossing his arms and smirking casually.

“You look lost. You ever been to the Jedi Temple before?” He stared at her quietly, and she paused, shaking her head silently.

“I’ve never been, but I wouldn’t say that I’m lost. My Master says that a Jedi is never truly lost with the Force as their guide. I’m merely enjoying the view.” She glanced around quietly before shrugging. The boy seemed to stare at her suspiciously for a few moments before speaking.

“But you’re a padawan. How’ve you never been to the temple before.” He pointed at her face and Taylor blinked before realization struck her and she reached up, feeling the long thin braid that hung behind her ear. She traced the hair carefully before glancing back at the boy.

“This is my first time visiting Coruscant,” Taylor spoke carefully and crossed her arms before her.
“My Masters found me on my homeworld. They crashed there and found me. I’d just tapped into the dark side unconsciously, and when I turned from it, they chose to train me.” She spoke carefully and considered the boy, studying his reactions. He seemed confused, but after a moment he seemed to take her at her word, moving on.

“Well, if you’re new here, then you really should be taking the guided tour. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jax, and I’ll be guiding you on your visit to the Jedi temple, today.” He grinned cheekily and held out a hand that Taylor reached out and took, shaking it smoothly. She considered the boy curiously for a few moments before glancing around.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Jax, and I thank you for the offer, but if I’m mistaken you should still be in lessons, shouldn’t you?” She glanced around and then back to the boy at his stubborn look. She moved to open her mouth, pausing when the boy let out a sigh and spoke softly.

“I was excused from lessons today.” She studied him, idly wondering if he was lying, though before she could decide she found her eyes drawn to the way the boy stared with fascination at her shoulder. She considered the boy’s interest before chuckling and reaching up, collecting her weapon and moving to offer it out.

“Curious?” She asked softly and watched as the boy took the Lightsaber pike carefully in his hand and studied it. He slowly rotated it around and thoroughly inspected the mechanisms. Taylor watched as the boy gently touched the activator and stared at the glowing golden blade with awe on his face. He swirled it around before shutting it down, turning an eager look back toward her as he returned the weapon.

“I’ve never seen a sabre like it before.” His voice was eager, and Taylor smoothly grasped the weapon, twirling it expertly again and hanging it over her shoulders once more, grinning down at the boy. She gestured for him to lead the way and followed along at his side, speaking softly.

“It’s a Lightsaber Pike. They’re rare, but my Masters tell me that they’ve been used before, they’re significantly less lethal than most types of sabre, and they allow you to strike at opponents without worrying about severing parts of their bodies.” Taylor spoke casually as she trailed along after the boy, studying him as he stared up at her with open curiosity.

“Why’d you pick it over a regular sabre or a sabre staff?” The question was fascinated, and Taylor crossed her arms behind her back as she considered the question carefully.

“My homeworld is a dangerous place, and there’s often fights that I get dragged into that I’d rather not be in. This weapon is effective as a deterrent without being having to resort to lethal force or permanently maiming my opponents, but it gives me the option for both should either be necessary.” The words were careful, and Taylor watched as the boy nodded quietly before gesturing down a hall.

“No, wait, Jax. Stop.” Taylor dodged a flying copper sphere and watched the rest crashing off of
walls and bouncing around the small training room that they’d ended up in. After making sure that no more missiles were coming, Taylor gently straightened up and spoke kindly as she watched the crestfallen expression washing over the boy’s face.

“I told you!” He cried out softly and curled his hands into fists and Taylor let out a wry chuckle, gripping the boy’s shoulder and tugging him over to the middle of the room, pushing him down into a seat as gently as she could.

“Jax, you’re trying to run before you walk. Trust me; you can do this. Let’s start with one object.” She watched as the boy hung his head and she shook hers, moving to take a seat next to him. She let her eyes drift over the training area, the large room clearly designed to practice telekinesis with it’s numerous variably designed objects scattered around. She considered what was at hand before glancing down at the defeated looking Jax.

“That one.” Taylor pointed as a specific object, a large copper object shaped like a baton. “Start with that, lift it up and move it around you in a circle.” She saw the boy’s unimpressed look and gave him a look that indicated that he should trust her. When the boy moved to obey, closing his eyes and moving the object, she gently tapped into the Force and nudged an oblong egg-shaped object made from some sort of wood.

“Now this one, pick it up and move it opposite the first, make sure that you keep them on the same plane and make them weave around each other.” Taylor watched the boy’s forehead crease, and she glanced, overseeing the second object wobbling up and moving toward the first, his expression deepening as they moved around each other. Taylor considered the boy as he did a few wobbly passes with the objects.

They’d wandered every floor of the temple and Taylor carefully teased the young boy’s story out him. Jax had only been an initiate in the temple for six months. He’d been discovered living on the lower levels of Coruscant by himself, and a Jedi had noticed his Force sensitivity which had been the only thing that had kept him from being sent to an off-world orphanage.

Jax had been born on the middle levels of the ecumenopolis, and he’d been raised by his mother, having never known his father. The boy still spoke fondly of his mother, confiding in a sad voice that he was pretty sure that she’d been killed in a workforce riot that she hadn’t even been attending. He wasn’t sure, but her path home from work had crossed into part of where the disturbance had spilled over, and she’d never returned home after the day that it’d happened.

Jax had told Taylor about his life living on the ‘streets’ of Coruscant, dodging the gangs and doing what he could to keep from ending up in prison or off world. Coruscant wasn’t a place for orphans, but the boy hadn’t wanted to leave his home, which was a thought that Taylor could empathize with.

Taylor watched as the boy gained more confidence and moved the objects more artfully and she nudged another object with the Force, watching as the boy’s power lashed out and scooped it up, lifting it and moving it as well. She considered him quietly, watching as his expression smoothed out as he got a better grip on his powers. Each time he seemed more comfortable she touched another object, and he’d scoop it up, adding it to the complicated dance he was doing.

Jax had eventually confided in her the reason that he hadn’t in fact been excused from lessons, a lie that Taylor hadn’t been surprised by. He’d quietly admitted that he’d been considering just sneaking back out of the temple to find his way back to his old haunts on Coruscant when he’d stumbled on her. It hadn’t been difficult to glean the reason why from the boy either. Jax was convinced that he’d never be a Jedi.
He was so far behind his peers in his age group in use of the Force, in philosophy, in everything and it felt like a constant uphill battle that the others didn’t even seem to get. Taylor had understood the boy’s trouble though, and she’d listened as he spoke about trying to learn surrounded by people that had been doing these things their whole lives. He talked about the looks he’d get when his control wavered, or when he failed to do something that would be easy for the others, and she’d seen the loneliness that hung around the boy.

Taylor had been the one to suggest that he show her what he was having trouble with. She’d watched as he attempted to levitate a half dozen balls and she’d saw when his frustration overcame his calm and the balls had suddenly rocketed off and around the room. It’d been a mistake that she’d made a few times too and she gently reached out, touching the boy’s shoulder.

“Don’t stop; just take a deep breath. I want you to focus on staying perfectly calm and then open your eyes.” She studied the young boy as he took a few breaths before nervously opening his eyes and then staring in awe at the dozen objects that floated around him in a complicated dance. Taylor watched as well, smiling as the boy slowly lowered them down around them.

“...How?” He spoke curiously and glanced up at her with evident excitement in his eyes. Taylor moved to open her mouth to respond, but it was a different voice that cut across them both, the words issuing from an aged throat.

“All journeys start with small steps, Theron. Sometimes, focusing on the steps in front of you can help you make it along the whole path without actually seeing the sheer scope of what you needed to accomplish.” The words were soft, and Taylor glanced over when the boy to her left jumped and shifted guiltily.

The voice had come a tiny hunched over alien that loomed in the doorway to the training room. Barely clearing two feet tall, he had wide bulbous eyes and a small mouth, and he walked with a casual grace that belied his ancient appearance. The robes that he wore declared him a Jedi Master and Taylor nervously straightened her spine as Jax spoke quickly and apologetically.

“...Master Oteg, I-” The tiny gray Jedi raised his tridactyl claw and waved the boy away.

“Peace, Theron. Peace. It’s not the first time you’ve skipped a lesson, and it won’t be the last, but at least you finally approached someone for help with your issues.” The Jedi Master hobbled forward and held out a hand toward her and Taylor reached out a hand to shake it, smiling at the man.

“Thank you for being so patient with Theron, Padawan, and I think for keeping him out of trouble. But, I must admit that you have me at a disadvantage. I’m afraid that I don’t know your name.” Taylor ignored the rebellious huff from the boy as she smiled at the aged Jedi and then she smiled.

“Thank you, Master. And I’m Taylor, Taylor Hebert.” She smiled when the Jedi’s eyes widened, and he chuckled before glancing at Jax casually.

“Indeed? Master Zallow was looking for you, Padawan Hebert, perhaps young Theron would be willing to show you the way? Last I saw he was in the Main Hall.” Oteg stared at the boy, who slowly nodded before pushing to his feet. Taylor glanced at Oteg for a moment before joining Jax. A momentary brush in the back of her mind saw her offering the Master a respectful bow that he returned before following Jax toward the door.

“So, Theron?” She spoke curiously when they were outside the training room, and she smirked
when the young boy’s ears darkened as he hurried on.

“It’s my first name, only my mother and Master Oteg call me that. Everyone else just calls me Jax.” He spoke quietly, and Taylor studied the boy as she followed him out of the back halls and out into the massive main hall of the Jedi Temple. Toward the doors, a powerful looking man was speaking with two knights, and Jax seemed to pick up the pace when he caught sight of the man. Taylor hurried in his wake.

The man glanced up as they approached and he gave Jax a stern look that softened when he saw that she was trailing him. He bowed to the other two masters with him before heading to meet them part way across the hall. He bowed his head quietly in her direction before addressing Jax.

“Jax. Skipping lessons again, I see. Though I suppose that since you’ve done me the favour of locating this wayward padawan, I will avoid disciplining you this time.” Taylor chuckled softly and blinked when the man turned her way and then offered her a friendly smile.

“Padawan Hebert. We were here to talk about your Knight Trials.” His voice was soft, and Taylor found herself nodding despite her mind suddenly drifting. Something familiar began to coil in her gut, some familiar darkness. Memories of standing in the rain facing her memories washed over, something horrible coiling in her gut as -something- came. Taylor felt her cheeks paling, and she started at the touch to her shoulder.

She jerked back, staring at the confused faces of Zallow and Jax staring at her. Jax watched her worried as the Jedi Master stared at her quietly and spoke with soft resolve.

“Padawan? What’s wrong?” He stared at her and Taylor stared back before glancing toward the doors, staring out at the fading sunlight of the city beyond.

“I sense… great darkness. Death is coming.” She spoke softly, her voice hollow. She glanced back toward Zallow, watching as he considered her carefully for a few moments. Bowing his head, he seemed to focus inwards before his own face paled and he stepped away from her.

Turning his gaze toward the doors, Zallow’s expression hardened when the sound of fighting drifted through them. The distinctive noise of a lightsabre igniting was very noticeable among the din. When Zallow suddenly rounded on her, Taylor jerked back nervously.

“Padawan. Go quickly. Take Jax with you. He’ll show you where the younglings stay. Get them out of the temple, and make your way as subtly as you can to the Senate building when the fighting ends.” He stared at her quietly and then glanced at Jax, crouching low and staring at the boy.

“Jax. I know you know how to get out of here without using the speeders.” The boy seemed ready to argue, but the stern look on Zallow’s face silenced his protests, and the boy just nodded before turning and running to her side. Taylor glanced at Zallow as he drew his sabre and headed for the open doors. Taylor saw a figure in a black cloak entering the doors tailed by a Twi’lek woman, but when Jax dragged on her side, she moved with him.

They ran down the hall, heading toward the nearest side passage, though the sound of gunfire from beyond saw them turning back. Jax froze for a moment before pointing to the north.

“This way, we can cut through the passage that leads to the cantina, duck through the kitchen and get to the others.” She stared at him quietly before waving him on. She ran after the boy, praying that he’d known more of the Force, so that they could have moved that the full speeds that she was
capable of. They had nearly made it to the passage he’d indicated when a thunderous crash from the other end of the hall stopped them both.

Taylor turned, watching as the shuttle smashed through half the pillars at the other end of the hall, scraping across the floor of the temple with a shower of sparks. When the side of the shuttle crept open, and a wash of red light emerged, Taylor turned and dragged Jax along, panic rising in her middle. The sounds of dozens of lightsabers igniting in her wake saw her hurrying down the passage that the boy had indicated.

The quick jog they’d been doing turned into a run as the sounds of battle drew closer, and they hurried down the narrow corridors past the art that Jax had playfully told her about over the afternoon.

“This way!” Jax ripped around a corner and Taylor followed, her blood running cold when a trio of soldiers in black armour exploded out of a staircase to the left. She didn’t even think, one hand came up, and she smashed the soldiers back into the stairs as they ran past, she followed in Jax’s wake. They charged through an empty kitchen and through an empty cafeteria that contained the shattered remains of more than one meal.

To the left, a trio of Knights was trying to hold back twice as many Sith, so she and Jax swung right, Taylor following in the running boy’s wake. She watched as Jax ducked around a fallen statue and slid under it as well, using the Force to put her back on her feet without missing a step. She rounded the corner and heard Jax’s cry when he saw a group of young children at the opposite side of the corridor, huddled behind a single Rodian Padawan.

The three menacing looking Sith Warriors between her and the Rodian were concerning. Taylor charged down the corridor and saw that there was an intersection just behind the Rodian and the younglings. When the Rodian lit up her lightsaber, Taylor glanced back at Jax.

“Go around, get to the younglings.” The boy stared at her with open worry in his eyes before his expression firmed, and he swung left down a side corridor, and she charged. The Rodian saw her coming and said something which caused the children to turn and flee down the left end of their hall as well and then Rodian launched herself at the Sith.

Taylor moved and touched the Force, slamming the Sith closest to her into a wall, and then lunging at the next. Her weapon flew into her hand and lit up and the glowing golden blade smashed into the shuddering crimson blade of the Sith.

Taylor stared at the cold black eyes of the mask and then she dipped herself into the Force, moving with it, smoothly dodging around the strikes of her opponent, keeping him distracted, and off of the Rodian. A surge of danger in her mind saw her spinning as another blade lashed at her back, and she deflected it. She moved around the Sith, attempting to keep them both in front of her.

The battle dissolved into a blur of strikes and counter-strikes, lunches and blocks. The corridor itself was too small to allow the use of any of her more esoteric powers, and it left the battle to skill. Taylor moved with ease and grace that she’d never had back home, dodging attacks and deflecting them with ease, using the solid bottom of her attack to lash out and keep her opponents off center.

She heard the scream as the Rodian was hit, watched her go down, and when the Sith glanced at her and her opponents before turning toward where the children had gone she lashed out with the Force, smashing her opponents back. She charged, her hand opening and the downed Padawan’s sabre crashing into it. She crashed into the third Sith, her weapons twirling dervishes of Death and she
watched as he backed up, blocking her.

Her strikes were savage and true, and she watched as she blocked one of his powerful overhand strikes with the Padawan’s blade, deflecting his guard up and away. One armoured boot lashed out, slamming into the side of Sith’s knee and the pike’s humming blade crashed into his arms, severing both just below the elbow. She watched the limbs flying away and the sabre de-activating.

One negligent flick of her wrist smashed the Sith into the wall and into the arms of blissful unconsciousness, and she spun in place, putting herself across the corridor the children had gone down, both weapons out as she turned toward the recovering Sith. She watched as they stared at her, and she felt the hate almost wafting off them.

When they charged, she sank into the Force, feeding off the serenity and matching them blow for blow, her weapons blocking and dodging as she kept them both off of her, using her superior speed and reach to keep them moving backwards. Every lunge and strike pushed the Sith back a few steps, and she’d just gotten them past the last intersection in the hall when one of the warriors made a mistake, and she lunged. She lashed out with her pike and watched as his lightsabre was struck and launched away from his hands, shutting off as it flew down the corridor behind him.

Taylor’s other weapon came up, blocking the counter by the other Sith Warrior and she smashed the base of her Pike into the side of his head with enough force to dent steel, sending the Sith warrior crashing savagely into the wall and collapsing. The first Sith that Taylor had disarmed had turned toward his weapon, and it was flying through the air toward him. Taylor reached out and activated the weapon, ignoring it’s crimson blade and savagely pulling it toward her, watching as it slammed into the Sith, smoothly impaling him through the chest.

Taylor stood there panting as the sounds of battle were suddenly gone, her body heaving as she tried to get her heartbeat under control. Before she could center herself, a blast of Lightning came from the left-hand corridor, blasting her off her feet and sending her skidding down the hall that Jax had vanished down less than ten minutes before. Her body hit the ground, racked with agony from the attack, and she rolled a half dozen feet before coming to a stop on her back.

Achingly forcing herself to look down where the attack came, Taylor sighed a figure in a long dark robe walking almost casually toward her. A featureless metal mask with a single glowing red triangle in the middle covered the Sith’s face, his robe armoured and intimidating. The cloth of the robe dragged along the floor as he advanced on Taylor’s form, his hands still dancing with arcs of violet lightning. The glowing light focused in her direction as the mechanical voice issued forth.

“Never send a Warrior to do a Sorcerer’s Job.” The man raised his hand and Taylor raised her own weakly, flinching as her efforts to deflect the first blast of lightning were less than ideal, and she felt more agony crawling over her body. She screamed at the pain and lay there, panting as the Sith approached, staring down at her.

“Where are the children.” The voice was cold and mechanical, and when Taylor just started to laugh, he reacted with a snarl of rage, releasing another blast of lightning that stilled Taylor’s laughter. She lay there in agony, panting as her vision began to blur around the edges, staring up at the glowing triangle on that Sith’s face.

“Tell me where the children are, and I will make your death swift, padaw-” The Sith’s question suddenly cut off when a hunk of broken masonry smashed into the side of his head. Taylor stared in confusion at the bit of broken rock, turning her attention down the corridor when the Sith loosed a mocking laugh.
“L-Leave her alone.” She stared in horror at Jax standing there and holding her lightsaber pike in his hands. She saw the rictus of fury on the boy’s face as he suddenly charged, the boy’s body blurring as he tapped into the Force. The Sith raised a hand, and a barrier sprung up, deflecting the boy’s first wild swing, and then he lashed out with a hand, blasting a wave of Lightning toward the boy that sent him crashing backwards.

The Sith advanced down the corridor toward Jax’s smoking body, and Taylor lurched forward, her body screaming every step of the way. She got her feet under her and reached out, a hand ripping the Sith’s Lightsaber free, and she caught the curved-handled weapon, igniting it smoothly and lunging toward his back.

The Sith raised his hand again, but Taylor was ready, her own hand coming up and issuing a destructive Force blast that shattered the barrier. She swung with the weapon in her hand, snarling as the Sith used his hand to deflect it just as Taylor had once caught Glory Girl’s punches.

Taylor’s adrenaline began to flag and her attacks began to slow. When she over-committed to a swing, she felt the Sith’s hand jamming into her side before she was savagely blasted by a wave of lightning. The energy lifted her into the air, slamming her into the upper part of the wall. Taylor felt her body screaming in pain as she fell and hit the floor, something in her arm shattering on impact. The Sith pointed a hand at her, and the lightning shot out, and Taylor’s entire world was agony. She arched up off the ground, screaming her throat raw as the pain coursed through her.

Mocking laughter was all she heard when the pain stopped, and she lay there in agony, her body visibly smoking as she watched the Sith playfully batting away Jax’s furious sloppy attacks. She stared at the boy as he attacked and she reached out her hand, grasping weakly at the Force. She gripped the Sith’s leg and pulled, pulling him off balance and making the blast of lightning he’d used miss the youngling entirely.

“J-Jax. R-Run.” She cried out weakly before turning her attention on the smooth metal of the Sith’s mask. She felt her blood run cold as he started to laugh again. He continued to deflect the attacks from the boy wielding Taylor’s pike with almost casual ease.

“She is right, boy.” The words were casual, almost lazy as he seemed bored at keeping the boy from killing him. “You stand no chance here. Run. I’ll even let you go if you leave her to die.” Taylor stared at Jax as he backed off, staring between the Sith and her. She stared into Jax’s eyes, willing him to go, to live. She saw the moment that he decided though and she screamed as he lunged.

The Sith moved with almost inhuman speed, grabbing Taylor’s pike and smoothly gripping the boy’s shoulder, turning the weapon against him. Taylor watched as the boy jerked suddenly to a stop as the weapon pierced his own body and he stood there. The Sith released him, backing off and watching almost fascinated as Jax staggered backwards, holding the weapon in place as he crashed into the wall, the glowing blade piercing through his back leaving a scorch in the wall as he slid down to rest against the floor, the weapon shutting off as he released it and it rolled across the floor. The Sith glanced toward her and moved to speak as he approached.

“I did-” Taylor felt a well of rage and anguish washing through her and the Force sang at it. She reached out a hand, and the pike ripped free of Jax’s suddenly slack fingers. Taylor surged to her feet, her body screaming in agony a mere echo of the Force screaming in her mind. The weapon flashed as she slammed into the Sith. He moved more desperately, backing off as the pike crashed into his shields savagely over and over. The Sith turned to peer behind him, and Taylor viciously slammed her Force into him, smashing him into the wall and then smoothly severing one of his arms.
as he bounced back.

When the Sith rounded on her and attempted to hit her with lightning Taylor slammed the base of her pike into his elbow, deflecting his arm upwards and allowing the lightning to strike the ceiling, and twirled the blade smoothly bisecting both of his legs and watching as he flopped to the ground. The Sith loosed a snarl of fury and anger, pointing his hand once more at Taylor and she grasped the Force and used it to send the Sith’s torso and arm smashing into the far end of the corridor hard enough to liquefy his bones.

Taylor spun back toward Jax, fear and anguish washing into her, but she staggered to a stop when she found the hallway completely empty and undamaged. The pain she felt in her body evaporated, and she spun again toward where she’d sent the Sith and staggered backwards, finding Marr standing before her in the hallway. He stared at her stoically and suddenly, the hazy feeling in her mind that had kept her from realizing that she was in a simulation shattered.

The anguish and regret remained, and Taylor felt a fury erupting within her. She snarled in rage, and she suddenly lunged, her weapon igniting and she swung it at Marr with no semblance of finesse or precision. The Sith ignited his own lightsaber and blocked her attack.

“W-Why?” She cried out as she slammed her weapon into his over and over, the fury burning bright and furious within her. Marr didn’t respond, staring at her stoically and deflecting each of her wild and ungainly swings. Taylor continued the onslaught until her fury burned itself out and then only the anguish remained. Taylor staggered back, sweat dripping from her face and the weapon dropping to hang from her arms. She stood there silently and stared at Marr, watching as he kept his weapon lit and at the ready without speaking.

“Why… Why would you do that to me? W-what possible reason could you have to show me, th-that?” She stared at Marr as the spirit shut his weapon off and hung it from his belt, staring at her coldly. She shut down her own pike when the Sith finally spoke.

“This was the only way that you would understand.” His disguised voice was quiet and almost regretful, and Taylor took a step back. A gesture of the Sith and Jax’s body reappeared between them, a smoking hole in the middle of his chest. Taylor jerked her gaze from the boy back to Marr, and he locked gazes with her.

“That pain you feel, Taylor. The ache in your chest? That is what the people that care about you feel every single time that you risk your life. Every time that you nearly die doing something stupid to try and save them.” Taylor flinched quietly and swallowed before trying to speak.

“I- T-that’s different.” She spoke softly, and Marr stared at her coldly. “I’m not, He-he’s, he was just a kid. He shouldn’t have-” The Sith laughed bitterly at her and Taylor silently clenched her fists. Taylor desperately tried to hold onto the bitter anger that she felt as she stared at Marr but the feeling slowly wicked away, and her shoulders slumped.

“W-Was any of that real?” She spoke softly, staring down at the slumped-over form of Jax, her eyes pricking with moisture.

“All of it was real. But Jax has been dead for a very long time. This was drawn from the memories of the Noetikon’s creator. The events and the timeline was spliced together, but Satele did know a youngling named Jax. She met him as you met him when she was here recovering at the temple after the loss of her Master.” At her look, Marr shifted and stepped closer, Jax’s form vanishing once more.
“Satele lost her master when the Empire took Korriban at the outset of the Great Galactic War. She was here at the temple, awaiting the council's ruling on if she’d be assigned a new Master or if she’d be allowed to take her Knight Trials. She met Jax and bonded with him as you did.” Marr gestured her to follow and led her down the corridor toward the main hall of the Jedi Temple.

“They developed a bond, like the ones that you share with your friends, and Satele inspired Jax to stay in the temple as you did. She inspired him to be better then he was. And then she became a Knight and went off to war. She wasn’t actually here when the temple fell. She was on Alderaan. Jax was here. Satele had shown him that he could be a great Jedi if he tried, and he did. He began to dedicate himself in class, and he advanced.” Marr spoke as they walked through the empty halls, heading toward the great doors that the Sith had crashed the ship through.

“When the temple fell, Jax got the younglings out, secreted them into a hidden passage he’d been using to sneak out of the temple, and had them lock it behind them, and then he used a training sabre to keep the Sith back until the Younglings were long gone.” He glanced at her quietly as he came to a stop before the great doors. Taylor stared at him silently and swallowed, still feeling that ache in her chest despite knowing that the friendly boy she’d met had died thousands and thousands of years ago.

“Still, why show me this?” Her voice was laced with pain and Marr shook his head before speaking softly.

“You needed to understand.” Taylor stared at him quietly, and Marr let out a weary sigh before continuing.

“Death doesn’t happen to you, Hebert.” He stared at her before waving a hand. “It happens to everyone around you. All the people left standing in your wake.” Taylor stared at him as the Sith studied her quietly.

“I could argue with you about philosophy, or tactics, or ego, but this is what’d get through to you the most. This pain you feel.” He pointed at her chest, tapping her in the middle of her sternum. “This is what you do to those around you when you do not take care of yourself. And you care for them far more then you care for yourself.” Taylor stared at Marr’s face for a few moments before slowly lowering her gaze. She wasn’t sure why, but a part of her felt ashamed about the words he had said and she couldn’t hold his gaze.

A few moments of heavy silence hung between them before Marr turned and marched out the open doors.

“The memories will fade in time, and the pain with them, but until they do we might as well make use of the skills that you’ve borrowed from Satele. Let’s see how well you can handle that weapon without fury driving you into a blind panic.” Taylor stared after the Sith as he came to a stop out on the promenade of the Temple. She looked out at the massive city that stretched into the distance, watching the cars flying past and she turned her gaze to Marr who looked expectant.

When he ignited his weapon and launched himself at her, she activated her own and intercepted his attack. True to Marr’s words the knowledge was in her mind, the right ways to twist, to dodge, to block and she moved with Marr, practicing. The agony in her chest fading as the battle became all that she saw.
“Enough.” The words dragged Taylor from her thoughts, and she drew back. True to Marr’s words, the pain had faded as a scar did. It didn’t vanish, she remembered Jax, and the image of him slumped over was burned into the back of her mind, but it was a distant pain, like the loss of her first pet. Taylor backed away from Marr and held her weapon at the ready, the last time he’d said that he’d waited until she’d backed off before attacking again, but this time he deactivated his weapon.

“You’ve clearly recovered enough to be distracted by the issues in your real life, and your skills have suffered as a result of it.” Marr studied her quietly, and Taylor let out an embarrassed cough, at being caught agonizing about her girlfriend by the Sith Lord living in her head. When Marr merely snorted Taylor flushed and deactivated the weapon in her hand.

She lowered it and took a moment to stare at it silently. She knew that she would miss the weapon when she’d returned to the real world. She felt right holding it in her hands. She studied the silver weapon carefully before glancing up at Marr. Thinking about the real world filled her with a sudden surge of panic.

“How long have we been in here?” Taylor frowned as she considered the amount of time that she’d spent with Jax and fighting. Everything had begun to blur together in her mind as time went on. Marr gently shook his head and held up a hand.

“Fear not. Time passes differently like this. You’ve only been meditating for about an hour and a half.” Taylor nodded quietly and let out a quiet sigh. Victoria was still in class. She frowned softly as she studied the smooth stones under her feet. Marr’s voice cutting across her thoughts, startled her.

“Shall I collect Bastila so that you might pick her brain in regards to your relationship issues?” His voice was laced with dark mirth and Taylor stared at him quietly before suddenly straightening her back.

“What about you then, Darth Marr?” She watched as he perked up in confusion and shock at her comment.

“The Sith are great proponents of Passion, right? And as you’ve said, you've heard my thoughts on Victoria. What would you suggest I do?” She kept her voice even, her gaze hard and she was surprised when Marr released a wry chuckle before staring down at her.

“You’re asking what I would suggest to clear up the awkward tension between you and your paramour?” Taylor stared at Marr at the odd wording and slowly nodded when he seemed to be waiting for her input. Marr seemed to consider her for a moment before speaking.

“I would suggest that you be bold. Make a move, or just ask her what’s going on. No one ever got anything worth getting without taking some risks.” Taylor stared at him in confusion, but before she could ask more, the world around her faded to darkness as she suddenly jerked up from where she’d been laying across her meditative area, inhaling sharply as she glanced around the familiar confines of her basement.

After everything that she’d been through, the room felt almost oppressively small. Taylor considered the walls quietly for a few moments, mulling over Marr’s words in her mind before slowly pushing to her feet. She drew out her phone, verified Marr’s guess and figured out how long she had before Victoria got home.
As she headed up the stairs, plans began to form in the back of her mind. She could do bold.

Victoria nervously stared at the ornate wooden doors of the Creative Arts wing of BBU. She nervously paced back and forth at the base of the stairs that would lead her up to said ornate doors. Victoria had finished her test, and they’d directed her here to wait for her audition. She hadn’t done amazingly on said test, and part of her wanted to cut and run. To sneak off back home and pretend that none of this had happened like she hadn’t spent the last several weeks agonizingly preparing for this.

She took a single step onto the steps before nervously backing off and letting out a quiet groan. Even if she did good on the audition, her test scores would almost certainly preclude her taking the courses that this audition was for. There was no reason to waste her time or get her hopes up. She hadn’t understood half of what the composition questions had been about despite the tutoring that she’d received. Victoria stepped back and lowered her feet, glancing toward the nearby safety of a bus stop. She’d taken two steps toward it when a voice shouting toward her pulled her up short.

“Where the heck do you think you’re going, Dallon?” Victoria felt her shoulders tensing as she turned to peer toward Warren standing at the top of the stairs his arms crossed before him. The purple streaks in his hair were gone and had been replaced with neon green, and the young man’s amused face was focused on her; she nervously shrunk back as he tapped his foot.

“I was just-” She started softly, pointing toward the bus stop. Warren didn’t let her finish, smoothly descending the steps and grabbing her by the arm.

“I know damn well what you were just about to do, Missy. And I didn’t spend three weeks tutoring you on musical theory, and helping you convert that song you wrote just for you to get pre-game jitters and bail.” Victoria whined as he dragged her up the stairs and into the building. She glanced around as he tugged her toward the auditorium, though he ended up swinging away from it before they entered and heading toward the side entrance.

“We’re doing this.” He smirked ferally up at her which caused Victoria to let out a nervous whimper as they entered the backstage area. A woman with a clipboard glanced up at them and perked up, flashing them a smile.

“Oh. Warren, good you found her. Miss Dallon, you’re on next.” She glanced toward the stage and the rather… interesting sounds that were coming from it before smiling back toward Victoria. “It shouldn’t be long now. Do you have some form of accompaniment for your song?” Victoria blinked and glanced toward Warren who waved a hand.

“Oh. Warren, good you found her. Miss Dallon, you’re on next.” She glanced toward the stage and the rather… interesting sounds that were coming from it before smiling back toward Victoria. “It shouldn’t be long now. Do you have some form of accompaniment for your song?” Victoria blinked and glanced toward Warren who waved a hand.

“I’ll be playing for her.” The woman blinked curiously and shrugged with a smile. Victoria quietly stepped to the side, staring at the nearby mirror. She checked herself out in it, briefly wondering why she hadn’t dressed up for this as she picked at the sweater that she wore. She adjusted it quietly and pulled the hood down off her head, nervously fixing her hair. The sound of a low chuckle behind her caused her to jump as Warren appeared at her left.

“Vic, they don’t care how you look, they just care how good you are at making music. You’ll be
fine. Trust me.” He smiled confidently at her and Victoria felt her back straightening as the confidence rubbed off on her. The woman by the stage waved eagerly at them as a figure wearing an odd multi-instrument exited and smiled at them. Vic glanced at Will who gave her a wave before disappearing onto the stage.

Victoria followed him out, moving over to the microphone, and the chair sat next to it. She took a seat, carefully adjusting the mic before speaking into it.

“Hello there, I’m Victoria Dallon. I’ll be performing a song that I wrote a few weeks ago, with the aid of a friend.” She waved at Warren who waved back before turning out toward where the audience would be. The lights in the auditorium had gone down and the spotlight on her meant that the few people that were watching were merely black silhouettes with the faintest hints of glimmers where their eyes would be. This made it easier for Victoria to pretend they weren’t there.

She quietly adjusted the mic as she waited for Warren to start the song, listening as he gently danced his hands over strings of the electric guitar he held, getting used to them before the low mournful melody issued forth around her. They’d practiced this and Victoria knew just where to come in, and she closed her eyes, leaning forward and letting her lips part as she sang into the microphone, being careful not to touch it with her lips.

“I-I” Victoria dragged the word out softly, wrapping her arms around herself as she let herself get lost in the lyrics. “Can’t be the only one who’s lonely tonight.” The words were dragged out, Victoria exaggerating her accent a touch as she sang. Warren kept time with her perfect, and she felt her lips quirking as she continued to sing.

“I can’t be the only one, who’s floating by myself, wishing that I was somewhere else — talking to voices in my head, because at least they’re listening. Right here’s an easy place to hide, I’ll stay in bed and shut the blinds. Don’t even know where I would go;” She hummed faintly before continuing, her lips curling into a smile.

“But, I know that there’s gotta be somebody out there, there’s gotta be somebody, somewhere, who needs company. And it’s comforting to know I…” She paused and hummed, lowering her voice before continuing. “can’t be the only one who’s lonely tonight. No, I can’t be the only…” Victoria smirked as she launched into the second verse.

“One with nobody to call, this city makes me feel so small. A million people in this town, but I could scream without a sound. So I fly so high to pass the time, talk to someone I met online to make myself feel less alone.” Victoria felt her lips curling into a genuine smile as she sang along, hearing the music flowing around her. She shifted forward as she slid into the chorus again.

“‘Cause I know that there’s gotta be somebody out there, there’s gotta be somebody somewhere who needs company, and it’s comforting to know I…” She paused and listened to the music quietly, waiting and carefully singing at the right points. “No, I can’t be the only one who’s lonely tonight. No, I can’t be the only one’s lonely. No, I can’t be the only, the only.” She shifted back as the last words left her mouth and leaned back quietly, staring up at the darkened audience as the music slowly faded out.

The applause was a surprise, as modest as it was, and she felt her cheeks darkening. She quickly muttered a bashful thanks into the microphone before getting her feet back under her and vanishing from the stage. Warren crashing into her and laughing like a maniac. This set her off and she allowed the boy to drag her out to watch the rest of the auditions.
Victoria staggered out the doors of the Creative Arts wing with Warren’s arm around her shoulder, her cheeks bright red. She still couldn’t believe that she’d made it. Victoria’d been right about her test scores being somewhat weak, but Warren had offered to tutor her and get her up to speed, and the teacher had acquiesced. She’d had the course added to her schedule after her Parahuman Study class.

“You were amazing!” Will was standing there outside the doors with his arms crossed and Victoria let out an amused smile. When the boy tilted his head as if to ask ‘Well?’ Warren let out another mad cackle, and Will suddenly crashed into her wrapping his arms around her and laughing softly. Victoria laughed along with them as she was trapped between the two boys. She’d gotten to know both a lot better as she’d spent her evening cramming in all the studying and practicing at their apartment, and she took a moment to enjoy their excitement on her behalf.

“So, how’re you going to tell Taylor? She’s going to fre-” Victoria’s cheeks were aching from her smile, and she was plotting how she’d tell Taylor when Warren and Will both suddenly staggered to a halt, their arms around her stopping her. Blinking, Victoria pushed past the two larger boys, glancing ahead. She felt her mouth go dry when she saw the familiar form of her father standing before them. He was dressed in his civilian clothes, a leather jacket and jeans and he looked so normal as he flashed her a nervous smile.

Warren glanced at her worriedly, and she shrugged off his arm before standing up a bit taller and facing her dad. She was tempted to run to him and hug him, but she remained standing next to Warren as she wrapped her arms around herself instead, gently gripping her arm while she spoke.

“Hey, Dad.” She heard Warren suck in a breath to her left and she listened to the boys shifting up to either side of her. She saw her Dad look a touch concerned before a soft smile spread over his face.

“Hello, Victoria. You were amazing in there; I didn’t know you could sing like that. Who are your friends?” He studied her and Victoria glanced up to see the oddly stern looks on the two older boys faces that filled with her with an odd sort of warmth. She tucked her hands into her pockets and spoke faintly.

“Dad, this is Warren and Will. Warren helped me with… well, everything. And honestly, my guitar work is a lot better than my voice, but the audition requires that you perform your song.” She huffed faintly and ignored the wry chuckle from the boys. She studied her Dad quietly, and as he watched her, and she let out a sigh.

“Guys, you mind if I have a minute?” She studied them both as they glanced at each other, offering her a smile. Will smoothly reached out, ruffling her hair casually before he spoke.

“Yeah, Vic. We’ll be over there when you’re done. We’ll walk you to the bus.” He pointed toward a nearby picnic table, and then he slid off with Warren. Vic stared after them quietly, smiling at the odd protective nature of the boys, despite them having to know that if he really wanted, Victoria’s father could easily beat them both.

“They seem nice.” Her dad’s voice was soft, and Victoria glanced at him, and she smiled quietly.

“They are. Warren’s been helping me out a lot with all of this.” She gestured toward the building.
She saw the flicker of suspicion on his face and snorted. “Will’s not great with music, but he’s been very supportive. Says that any project of his boyfriend is a project of his. They’ve sort of adopted me, I think.” Victoria saw the tension in her Dad’s shoulders loosen and she let out a chuckle, glancing around. “How did you hear about this?”

“You mom found a letter in the mail confirming your time of audition.” He must have seen her somewhat concerned look cause he returned it with a sad look of his own before quickly continuing.

“She’s not here, she didn’t think that you’d want to speak with her, but she did have me record it for her.” He patted his pocket, no doubt where his phone was, and Victoria let out a quiet sigh.

“She’d be proud of you, Victoria. I certainly am.” Victoria stood quietly where she was, letting out a quiet sigh as she wondered just how proud her mother would be if she knew what was going on. She stared at her feet for a few moments, the awkward silence between them yawning quietly and stretching as she shifted in place trying to put the feelings she wanted to share into words that she could actually say.

“How’s Taylor?” The question hit her with an almost physical force, and Victoria glanced up nervously at her dad wondering what he knew, what her mother knew. He seemed to study her for a moment before offering her a sad smile.

“Your aunt told us, Victoria.” She studied him, and when he continued to smile, Victoria felt her shoulders relaxing a bit. She looked at him nervously, searching for any sign of the anger that she’d seen in her mother’s eyes when she’d found about her and Taylor, finding none was especially comforting to Victoria.

“She seems like a nice girl, even though we haven’t interacted much.” He stepped closer. “Once things calm down, maybe we can change that? I’d like to get to know my daughter's girlfriend.” Victoria paused, staggering a bit and flushing. The concerned look from her dad was touching, but she merely waved him off.

“It’s uh. No one’s called her that to me yet. ‘Your girlfriend.’” She bit her lip quietly, doing her best to ignore how much she enjoyed that. Her dad’s amused chuckle was soothing her frayed emotions. She stared up at him silently before finally taking a step closer. He moved to open his arms, and the next thing knew Victoria’s face was buried against his leather coat, and she inhaled the scent of the material her arms clamping around him.

There were no tears this time, and she merely clung to her Dad, her face buried in his chest and drawing strength from him as the late spring air whipped her hair up and around them both. His arms wrapping around her finally soothed the last of her frazzled nerves and Victoria let out a long slow sigh of relief as she enjoyed the lingering warmth in the hug.

Victoria slipped out of her Dad’s car and stood on the sidewalk, watching as he pulled away. After they’d hugged for an uncomfortably long time, they’d ended up walking over and letting Warren and Will know that they could head on. Victoria had quietly talked with her dad about everything that had happened, and his quiet support had been both a surprise and very profound comfort.
Her dad had sat with her in the cold spring air, and he’d asked her to tell him everything, and she had. She’d told him of how she’d felt with her powers, explaining how lonely they’d made her. She’d curled into his side as she explained the bank and the aftermath that followed, including her interactions with Amy, and with Taylor. They had discussed her reactions to Amy’s secret, and he’d apologized for keeping secrets from her.

She’d explained the end of her relationship with Dean, and she’d had to physically hold him back from hunting the idiot down to teach him the error of his ways. They’d discussed her growing closeness with Taylor and her confusion over it. They’d talked about her argument with her mother, and how she’d stopped Taylor from doing something horrible to avenge them all. He’d congratulated her when she told him about making her move.

He’d listened as she explained her uncertainty about where she stood with Taylor, her indecision about what to do, and how to act considering the girl's reservations about the idea of the relationship. He had sat there and listened to it all, and merely held her. He hadn’t much in the way of advice to offer beyond being careful and doing her best, to be honest, and open, but finally talking about it had been a weight off of Vicky’s chest.

They’d talked about his work with the Protectorate, and they’d discussed the repairs to the house. She saw this spark of life in his eyes that she remembered from when she was younger, and a tiny dark voice in the back of her head made her wonder how much of this was because he was finally free of her aura. She watched as he talked animatedly about his work with hunting down the Empire and he’d spoken with her about his and Neil’s plans to make a few upgrades to the house since they’d had the repair materials lying around now.

She had listened and agreed when he’d told her that he wanted them to talk more, and when he’d asked if she’d needed anything, money or things for school, she had waved him off. The sentiment had warmed her to her core, though, and she’d agreed when he insisted that they start texting him every few days to let him know how she was doing. Eventually, though the time had grown late and when she mentioned that she’d promised Taylor that she’d be home for dinner, he’d brought her back in his car.

She studied the house as she crossed the street, and the gently flickering lights gave her pause. She dug out her keys as she ascended up the steps and opened the door. She kicked off her shoes and walked toward the kitchen, watching the shadows flickering over the floor. She moved carefully up to the doorjamb and peeked through, the scent of cooking food hit her, and she felt her mouth watering, though she was somewhat floored by the view that waited for her.

The table had an actual table cloth on it, and there were dishes with cutlery laid out. Victoria stared at them in confusion along with the gently flickering candles on the table. She flushed quietly as the only two settings penetrated her mind and she nervously looked down at the rather comfortable clothing that she wore. The arms suddenly snaking around her middle, startled her, and she let out a soft gasp as she felt Taylor’s face burying itself against the back of her head.

“We’ve not actually had a chance to try for a date, despite everything, and Amy’s going to be back tomorrow, so I figured…” Taylor’s voice was soft, and Victoria felt her heartbeat picking up as the girl tightened her arms around her. Victoria nervously shifted in place, glancing over when Taylor’s arms loosened, and she peered around and up at her.

Taylor was dressed in her regular clothes, a simple fitted dress shirt and black jeans. Feeling nervous, Victoria studied Taylor quietly and glanced at the stairs.
“Should I get changed?” She spoke quietly, and she blushed when Taylor’s lips curled into an amused smile.

“If you want? You look lovely like you are though. It’s just us tonight. I’ve convinced,” Taylor paused and issued a cough that sounded suspiciously like ‘bribed’ before continuing. “Lisa to remain in her room. I figured we could do dinner and a movie.” She smiled at Victoria, and Victoria considered Taylor quietly for a few moments before vanishing up the stairs.

The sound of Taylor’s amused call about dinner being ready in fifteen minutes saw her hurriedly vanishing into the bathroom.

After a somewhat hurried shower, Victoria had managed to put together an outfit that didn’t seem like overkill compared to Taylor’s almost casual dress. A simple tank top and nicer jeans with a different less grungy sweater to pair it off. She’d nervously entered the kitchen, and Taylor’s smile had soothed her odd hesitance.

Part of her had a hard time considering that Taylor was the one who’d never been on a date before. The girl seemed to be at ease, though the occasional nervous glance her way did a lot to soothe Victoria’s racing heart. For some reason, the idea that Taylor was just as worried about this made her feel a lot better.

The food had been produced, and Victoria sat eating quietly, humming faintly in delight at the fascinating mix of spices on the meat. She glanced up, seeing Taylor watching her with fascination and she felt her cheeks heating. The smile growing on Taylor’s face did nothing to ease her embarrassment, and she issued a cough and tried to distract Taylor.

“I uh.” She shifted nervously as she picked at her food. “I had an audition today. At BBU. I wanted to try and get into the summer session for their Music Theory program.” She saw Taylor’s surprised look, and when the girl leaned forward eagerly, Victoria smiled quietly.

“Warren helped me a lot, and I uh, I got in.” She spoke softly and studied Taylor. The girl looked shocked at first, but she caught up, and Victoria found herself smiling at the broad grin on Taylor’s face.

“Congratulations, Vic. What’d you play?” Victoria picked quietly at her plate for a few moments before speaking softly.

“The Only. But it’s not one you’ve heard yet. I can show you later.” The words were soft, and Taylor eager smile made her feel a lot more at ease. Victoria studied the girl quietly before leaning back in her chair.

“My Dad showed up. He got a notice from the school about the audition.” Taylor’s curious look lacked any overt concern which actually surprised Victoria, and she ended up taking a few moments to nibble on the potatoes as the girl studied her curiously.

“He uh. He congratulated me on the audition, and uh. Other things.” Victoria trailed off and glanced at Taylor when the girl raised an eyebrow. When she didn’t respond, Taylor waved a hand between them, and Victoria nodded quietly. Taylor let out an amused chuckle.

“That’s good, right? That he’s supportive?” Victoria blinked and nodded faintly, swallowing the food in her mouth before speaking.
“Yeah, but now he wants to have dinner with us sometime, so he can ‘get to know you’” The words were said with a playful undertone of menace that saw Taylor swallowing nervously. Victoria chuckled as she sipped at her water, earning herself a dirty look from her girlfriend.

“So, you’re in this music composition course, right? How’s that going to work? Will it affect your regular classes?” Victoria smirked at Taylor when she changed the subject but followed along, and they spent the rest of dinner discussing the course she’d auditioned into.

“Did you ever find Bugs Bunny attractive, when he’d put on a dress, and play a girl bunny?” Victoria chuckled quietly as the characters on the screen devolved into laughter. Wayne’s World was an odd choice for a date movie, Victoria thought to herself, but for some reason, it sort of suited her and Taylor’s friendship. The film itself was funny, but Victoria found herself more fascinated with Taylor.

Victoria had been surprised when Taylor had immediately cuddled into her side once the movie had started and every reaction she’d made since had been driving the blonde toward distraction. A bemused chuckle from Taylor as Wayne and Garth began to scream saw Victoria glancing down toward Taylor, studying the lines of her face lit by the glowing TV.

When Taylor glanced back at her, Victoria had flushed and flicked her own gaze back to the TV, feeling Taylor’s eyes on her, the attention almost burning into the side of her face. She watched the movie for nearly thirty seconds before the focus became too much. Victoria slowly drifted her gaze back toward Taylor, studying the lines of her face lit by the glowing TV.

Something behind her eyes seemed to harden, and Vicky felt her mouth going dry.

When Taylor’s hand curled into her sweater, and she pulled herself closer, Victoria’s eyes drifted shut, and she felt Taylor’s lips ghosting gently over her own. The contact deepened, and Victoria lost herself in the press of Taylor’s lips, feeling the other girl’s hand tangling in her hair as kiss dragged out.

Something warm began bubbling in her chest as her heart rate picked up and she leaned closer, deepening the kiss a touch, a soft sound from Taylor broke the magic and ice knifed through her and Victoria gently lifted her hands and pushed Taylor back. She watched as Taylor shifted back and stared at her with a confused look, quietly licking her lips.

“Vic, what?” The girl’s eyes searched her own and Victoria let out a nervous sigh.

“T-Taylor, wait. You don’t have to—” Victoria paused and swallowed, trying to find the right words. Taylor stared at her curiously, and her hand remained wrapped around Victoria’s sweater, keeping her from backing off. Taylor’s expression fell a bit as she stared, and Victoria felt her heart hammering a touch.

“Are you having second thoughts?” The words from Taylor were low and nervous, and Victoria let out a slow sigh, shaking her head as she reached out a hand and pushed Taylor’s hair back from her ear.
“No, no. Nothing like that. I just now that… this sort of thing isn’t fun for you, and we don’t have to…” She trailed off at Taylor confused look, watching her nervously. Taylor gave her an odd look and Victoria’s shoulders tensed, and she picked at her top before she continued softly, nervously.

“After… well after everything, I did some research, about uh… well, you know.” Victoria nodded quietly. “And uh. I talked to Tattletale some.” Taylor paused and slowly lifted an eyebrow and Victoria let out a nervous whine.

“She caught me reading up on it, and after she stopped laughing, she offered to answer any questions I have. It turns out that she’s uh. Well…” Victoria trailed off, and Taylor stared at her blankly before finally speaking.

“Asexual?” She spoke softly, and Victoria nodded, her cheeks heating up. Victoria stared at her girlfriend as Taylor opened her mouth, paused and closed it. The girl took a few moments to think before opening her mouth again and speaking softly.

“I’m… touched, that you went to all that effort, Vic. But.” She rubbed at her face quietly before shifting up. Victoria let out a nervous squeak when Taylor moved to plant herself neatly atop her lap.

“I’m not Lisa, Vic. And, you’re welcome to do research but if you want to talk about my limits, I’d rather that you do it with me. Firstly, I’m not asexual like she is. Secondly, I’m also pretty sure that she is not only asexual but almost certainly sex-repulsed.” The girl studied her quietly, and her confusion must have shown because Taylor let out a gentle sigh.

“It means that she’s very much against the idea of most kinds of uh, sexual touch. Considering that she can tell exactly how long it’s been since you last washed your hand or brushed your teeth, that kind of makes sense.” Victoria wrinkled her nose quietly before letting a shiver wash through her. Taylor seemed to shake herself out of her thoughts before focusing back on her once more.

“But the main point here, Vic, is that I wouldn’t have agreed to this if the idea of touching you disgusted me.” Vic flushed a bit, her heart rate picking up as Taylor stared at her. The dark haired girl quietly rested her arms around her shoulders, and Victoria stared up at her nervously.

“I-” Taylor paused, frowning quietly. Taylor’s eyes locked on her own, and Victoria felt her heart beat continue to race as the girl stared at her silently. “Kissing you is nice, Vic. It’s pleasant. I enjoy it, just like how I like holding your hand or curling into your side. When I said that I wanted to be your girlfriend, I meant that I was interested in all the terrible things that came with it. There are things that I can’t do, but I’ll let you know about those myself. You shouldn’t be too afraid to ever touch me.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and Victoria flushed, staring up at her. Taylor hung there for a few moments until Victoria managed to dredge up the nerve to speak, her voice hoarse.

“I-...Okay. Sorry, I just…” Victoria trailed off, flushing when Taylor gently lowered her forehead to touch Victoria’s, looking into her eyes. Victoria felt her heart continuing to race, and she moved to lean up, her lips bare millimetres from Taylors when something from the TV garnered her attention.

“...on your own definitely has it’s perks, Shwing, you know cause your mom doesn’t tell you to turn down your stereo and junk like that, which is a real drag, shwing, shwing, you know cause…” Victoria paused and felt Taylor’s lips quirking up against hers and Garth repeatedly saying ‘shwing’ drove them both over the edge, and suddenly Taylor had collapsed against her as they both devolved into wild giggles.
[[HOLY SHIT. HOLY FUCKING SHIT. THIS CHAPTER WOULDN’T FUCKING STOP. But uh. I guess you guys deserve something meaty to sink your teeth into after that hecka long break that we had to deal with with all the rewrites. There’s action; there’s romance, there are awkward Dad hugs, there’s awkward relationship talk. There’s relationship advice from a Sith Lord, and referenced help from the patron saint of ‘Ew, Gross.’

As always, lemme know what you think, I look forward to your feedback, and I dread to think of the number of fucking errors that will come back in this monster. =P I work all day tomorrow, so unless you nerds are super fast, the updates won’t happen until after 9 pm EST. I might take tomorrow off other than tweaks, but you can expect 7.2 sometime Sunday. =] It’ll be shorter… I hope. But there will be a B-side. So uh. That’s fun?]]
Chapter Summary

[[So this isn’t a full chapter — just a b-side for 7.1. Basically as I’m plotting out 7.2, I realize that to frame it the way I want, I have to cut out the whole, moving rooms and getting Amy set up with an actual place to sleep, and that’s kind of sad, so I figure I’ll toss it into a B-side, and then I figured some practice with Lisa would be good, and here we go. Hope you folks like it.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 7th, 2011

Downtown, Brockton Bay

Lisa could feel the truck rattling all the way up her spine, and she squished herself down into the seat, wondering for the fifth time why she’d agreed to this. It was the first weekday she’d had off in nearly a month and a half, Piggot was busy outside of the city, meaning that she’d finally had some time to herself. She’d intended to spend it curled up in bed with some mindless video games to distract her. And yet, somehow she was crushed into the cab of this ageing pick-up truck with Victoria Dallon of all people at the wheel.

Lisa quietly glanced over at the girl sitting almost expertly behind the wheel, rapping on the steering wheel in time with some tune that only she could hear. She looked so much more relaxed then she had in weeks, her outfit the same casual clothing Victoria had been wearing since the Leviathan fight, but it was like a weight had been lifted off the young hero’s shoulders and Lisa watched Victoria smiling softly as she waited for the light to change.

The other girl must have caught her looking because Victoria turned on her and flashed her a smile that reminded Lisa why she’d come along on this adventure. Victoria had asked her earnestly for help, and she’d grown tired of spending all her time at the house alone in her room. Despite her powers and her various hang-ups, Lisa did truly crave company. She returned Victoria’s smile nervously before glancing out the window and taking a slow, steadying breath.

“Relax, Lisa. She might grumble a lot, but Danny took care of this truck. She’ll get us where we’re going.” Lisa glanced back over and let her gaze drift out over the streets, her mind turning toward their task for the day. Amy was to be returning this afternoon, and Victoria had volunteered to go and collect her some actual furniture. She and Taylor had apparently decided that they would take most of Taylor’s furniture during the room swap, and Victoria was taking her to collect Amy’s things.

“Remind me why we’re taking this relic to your old house instead of just flying?” Lisa’s voice was laced with feigned boredom, but she quietly gripped the door handle and blinked when Victoria let out an amused snort.

“I might be strong, but I still have to deal with awkwardness and balance when flying. It’d take at
least a dozen trips if I were flying it all over, or we could load it all into the back of the truck and do it in one.” The girl studied her quietly, and Lisa was tempted to ask why she’d been invited along.

Lisa knew that Victoria could almost certainly do all the heavy lifting herself, and even if she couldn’t, Taylor would have been a better choice. But Lisa didn’t probe, turning her attention back to the road as she ignored the itch in the back of her head that made her want to use her powers to figure out what was going on. The light before them changed though, and the truck rumbled on toward the upscale neighbourhood, heading up a steep hill.

Lisa was out the door the moment that the truck rumbled to a stop and she stood next to the large dented vehicle, taking a steady breath before turning over to watch Victoria dropping out next to the truck and glancing around. Lisa watched the girl searching for something and apparently not finding it; she let out a gentle sigh before flashing her a grin and gesturing her toward the house.

“Your dad said it was okay to get this stuff, right?” Lisa studied the house, speaking carefully. She glanced over, watching Victoria’s ponytail bouncing as she nodded. She turned back to the house and looked at it, feeling her powers coming to play, telling her that repairs to the home had just barely been finished.

When she saw Victoria reaching out with a keychain, Lisa felt her powers twisting in her mind, and she stepped forward, waving the other girl off. She considered the door for a moment before moving to the nearby window and pushing up onto her tiptoes, her hand scrabbling along the top of the window frame, finding purchase on something metal and she pulled it free.Turning, Lisa flashed the shiny new key she’d found toward the other blonde, slipping over to the door and slotting it into the lock, twisting the key and unlocking the door. Victoria’s confused look startled her, and she pointed.

“They replaced a big chunk of this wall. Look, right here, the paint is different.” She gestured to the lighter paint around the window and the doorway and shrugged at Victoria.

“They probably had to replace the door and the locks with it.” Lisa studied Victoria’s consternation as she considered the open door before shoving her keys back into her satchel and then moving into the house.

The place was quiet, and Lisa followed smoothly in Victoria’s wake, glancing around the space and taking in the lines of the house. She studied the pictures on the wall, noting how each had been hung, how each had been framed. She felt the house telling her a story that was so very at odds with the story that her powers told her about the dynamics between Taylor’s friends that it almost gave her a headache.

Glancing at the stairs saw that Victoria had paused halfway up and she moved to follow. Victoria led her up the stairs and paused at one of the doors, slowly pushing it inwards. The room beyond had clearly been Amy’s the place very particularly organized and arranged. It was immaculate like Lisa’s spaces, but there was a system, an odd mix of carefully constructed chaos that suited the bio tinker.

Lisa got the impression that Amy could find anything in the space with a mere thought, but it’d leave most others entirely lost. Lisa moved around the room, carefully taking in every detail, considering how it all fit together. The images in her mind expanded as she considered the space, her mental picture of Amy growing. She glanced up when Victoria let out a cough and chuckled softly as she shifted in place.

“Your sister has a particular system. I’m just… committing it to memory, wouldn’t want to have her murder us all in her sleep for ruining it.” She saw the flicker of genuine nervousness in the other
hero’s eyes, and she chuckled before glancing around. She opened the cupboard on a hunch and nodded when she found a stack of empty totes, nodding faintly.

“Alright, I’ll start packing things up; you start getting the clothes into suitcases.” Victoria blinked at her and turned toward the door and Lisa coughed, pointing at the luggage carefully stored in the shelf above the closet. Victoria blushed, but she moved to quickly gather up Amy's things in the closet, folding them carefully and putting them away.

While the other blonde worked, Lisa set to work dismantling the book collections, carefully storing them in the totes to make reassembling the shelves accurately easier. Once the books were sorted, she collected the various little small collectibles that Amy kept around, and then the posters were removed and rolled up. When she’d stored Amy’s laptop with the rest of the belongings, she moved over and helped Victoria finish with the clothing.

Lisa was surprised when she found herself carrying the totes down. She knew that she could just sit and wait for Vicky to do it all, but there was an odd sense of camaraderie, and this would get things done faster. She moved the smaller loads, and Vicky carried the furniture down wholesale and broke it down carefully by the truck before securing everything in. Lisa finished placing the last of the small luggage in, checking that everything else was present. She glanced up, ready to get Vicky to finish attaching the securing lines only to find the blonde gone.

She dropped off the bed of the truck and dragged a hand over her forehead, sweating despite the unseasonable chill. She considered the house for a moment before blowing out a breath and moving up and inside. She carefully walked through the hall and up the stairs, peering into Amy’s rather empty room to take in the space, making sure that Victoria hadn’t caught something that they’d missed.

She didn’t find the blond lurking there, but she heard a sound down the hall and she moved up the hall, peering into the room she assumed was Victoria’s. A suitcase had been laid over the bed and Victoria had apparently been halfway through loading some minor essentials into it when she’d discovered something.

Lisa carefully slipped around the door and into the room, staring at Victoria who was standing silently by her desk, holding a cream-coloured envelope as she studied the writing on the front. Lisa saw the girl’s hands shaking as she held the letter, and she moved closer before the girl could act on her initial impulses and crush or shred the letter. One hand reached out, gently tugging the letter from Victoria’s hands, and the girl didn’t stop her. Lisa studied Victoria’s face before carefully opening up her purse and tucking the letter away for safe keeping.

Victoria didn’t look at her, but she moved to grab a few things from the dresser, finishing her packing before sealing up the bag and lifting it up. Lisa studied Victoria for a moment, watching the girl as she looked around the room. She studied Victoria quietly, frowning as her gaze drifted around the space and she was confronted by just how poorly it suited Victoria.

The room itself had been as carefully arranged as Amy’s but in a different way. Nothing fragile was within arm’s reach; everything that could be broken by a brush of Victoria’s hands had been secured high. Beyond that everything seemed so very impersonal, things that had been replaced a dozen times to the point that Victoria barely paid them any mind.

The clothing hung in the closet was too bright compared to the simple muted colours that Victoria wore now, and there were no personal artifacts littering the place. No old toys, or books that she’d read and never managed to put down. Nothing sentimental sat on the dressers or on the desk. Lisa
moved over and opened the drawers, considering the writing utensils and half-finished projects within.

Tracing her fingers over the magazines scattered over the desk, Lisa found herself confronted with a memory from her youth. Her brother had snuck her out of the house and taken her to a carnival, and she’d ended up in the funhouse, and she’d been fascinated by the windows that showed so many different vast and beautiful landscapes despite the windows being mere inches apart.

The magic had faded when her brother had convinced the ride operator to sneak her back to see behind the windows. The sad little cubicles looked so very empty and flat from behind; the perspective was broken when she saw the thin cutouts and carefully arranged images that had been so artfully arranged. Even seeing them from the front hadn’t brought it back.

This room was like those windows, a carefully constructed veneer of a teenage girl that had been laid over an empty room filled with replaceable decorations. Lisa gently lifted a wooden framed picture of Victoria and her family off the dresser, and she tucked it under her arm. She’d once seen Victoria holding a stuffed rabbit at the house, and she wondered how much control it had taken the girl to keep from losing that like she’d lost every other artifact of her life.

Glancing up, she saw Victoria staring at her strangely, and she shrugged up her shoulders before holding out the picture. When the other blonde took it and studied it, Lisa moved to tug her along.

“C’mon, ‘Collateral Damage Barbie.’ If we’re gonna get this shit set up before your sister gets to the house, we’re gonna have to get the lead out.” She grinned when Victoria let out an irritated huff and followed in her wake.

“I honestly preferred ‘Backblast Barbie.’” The voice behind her saw Lisa chuckling as she bounded down the last few steps and out the door.

“Me too! I was proud of that. No one even chuckled, though.” Lisa let out a mournful sigh before heading toward the truck. She paused at the door watching as Victoria hopped up into the back and carefully secured the straps like Taylor’s handler had shown them, locking everything in place before pushing the tailgate up and then heading up to join her.

Lisa climbed into the cab, crying out when Victoria’s luggage and the picture ended up in her lap. The other blonde merely smirked at her as she slid into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. The familiar, terrifying rumble was somehow made worse by the heavy load in the back and Lisa made sure that she’d secured her seatbelt before they pulled out.

As they were driving down the hill toward Taylor’s, a fancy looking car drove past them. Lisa watched as Victoria’s jaw clenched, and she gripped the steering wheel till her knuckles whitened, but she didn’t comment when they drove past each other and didn’t react. Lisa glanced out the window and watched the houses drift past, admitting to herself that if anyone could understand having issues dealing with their family; it was her.

Lisa hadn’t expected it to be this much of a pain in the ass getting this place appropriately arranged.
Lisa had had to stop the other two girls twice as they’d tried to put things together before finally figuring out a way that she could fit Amy’s bedroom layout into Taylor’s former bedroom. She’d been exacting with Victoria making sure that everything fit together just as it had in Amy's room at the Dallon house.

Once the furniture had been in place, it’d been much easier getting the rest of it put together. Lisa hadn’t trusted the other two girls to deal with the books, so she’d done that herself and Taylor had spent about an hour fiddling around with Amy’s desk getting her computer and the various bits and bobs that had come with it correctly set up. Victoria had put away Amy’s clothes and then with some direction from Lisa she’d set about putting up the posters.

It’d been almost four in the afternoon when they’d all come to a stop in the middle of the room, staring around at the transformed space. They’d not had a chance to paint anything, so the colours weren’t a perfect match, but Lisa hoped that she’d managed to transplant the ‘feel’ of the room over. She stood there, staring around at the room quietly, her mind niggling at her. Taylor and Victoria were whispering with each other about the visit, and she had tuned them both out as she approached the desk, studying the small dolls that had been placed on it.

She carefully adjusted the figurines before, taking the tiny Hermione doll and lifting the arm that held her wand and then turning it just right. Lisa took a step back and crossed her arms, nodding as the niggling bit of obsession finally silenced itself. This was about as close to perfect as the real world got. The sound of two pairs of shoes stomping up the stairs startled her, and she glanced at Victoria and Taylor as they seemed to almost leap apart before her eyes, suddenly standing nearly three feet apart and looking anywhere but at each other.

Lisa rolled her eyes as they rounded on the door in time to see an exhausted looking Amy in a somewhat rumpled outfit, pushing the doorway open and stepping in. Peering past the girl saw a much more put together Lily standing curiously in her wake and looking over her shoulder.

“Guys? Lily wanted to know if you wanted to get-” Amy suddenly stopped and blinked, glancing around the room. Lisa nervously shifted from foot to foot as Amy’s gaze roved over her and then suddenly oriented on the desk behind her. Lisa moved to the side as Amy walked past her and carefully studied everything before turning back toward the group. Lisa ended up standing near Victoria and smiled as Amy seemed to just, stand in place and take in the room for a few moments.

“We figured that since you had decided to move in, you deserved to have a space that was yours.” Taylor’s voice was gentle, and she chuckled when Amy glanced at her curiously. She rubbed at the back of her neck as she shrugged her shoulders.

“We moved over to my Dad’s old room and set you up in here.” Lisa watched as Amy reacted subtly to Taylor’s comment, a flicker of something washing over her before she lost it in the shock and confusion at finding her room here.

“We figured that since you had decided to move in, you deserved to have a space that was yours.” Taylor’s voice was gentle, and she chuckled when Amy glanced at her curiously. She rubbed at the back of her neck as she shrugged her shoulders.

“We moved over to my Dad’s old room and set you up in here.” Lisa watched as Amy reacted subtly to Taylor’s comment, a flicker of something washing over her before she lost it in the shock and confusion at finding her room here.

“How did you get all my stuff here? And it’s all… It’s perfect.” Lisa perked up and smirked when Amy slid over to a bookcase and peered into it, tracing the spines of the novels that were lining it, and Lisa felt herself blushing just a touch when Victoria elbowed her.

“Me and Lisa drove over and collected it all. When I told Dad that you were staying here, he said we could get what you’d need for you. You should thank Lisa for the organization. She sort of made sure it all went where it needed to.” Victoria’s voice was light, and Lisa watched as Amy glanced at her sister with open concern.
“Weren’t you worried about-” Amy paused as if suddenly noticing that Lisa and Lily were still there as she cut off her comment as she studied her sister carefully. Lisa found herself surprised when Victoria chimed in almost casually.

“Mom? Yeah. A bit. But I mean, I had Lisa with me.” Lisa blinked and glanced over at Victoria, watching the girl glance at her before turning toward Amy’s equally incredulous look. Lisa found her cheeks darkening when Victoria explained though.

“Mom might be pretty scary when she’s on a tangent, but I figured that if I had Tattletale in my corner, I would probably make it out okay. And she ended up being pretty helpful.” Lisa nervously glanced off and huffed when Victoria peered her way before stuffing her hands into her pockets. Amy’s wry chuckle merely made her cheeks burn brighter.

“Anyway,” Taylor’s voice cut across the room and Lisa silently thanked the girl for saving her from the scrutiny. “You were saying something about Lily wanting something?” Lisa’s gaze drifted over to the door, watching in amusement as Taylor peered back at Lily, soon followed by everyone else in the room. She found herself chuckling when the Asian girl shrank under all their stares that settled on her.

“Er. I was wondering if you wanted to get pizza or something. It’s a school night, but we’re all finally out of the hospital, I figure that we could do some movies or something.” Lily spoke quickly and seemed to perk up when Taylor and Victoria smoothly nodded. The girls started filing out of the room, leaving Amy to check things herself and Lisa followed heading toward her own room.

“Hey.” Lisa paused at the door and glanced over to where Victoria was looming near the top of the stairs. She blinked and glanced around before stepping toward the other blonde. When she didn’t speak, the other girl spoke lazily.

“You should come down. It’ll be fun. You worked pretty hard today; you deserve to celebrate with us.” Lisa blinked and glanced at her door, considering it for a few moments before letting out a sigh and moving to follow Victoria down the stairs.

“...don’t put pineapple on a fucking pizza.” Taylor’s voice called out of the kitchen, and Lisa grinned when Victoria let out a bark of laughter and moved to save Lily from Taylor’s wrath.

Lisa watched the television with rapt attention, idly watching the tale of the young boy and his vampire friend unfold. She hadn’t been the one to suggest Let Me In as the movie choice, and she wasn’t sure who had. Victoria and Taylor had been the ones to walk down to the local corner store to find the movies to rent. Despite their powers, it’d taken them almost forty minutes to get there and back, and they’d actually arrived after the pizza had.

Contrary to Taylor’s insistence, a Hawaiian had made it into the house, and Taylor had playfully teased Lily about it as they all settled in to watch the story unfold. Lisa’s attention was rather oddly drawn from the drama unfolding on the television to the one unfolding in the living room.

Lisa had taken the armchair for herself, and it’d left her a perfect view of Taylor and Victoria curled up together watching the movie with rapt attention and doing their best to avoid getting too
comfortable with each other. She also got to watch the curious looks that Amy kept sending at the pair, the questions that she both wanted and didn’t want to ask hanging about her like a cloak.

She even got to watch as Lily watched Amy, Taylor and Victoria all, seemingly just as confused as she was by the whole thing, though Lisa briefly contemplated the odd sort of hesitancy that hung around the girl. When her powers prompted her to poke, to needle something else welled up in her, and she found herself turning her attention back to the television, watching as the tiny Vampire saved the young boy once more and felt herself smiling quietly.

She reached down, and carefully lifted a slice of pizza from the plate in her lap, nibbling quietly and doing her best to avoid getting dragged into whatever sort of mess was brewing on the other side of the room. Despite the intentions of her powers, she had far better things to do with her time then getting on the wrong side of those girls. For the moment she just let herself relax into the comfortable chair, the sound of the movie washing over her blending with the background sounds of other people in the room that reminded her that she wasn’t alone.

Chapter End Notes

[[So that was kind of fun to write. Not much actual plot, just. Lisa and Vicky are bonding a bit and getting Amy set up, and then some girl’s night in. It’s just nice to explore like. Friendships that aren’t all about like, Taylor at the focal point. Also, I enjoy the idea of Victoria deciding that if her mom ambushes her, she should have Tattletale around to rip her a new one. Made me laugh. Anyway. 7.2 is coming soonish.]]
Chapter Summary

[[Another week begins, and with it, we get 7.2, This chapter was interesting to write. I had most of it done yesterday, and then I ended up having to rewrite parts of the first section cause of Ward things, and then I basically went back over it all and ended up rewriting it all again. No guarantees that it’s great, but it’s certainly a fun ride.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 8th, 2011
Taylor’s house, Brockton Bay

When she opened her eyes, the lack of sunlight coming through the window told Victoria that she didn’t need to be awake yet, and she let the lazy warmth that wrapped around her lull her back into a comfortable doze. She shifted, smoothly sliding up against Taylor’s side and curling her face into Taylor’s shoulder. The other girl’s arm unconsciously tightening around her saw the blonde girl smiling as she glanced up at her girlfriend’s sleeping face. Even dead to the world like this, Taylor seemed to sense her attention and shifted her gaze down, muttering something vaguely affectionate and pressing her lips to Victoria’s head before settling back into the bed and breathing evenly once more. Victoria considered just closing her eyes and trying to grasp whatever sleep was still available to her, but instead, she found herself considering Taylor.

At times like this, when she was left alone with her thoughts, Victoria often found it difficult not to compare Taylor with Dean. She had dated other boys in the past, but only Taylor and Dean had managed to engender feelings like this in her. The warmth in her chest and the pervasive sense of safety when they were around. But beyond those subtle similarities, the pair seemed more like opposite sides of the same coin: similar origins but violently different expressions.

Once, during a fight, Dean had accused her of being the last person in a long line of people that had personally let him down. Victoria had to admit that this was the difference between Taylor and Dean that was most clear. Dean had told her of his mother abusing his gifts, he’d told her about his father, and his teachers. He’d told her of all these people that had failed him, and he’d done it during an argument to point out that she had done the same thing.

This was an odd contrast to Taylor. Victoria was reminded of the night that they’d gotten together, as they’d curled up in bed together and Victoria had held the other girl as she slowly and haltingly listed off a litany of the tragedies that the people around her had suffered. It hadn’t been about how they’d failed her, how she’d lost her mother or father, how her friends had turned on her. Taylor had told Victoria what happened to people that she loved.

She’d explained about the conversation she’d been having with her mother when the woman had
been killed in that car accident, how she’d left her father alone to grieve and pulled into herself, leaving him to suffer alone and pull back. She’d told her about Emma’s misbegotten attempt to woo her, and her failure as a friend and the explosions that had come after. She’d listed it all off with this tone of guilt as if she expected that if she’d just been better, then these people would have had different, better lives. She’d told her all this in an attempt to point out that Victoria would be better off without her.

Victoria shifted back, dragging the unused pillow from her side of the bed, and folded it in half, tucking it between her arm and her head, watching as Taylor frowned at the loss of warmth before rolling onto her side to face her, curling into the warm space that Victoria’s body had left. Victoria smiled faintly as she reached out, gently pushing the dark hair out of Taylor’s face, tucking it behind her ear. The crease to the other girl’s forehead smoothed and she muttered again before sinking back into slumber.

Expectation, Victoria thought, was the difference. Dean expected great things from those he drew to himself. He believed in them, and he was disappointed when they failed to meet those expectations. Victoria herself had often suffered under those disappointed looks when she’d been a bit too tempestuous. When she’d done things that she really shouldn’t have, it’d even bled into their relationship at times.

Dean had always acted like a perfect gentleman, but it’d been in an almost overt manner. Dean had ensured that she understood that he wouldn’t pressure her into things, like most guys. He’d been careful not to seem forceful or push her, but sometimes this merely reminded her of the fact that most boys would ‘expect’ something. There was an implied expectation that Dean was particularly gallant about by letting her set her own pace. Dean had insisted that he wasn’t putting pressure on her, but the pressure had still existed.

In truth, she and Dean had experimented some, and she had spent a few mornings when they’d managed to find time to themselves laying in bed with Dean like this. Dean had always been the one on his back, and he’d cradled her in his arms, and Victoria had exulted in the hold, that warmth, one of the few things that had penetrated her barriers and made her feel like the world around her was actually real.

But now, as she studied Taylor’s face, Victoria found that she preferred this. She enjoyed waking up in Taylor’s arms just as much as she enjoyed waking up with Taylor in hers. Reaching out a hand, Victoria smiled softly as she lightly dragged the pad of her thumb over Taylor’s cheek, watching as the girl smiled softly and shifted closer.

There was no expectation with Taylor; Victoria admitted as she remembered the night before. When the movies had come to an end, and everyone agreed that getting a decent night’s sleep before school might be the best plan, they’d all tidied up. Amy had seen Lily out, and Taylor had gone to get her shower out of the way. Victoria had ended up cleaning up the dishes and putting the leftovers in the fridge.

She’d done her own evening routine, brushed her teeth and tied her hair back and then she’d slid into the room that had once been Danny’s, finding Taylor nervously sitting in their bed staring around the room at the shadows as if staring at ghosts. When the door closed behind her, Taylor had glanced up at her with such an open look of relief on her face that it had been palpable. It was an oddly empowering feeling to be so openly needed, and Victoria had been across the room, and into the bed so fast she’d worried that she’d accidentally activated her powers.

She’d held Taylor in her arms, feeling the girl shake quietly and being reminded of the last time that
she had been this afraid, this desperate for contact, for connection. She remembered finding herself in Dean’s arms like Taylor was in hers. She remembered making her move, the awkward fumbling encounter that had followed was mostly a blur in her memories. She distinctly remembered dozing off on Dean’s chest feeling warm and content imagining that everything was different, but she also remembered waking up in the stark light of the morning after to find that nothing had truly changed.

There had been no desperation from Taylor. It wasn’t about having someone, anyone close, Taylor had held her and earnestly thanked her for being there. She’d sniffled and commented that she could do this with her, and then she’d talked softly. Taylor had buried her body into Victoria’s, and she’d spoken quietly. Soft stories shared about Taylor’s parents. Times she’d been in this room as a child to hide from the storms, to other tales, helping her mother get ready for date nights with her father. Victoria had listened and glanced around, finally seeing the ghosts that Taylor had lurking around the room.

Eventually, Taylor had talked herself out, and they’d laid quietly in the bed, the moonlight dappling their features and they’d just stared at each other silently before Victoria had slowly shifted closer, giving Taylor a single chaste kiss before shifting down and wrapping herself around Taylor. The chuckle from the taller girl as she settled let Victoria know that perhaps she wasn’t the only one who enjoyed being needed either.

Soft grumbling from Taylor drew Victoria from her thoughts, and she watched as Taylor grumbled and rubbed at her face before reaching out. When Taylor didn’t find her close, she blearily opened one eye, the brown orb focusing after a moment to find her laying so close. Taylor blinked a few times before smacking her lips quietly.

“Were you watching me sleep?” Taylor’s voice was rough, laced with bemusement and sleep, and Victoria tilted her head but didn’t reply. Taylor let out a whine as she grabbed the blankets, tugging them off of Victoria’s form. Victoria gasped out at the sudden cold on her pyjama-clad form, but Taylor ignored her and spoke sleepily.

“That’s creepy.” She pulled the blankets up and over her face as her cheeks darkened and Victoria chuckled, tugging on the blankets, grinning when Taylor whined and kept hiding. “You’re a creep.” Taylor dragged out the last word, though the tone was playful enough despite the thick sleep in her tone that Victoria wasn’t bothered. When Taylor didn’t let her pull the blanket away, Victoria shifted closer, resting against Taylor’s side.

“If I’m a creep then what does that make you, hrm? You’re the one that agreed to go out with me.” She smirked as she tugged at the blanket, and Taylor loosened her grip enough that the blanket slid down and revealed the upper half of her face. She narrowed her eyes in Victoria’s direction before speaking; her voice still muffled by the blanket.

“Someone with poor taste, apparently.” She squealed when Victoria lunged, trying and failing to roll away, to escape the bed. Victoria was faster though, and she managed to pin Taylor in place, playfully tickling her sides. The gasps of outrage and the playful threats came, and Taylor continued to squirm and whine, despite possessing the strength to easily buck her off if she wanted. Victoria stilled her tickling when Taylor flopped onto her back, panting softly, and staring up at her with a broad grin on her face.

“I concede. Clearly, you are the superior contender in this war of tickles. What concession do you require of your defeated foe?” Taylor’s voice was playfully formal as she got her breathing under control. She reached up a hand, tugging it awkwardly out of the blankets, and trying to smooth her hair down. She glanced up at Vic when the girl leaned close, and she let out a whine.
“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet.” She commented, but she didn’t struggle when Victoria tilted up her chin and snagged a brief affectionate kiss before rolling off. Victoria sprawled back out on her half of the bed, glancing over when Taylor grabbed her phone off the bedside table and checked the time before putting it back down. The girl flopped onto her back and lay atop the pillows, staring at the roof as her brow furrowed.

“What’re you thinking about?” Victoria spoke curiously as she wiggled closer. Taylor perked up a touch, glancing down toward her and shrugging before rolling over to face her.

“I think… I might go for a run this morning.” Victoria studied Taylor for a moment before smiling quietly. The runs had stopped after the Leviathan battle, and it was probably a good thing that Taylor was going to resume them. Victoria glanced at the window, and when that failed to give her a good idea of the time, she rolled over and grabbed her own phone, checking the time. She could probably afford to do a run if they left soon.

“Mind if I join you?” She glanced at Taylor, her heart fluttering at the wide grin that suddenly grew across the other girl’s face. She smiled as well, watching as Taylor sat up with a soft grunt. Victoria climbed out of the bed on her side, stretching quietly. She glanced over her shoulder and flushed as she watched Taylor stretching and grabbing her phone.

A quick check of the weather and then she’d collected a pair of track pants, a tank top and slipped out of the room to get changed, leaving Taylor to get ready in her wake.

The first mile had been a bit rough on the both of them, several weeks of not exercising made things a bit uncomfortable, but after that, they dropped into their groove. They’d been quiet, and both had ended up listening to music, but Victoria found herself watching Taylor as much as the other girl watched her. She could guess what the girl’s serious expression was about, but Taylor managed to keep her thoughts to herself until after they’d gotten home.

Victoria had gotten her things together for school while Taylor showered, getting her own shower in quickly after. Once she was clean and dressed for school, she bounded down the stairs, finding Taylor alone in the kitchen. She checked her phone, considering the time and wondering if she should go up and wake Amy, but Taylor’s comment from across the kitchen as she nibbled on a cold piece of pizza next to the fridge drew her focus back to the here and now.

“Hey. Vic, you drove dad’s truck around yesterday, right?” The girl’s voice was soft, and Victoria perked up, slipping over quietly. In truth, this hadn’t been the question that she’d thought that Taylor had been agonizing over but curious where it was going, she moved to open the fridge grabbing a slice of pizza as well and nibbling on it as she studied Taylor’s curious face.

“Yeah. It rumbles like a fifteen-year-old cat, but it drives alright. Your dad clearly took good care of it.” Victoria hummed as she munched down on the pizza, savouring the cold meats mixing together and turning to study Taylor’s features curiously. When Taylor pulled out a key chain and offered it over she backed up in confusion not taking them.

“Vic. He’s not coming back for it, and it’d be better for someone to use it, and since I don’t even
have a learners permit that’s probably you.” Taylor considered the key’s quietly before shrugging and adding as an afterthought.

“And it might be best if we could lower the amount of time you spend travelling around by bus.” Vic tilted her head and slipped over, taking the keys from Taylor’s outstretched hand and setting them on the nearby counter. She glanced at Taylor as the girl looked down at her and Victoria chuckled.

“So this is a thinly veiled attempt to have me around more, I see how it is.” The comment was teasing, and Victoria’s lips curled into a smile as Taylor laughed at the joke. She remained close, feeling Taylor’s forehead coming down to rest against hers. When Taylor’s hand gently gripped her sweater, Victoria studied her quietly.

“It’s just. I’d feel better knowing that you were able to get yourself around even without flying. And considering you and Amy are both commuting now... It just makes sense.” Taylor hummed faintly before shrugging up her shoulders and opening her eyes. The girl looked into her eyes, her expression softening as she spoke.

“Also, having you around more would be nice, Vic,” Victoria smirked quietly when Taylor leaned up and kissed her briefly before a thump from above caused her to pull back. Victoria let out a sigh listening as Amy’s feet padded out of her room and up the hall, the bathroom door closing and the water starting to run. She glanced up at the roof for a moment before speaking softly, studying Taylor as she filled a glass with water.

“We need to tell her.” Victoria’s voice was gentle, and she watched Taylor’s shoulders tense at the words. She moved over gently, resting a hand on the other girl’s arm, turning Taylor around to face her. Victoria studied Taylor’s conflicted face for a few moments before speaking.

“I get it, I don’t want her hurt her feelings either, but this isn’t fair to her or us, Taylor. I don’t want to hide this.” Vic’s voice was firm, and gently squeezed Taylor’s arm. She watched as Taylor glanced at her nervously, something flickering in her eyes, confusion or shock. She seemed to study her for a moment before a smile ghosted over her face.

“We could do it tonight, I guess. Dinner or something, try to break it to her gently?” Victoria glanced at Taylor and nodded, but the sound of her phone vibrating. She considered the phone for a few moments. First alarm. If she were taking the bus, she’d need to be outside in about twenty minutes, and even the truck wouldn’t cut that much time out with morning traffic like it was.

“Sounds like a plan.” She studied Taylor for a moment before tilting her head. Hearing the sound of running water continuing, she slipped closer, tilting Taylor’s chin back and feathering a quick kiss over the girl’s lips. When she drew back, she studied the other girl quietly, seeing the confusion on Taylor’s features.

“For the record, I don’t want to hide this from anyone.” She smiled quietly and brushed Taylor’s blushing cheek with her thumb. “Amy’s the only person that I care about that still doesn’t know, I want her to know so that I can drag you around by your hand in public, or we can go on dates.” She watched as Taylor seemed to blink in shock at this before nervously picking at her vest. She wanted to say more, but the words died in her throat, and she merely smiled at Taylor, watching as the girl tried to react to that sentiment.

Her phone buzzing again with a ten-minute warning broke the magic, and she noticed that the running water had stopped. She gave Taylor a look before turning and heading back out of the kitchen and climbing the stairs. On her way to Taylor’s room, she banged on Amy’s door, getting a
muffled ‘coming’ from within before heading on to collect her bag.

Exiting the room, Victoria saw Amy dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and seemingly ready to go as she stuffed her keys into her purse. Victoria smiled quietly and gestured Amy on. She followed her sister down into the kitchen, grabbing the keys and flashing a rather shy looking Taylor a smile as Amy snagged the half eaten pizza slice that Victoria had left on the table. Amy offered Taylor a muffled and half asleep good morning before glancing at the clock and heading out the door. Victoria grinned at Taylor before following.

“Vicky?” Amy’s voice came from where she had paused halfway up the driveway when Vicky had gone toward the garage instead of toward the street, and she stared at her in confusion. Victoria didn’t respond, using the keys to unlock the garage and pushing it open. She glanced at Amy’s confused look and pointed at the truck getting a shocked look in response.

“Taylor’s letting you use her Dad’s truck?” The words were laced with a faint hint of something that Victoria didn’t examine too carefully. Instead, she headed over and unlocked the vehicle and climbed into the driver’s side. It took Amy a few moments to collect her jaw off the driveway and clamber in the passenger seat, but once she was in, Victoria waited till she had her seatbelt on before starting the truck and pulling out.

“She doesn’t have a license, and it doesn’t make sense to keep paying the insurance on it if we’re never going to use it. And it’s helpful when we need to move things. I used it yesterday to bring all your stuff over.” She glanced at Amy before putting her arm over the back of the bench seat and staring out the rear window, carefully reversing out the driveway and setting off to merge into the crowds heading to work or school.

...cannot believe my eyes, how the world’s filled with filth and lies, but it’s plain to see..” Tapping her feet along with the music blasting into her ears, Victoria had been slowly nibbling on a chicken strip as she worked on the final essay for her English Lit class, staring in consternation at the page that she and Taylor had spent most of Monday evening brainstorming with her in how to make a thought-provoking essay out of Ishmael. Victoria was set on incorporating cape culture, and Taylor had come up with a few interesting parallels, but Victoria was having a hard time deciding.

Someone jamming their elbow roughly into her side caused her to suddenly jerk up, and she glanced over, blinking in confusion, at Amy’s skeptical look. She reached up a hand, cutting off Neil Patrick Harris’ voice and pulling one bud free. She stared at Amy with what she hoped was a ‘What the hell’ expression, but her sister merely pointed across the table. Victoria followed her gaze and saw Dennis and Chris standing on the opposite side of the table, looking sheepish. At her gaze, Chris coughed and waved.

“Hey Victoria, I saw you were working on the English Lit Essay, and I figured you might have some ideas, care to work together?” Victoria narrowed her eyes at the boys curiously. In truth, most of the Wards had been closer friends with Dean than her, and part of her wondered if this was some sort of trick on his part, but the earnest smirk on Chris’ face hinted at something else. Dennis just looked nervous, so Victoria waved at the other side, tilting her head when both of the boys sat down.

“Thanks! It’s packed in here.” The boy dropped into the other bench and then opened his bag,
carefully removing several books along with a small box that had been wrapped in dark paper and sealed. He set the books before him and then slid the box over toward Victoria. Carefully snagging it, Victoria read Taylor’s name on the top and blinked glancing at Win who spoke softly.

“She asked me to make her something. Well, a couple of things. I had some time over the weekend, and I got it done.” Victoria tilted her head, considering the box before shrugging and shoving it into her bag. When the boy leaned forward, she glanced back up. “Seriously though, do you have any ideas about this thing? Cause I’m stumped. I barely managed to read the book; it’s pretty dry.” Victoria laughed before pushing her book forward between them.

“Right. I poked Taylor about this. Psychology and Philosophy are kinda her things?” She shrugged as she saw Win flip the book around and stare at the words on the page. He hummed quietly, pulling out his own notes, and flipping to the right page.

“I kind of really liked the whole, hidden but pervasive myths thing that they do here,” Chris spoke as he tapped one of the notes and Victoria leaned forward. “It kind of reminds me of like, the new gods from that Neil Gaiman book. Uh. American Gods?” Victoria stared at him, blankly, and he rolled his eyes.

“It’s this novel about like. The Americanized versions of old world gods of myth facing off against the myths of the modern world, technology, the media, the stock market. Stuff like that. It sort of parallels this a bit, I think.” Victoria hummed in thought, making a note to add the book to her reading list. She’d been about to respond when Chris was bunched over a bit, and Dean slid into the bench between him and Dennis. Victoria shot the boy a look, but he held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Not here to fight. I just. I miss hanging out with you guys.” He shrugged up his shoulders, looking almost pathetic. She glanced at the others seeing their sympathetic looks, and she sighed, deciding that it was just as easy to ignore Dean from across the room as from at the same table, she turned back to Chris, seeing his uncomfortable look and smirking before waving a hand.

“Anyway, you were saying? How’d you wanna tie it together?” She studied Chris as he bit his lip and considered for a few moments, his eyes drifting over the page.

“I guess it could be like an interesting examination of how mythology and superstition affect the daily motivations of their cultures and vice versa. With a focus on Modern Mythology?” Chris paused and considered the book for a few moments. Victoria studied the boy and smirked speaking quietly.

“It’s an interesting premise if nothing else? I could bug Taylor, she’d probably have a few book recommendations, but you could also poke Miss Collins about it. I’m sure she’d be happy to point you in the right direction.” She saw Chris perk up and continued casually.

“I was thinking about doing something about ‘Cape Culture’. Like how we’ve taken to almost Mythicize…” She paused, frowning quietly. “Mythologize? Er. Construe. How we’ve construed capes into almost mythical figures. People like the Triumvirate or Dragon. They’ve entered the collective cultural unconsciousness at a level above celebrities. With some minor elements about like, cape fiction.” She glanced at Chris, chuckling at his interested look.

“Like. Movies and books and stuff about Capes. There’s a lot of like, Mad Tinker Fiction out there; I found this uh. Web series on youtube.” She pulled out her phone, quickly skimming through it as she spoke.
“Dr. Horrible’s sing a long blog. It’s about this mad Tinker that kind of reminds me of Leet? But he falls in love with this girl, and he has this nemesis that’s basically me in Nathan Filion’s body, but it’s hilarious. This is one of the songs.” Victoria restarted the song and reached out, handing over the earbud. When Chris blinked before tilting his head and grinning quietly, she set the phone down, letting him listen in silence.

“So. How are you guys settling back in at your place? I heard the repairs are all done.” Dean’s voice cut into her enjoyment at Chris’ reactions to the song, and she glanced over to see that he’d been speaking to a somewhat confused looking Amy.

“Pardon?” Amy stared at Dean, confused for a moment before shrugging it off. “The repairs are done, yeah, but we’re uh. We’re not staying at home at the moment. We’re still with Taylor and Lisa at Taylor’s place.” Amy’s voice was curious as she studied Dean and Victoria watched the flicker of confusion and irritation on his face. He didn’t seem to notice her observation, so she carefully listened.

“Oh. I had heard that your Mother didn’t want her being around you two. With the attacks and stuff. You two nearly died.” Dean frowned a bit before shrugging up a shoulder. Victoria watched her carefully, glancing over when Amy spoke.

“That wasn’t Taylor’s fault. We’ve all earned enemies from capes and stuff, blaming it on her isn’t fair. When we found out what she’d did, we were pretty upset. She had no business saying things like that to Taylor, and no else had better either.” Victoria blinked at the steely undertone in Amy’s voice, chuckling softly. Dean’s expression hardened as he stared at Amy, and he spoke gently in response.

“Well, I hope you’re not being too hard on her. She does have your best interests at heart.” Dean spoke gently, his voice disappointed, and Victoria felt the urge to flick something at him, though that impulse stilled when he continued.

“She had a lot of stuff going on, and I doubt that finding out that your daughter was sharing a bed with the girl that nearly got her killed made her any more stable, she.” Dean cut off when Dennis let out a sudden choking sound at what he’d heard, and it occurred to Dean that he probably shouldn’t have said that. When she leaned closer, she watched Dean swallowing nervously.

“Where did you hear that.” Her voice was cold, and she ignored Amy’s nervous look, staring at Dean when he stared at her. He swallowed a bit before shifting back quietly. Victoria shifted up, leaning over the table.

“Where did you hear that, Dean? As far as I know, no one except Amy, our family, and Lisa know about that. It’s not in any official reports.” She watched as Dean slowly shifted back further glancing nervously between Dennis and Chris, who both looked rather shocked at the revelation. Clearly not watercooler gossip. Victoria admitted that Lily could have told as well, but she didn’t seem the type.

“I-uh. I just heard it.” Dean coughed and adjusted his shirt. “Rumors, you know.” Victoria stared at Dean, watching as he shrunk under her gaze. She got her feet under her and growled, her mother’s words from the hospital room coming back to her.

“...I was going to go and speak to her. But I saw her coming down the hall, and I was just so angry.”
“What’d you do, Dean?” She glared at him as he shifted back. She lunged forward to try and grab his shirt, watching as he quickly slid out of the seat and stood up. She growled as she prepared to leap over the table, though Amy’s hand on her sweater stopped her. She glanced down at her sister, taking in Amy’s dark look that she was shooting in Dean’s direction.

“Dean,” Amy’s voice was cold and harsh in a way that Victoria envied and even she felt shivers down her spine as Amy’s green eyes locked on the poor boy and she glared at him quietly.

“Dean, tell me that you had nothing to do with our mother going after Taylor.” She stared at him quietly, and Victoria turned to stare at him as well. Dean seemed to shrink a bit under the collective gazes of both of them and Chris and Dennis. Victoria had been about to go over the table, Amy or no when a voice cut across them all.

“Dean, is everything okay?” Everything ground to a halt as the group as one swung their gaze around to lock pale redheaded girl that had interrupted the confrontation. She was dressed well, simple skirt and top, muted make-up and jewelry, lots of bright metallic pins woven into her outfit. She walked over toward where Dean was standing and glanced across the table at them in confusion.

“Sorry to interrupt, just looked like a tense moment. Wouldn’t want tempers to boil over.” She flashed a feigned distressed look, and then the girl slowly checked out each of their faces. She moved from person to person before stopping on Victoria and then she smiled in recognition.

“Oh! Victoria, right? Dean’s girlfriend. He’s mentioned you, a few times. I think we’ve crossed paths before several times, but we’ve never actually spoken one on one.” The girl smiled quietly and waved. “I’m Emma Barnes; we met at that photo shoot back in like… November, right?” She spoke casually, and Victoria felt ice filling her as her back straightened.

“You’ve forgotten our last meeting.” Victoria’s voice was calm, and she watched the nervousness appear on the redhead’s face as she tried to remember. Victoria stared at her, sure that her eyes had turned into blue-grey chips of flint at this point. She had to actively resist the urge to bring up her shield, for fear of what she’d do to the girl. When Emma just stared at her confused, she went on speaking slowly.

“You were speaking with my girlfriend and her friend at the mall in the food court. You ran off as I came back.” Victoria’s voice was ice cold, and she ignored the shocked choking from Dean, Dennis, and Amy, though a part of her sent a silent apology to Taylor for ruining her ‘let her down easy’ plan. She stared at Emma as the girl’s mind worked, and her expression shifted into an almost evil smirk for a moment before it faded behind her friendly smile.

“Oh. I hadn’t realized that you and Dean had split. That’s a shame. Are you with Sabah then? She seemed rather nice when I saw her at the food court, and she’s cute, certainly dresses well. I was just trying to warn her about her friend, you know. I used to know Taylor, you know, before-” Victoria smoothly leapt over the table, using her hand to pivot and land gently on her feet between Chris and Dennis, suddenly much closer to a visibly nervous Emma.

“Sabah’s not my girlfriend, but she is a great friend. She’s also an excellent judge of character. I’d take her recommendations over yours. As for, Taylor, who is, in fact, my girlfriend, she has told me all about just how well you knew her, Emma.” Victoria loomed over the redhead, watching as the girl’s face paled suddenly before flushing red.

“You should know that Taylor’s-” Victoria growled and stepped forward, swiping out a hand which
grabbed empty air as Dean reacted to her rage before she could and dragged Emma away before she could get her hands on her. Amy said something that didn’t penetrate the haze of fury she was feeling, but she guessed it wasn’t directed at her because Chris and Dennis were suddenly hauling her backwards.

Victoria’s gaze was locked on the hateful look on Emma’s face as Dean physically dragged her away, and she wasn’t surprised when they ended up at what had once been her table among the confused looking faces of the people that had been her friends. She stared after them coldly for a few moments before shaking off the boys’ hands on her arms, turning back to the table.

She stood there quietly and took in the angry look on Amy’s face and the confusion on Chris and Dennis’ faces and deciding that she didn’t want to deal with this now, she slammed her books shut, stuffed them all into her bag and stormed out of the cafeteria, ignoring the stares locked on her back.

“...seriously though, what is a draco-pyromaniac.” Taylor quietly squeezed the water out of her hair, glowering over at a distinctly amused looking Will. Her only consolation was that he was just as soaking wet as she was. They’d been in the Cafeteria getting a somewhat late lunch when an alarm had gone off that sounded like an old fashioned church bell, and the sprinklers had opened up dousing them both in water.

“I honestly have no idea. But the kids in class keep saying that Warren and I are so lucky to live off campus cause we never had to worry about ending up with one as a roommate. Whatever that means.” The older boy rolled his eyes and squeezed the water out of his t-shirt before glancing down at their ‘haul.’

“Anyway, it looks like the only things that survived the deluge of water on the tray were the twinkies and the chips.” Will glanced at her and then shrugged moving to open the twinkies and offering her one of the yellow cakes. Taylor grinned and munched on the cake and glanced over at the others streaming out of the school as the alarms continued to ring ominously from the school.

Taylor shifted position as the warm sunlight managed to warm her chilly form, and she could already feel her damp clothing starting to dry as she snagged a bottle of water from the table and took a sip. Glancing up at Will’s confused sound, she looked up just in time to see Warren charging across the grass toward them his long brown hair fluttering behind him the sunlight making the highlights shine.

The boy came skidding to a stop before their table and gripped his knees, breathing heavily. He took a moment to collect himself before glancing at Taylor and speaking.

“Taylor, prepare yourself, Amy’s coming. She’s uh. Not super happy.” Taylor blinked at him in confusion before glancing over his shoulder. Amy was speedwalking across the grass toward them, her t-shirt also slightly damp from the fire-alarm. Not fare behind her, Vicky was moving slower. She’d pulled off the sweater that she’d worn out of the house this morning and was squeezing the water out of it as she stalked along in her jeans and a tank top.

Amy arrived first and skidded to a halt staring at them. Warren glanced nervously between them before hopping up onto the table next to Will. Taylor blinked quietly at Amy’s especially serious look, tilting her head when the girl seemed to stare into her for a few moments before speaking.
"So. Taylor. I heard a fascinating rumour at school today." Her chilly voice made Taylor feel oddly nervous, and she glanced between Amy and the approaching Victoria. Amy followed her gaze and glanced back at Vic, who simply gave her a withering look before striding past her. Taylor felt a squeak escape her throat as Victoria grabbed her hand and dragged her to her feet, turning to face Amy and holding up their linked hands.

"Yes, Amy. As I said at school today, we’re dating." Amy glanced over at her and Taylor frowned at the serious look on her face before nodding gently. She watched as Amy’s expression seemed to fall, and the girl let out an irritated noise. Taylor glanced up at Vic with confusion, and the girl sighed.

"I know we were going to tell her together, but uh. There was an incident at school." Taylor tilted her head at Vic who seemed oddly reticent, blinking when Amy’s short, clipped voice cut across them both.

"She got in a fight with Dean, and guess who showed up to save his bacon. Emma.” Taylor blinked at Amy before glancing at Victoria who shrunk back into her shoulders, Victoria didn’t respond, and Amy continued in that harsh voice.

"Emma started talking about what great friends you used to be and then Vic nearly beat her face in.” Taylor frowned at Victoria’s worried expression before flicking her gaze over at Amy’s face taking in her smooth expression and the expectant look in her eyes. She sighed softly before gently turning back to her worried looking girlfriend.

She gently pulled her hand from Vic’s, ignoring the tightening grip and the worried sound before gently gripping her chin and drawing her gaze back up staring at her quietly. There seemed to be an almost genuine fear in the other girl’s eyes, and Taylor studied her carefully, tilting her head when Vic spoke.

"I know I said I wouldn’t go after her. She just-" Vic’s expression hardened and sucked in a breath, looking back at Taylor. "She just, she was going to start saying things and-" Vic cut off again, glancing away. Taylor let out an amused chuckle that saw Vic glancing back at her, and she spoke softly.

"I can guess what she was going to say, Vic. And I applaud your restraint. I certainly can’t be upset at you for defending me.” She watched as Victoria seemed to relax. The sound of Amy letting out an irritated huff and storming off caused her to let out a sigh. A flicker of dark rage welled into her middle and Taylor sighed softly. She pressed a quick kiss to Vic’s forehead that drew exaggerated ‘aws’ from the two boys behind her. She ignored Vic’s chuckle against her chin before pulling back and glancing toward Warren and Will.

"I’m gonna speak with Amy.” She gently turned, using her grip on Vic to gently push her toward the boys. “Keep an eye on my girlfriend, hm?” She smirked when Victoria seemed to perk up at the comment, her cheeks darkening. Taylor turned and stalked off in the direction that Amy had gone.
Amy hadn’t been particularly difficult to locate; it’d barely taken fifteen minutes of searching to find the girl stewing angrily on a bench under a tree. Taylor had stared at the girl quietly. She moved around the tree and saw Amy glance up at her with a look of irritation on her face before turning to stare at the ground. She let out a sigh before walking around the bench and sitting down next to Amy and crossing her legs.

Part of Taylor would have preferred sitting in silence with Amy until the other girl had finally been ready to speak, to let the other girl set the pace, but the welling irritation in her from the Dark Lord flickered again, and she sighed before speaking, her words finally stilling that anger from Marr.

“You need to stop doing that, Amy,” The girl glanced at her in confusion and Taylor let out a sigh. “That thing you do, where you’re upset at how we’re acting, and you say something hoping to upset one of us. Like when we were watching movies, and you mentioned Dean.” Taylor saw Amy shrinking down under her gaze, and she slowly glanced off, letting her gaze drift back out to the damp coed lurking around on the quad as they waited for the all clear to return to school.

“It’s not fair; you were my friend first.” Taylor quietly lifted a hand, pinching the bridge of her nose and glancing off into the distance as Amy spoke gently. “I liked you too, and she knew it. But she always has to win.” Amy’s voice was filled with a faint bitterness and Taylor growled softly, even without Marr’s prompting.

“I’m not some prize, Amy. She didn’t ‘win’ me, and I’m not with her because she got to me first.” She glanced over at Amy, studying her quietly, taking in the girl’s hurt expression. She sighed softly and shook her head tiredly.

“We didn’t do this to spite you, Amy. But we do genuinely care for each other. You’re one of my best friends, and I’d seriously prefer it if you could support me- us in this. But, I’m not going to stop seeing her if you can’t. I’m sorry.” Taylor studied Amy quietly, watching as her shoulders slumped. The next question that came from Amy surprised her, though.

“Did you know? About my feelings?” Taylor blinked, and the surprised expression on her face gave her away because Amy let out a bitter laugh and spoke quietly. “Why her, then? If you knew how I felt, why couldn’t we have tried?” Taylor studied Amy quietly, considering the girl’s face calmly before letting out a long sigh.

“Do you really want to know?” She spoke gently, watching Amy’s reactions. “I can assure you that you probably won’t like the answer.” She watched as Amy’s expression became uncertain before she firmed her resolve and nodded faintly. Taylor took a deep breath before looking away, lacing her fingers across her lap.

“Do you remember the day I joined New Wave?” She spoke softly, listening to Amy let out a faint sound of agreement, and then she continued.

“You asked me about thefacebook group and the websites. The rumours. You asked me about them with this look on your face.” Taylor’s voice was soft as she stared at the grass.

“I’ve seen that look before,” Taylor spoke quietly before peering at Amy, taking a moment to study her before continuing.

“You’ve read the new articles about how I triggered, and you know what they did to me to make me trigger. But before all that, they used the rest of the school against me. Rumours and lies turned everyone that had once been my friends against me. The websites were part of it. But eventually, the
fun ended when they didn’t have anyone to convert.” Taylor took a breath, letting out a slow sigh.

“But they came up with this new game, Amy. They’d leave me alone, let me believe that they’d finally moved on, gotten bored. And then someone new would come to the school, or they'd move in around the neighbourhood, and I’d make a friend. Someone else that wasn’t popular, or well connected, but at least they’d talk to me, and they’d wait till I’d gotten attached and then one of them would take them aside, and show them those websites.” Taylor spoke softly, and she stared at her hands before looking at Amy’s concerned look and sighing.

“And then they’d come back and look at me just like you did. Sometimes they’d hold out a bit, try and believe that it was all lies, but eventually, they caved. Every last one.” Taylor studied Amy’s almost guilty expression and sighed.

“It’s human nature, Amy. Trust is earned, and we’d only been friends for a bit, but every time you looked at me with that affection, all I could see were all those people who’d looked at me the same way you had, with that suspicion, secretly wondering what kind of monster I really was under it all.” Taylor glanced off quietly before gently scratching the nails on one of the thumbs with the tip of her finger.

“Vic’s never looked at me like that. I’ve told her every dark story of that time, told her every one of my greatest regrets and she’s never looked at me like that,” Taylor spoke softly and glanced at Amy, seeing the girl’s expression soften and she let out a sigh.

“She believes in me in a way that, really, no one should, and that’s why I gave her... us a chance.” Taylor watched as Amy seemed to consider her a few moments before tiredly sighing and shaking her head.

“Tell-... Tell Vicky I’m sorry that I got mad. I kind of suspected this might happen, but I didn’t expect it to be this fast. I’m-” Amy seemed to pause and frown, staring at her feet for a few moments before sitting up.

“I’m gonna go clear my head. Tell the guys I said sorry, but I need some space. I’ll be home later, okay?” Taylor studied Amy for a few moments before slowly nodding, watching the other girl walk away, considering the sad slump to her shoulders. Taylor watched her go, quietly resting her hands in her lap until Victoria’s form slowly crept around the tree and peered down at her silently.

Taylor tilted her head and stared up at Vic, taking in her oddly serious expression, she shifted to the side and watched as the blonde girl dropped down onto the bench next to her and moved to curl into her side, resting tiredly against her shoulder. Taylor lifted her arm and wrapped it around the shorter girl’s shoulders holding her close and letting the comfortable silence stretch between them as their clothes dried in the sunlight.

“I believe in you because you believe in me.” Vic’s voice was gentle, and Taylor chuckled quietly, resting her cheek on Victoria’s head. She briefly considered attempting to point out again just how badass Vic was, to make her see that it was easy to have Faith in her, but instead, she hummed as she closed her eyes.

“So. You finally got to meet Emma up close. She’s uh- Well, she’s something else, yeah? Apparently, when she thought that Sabah and I were together, she tried to steal her away.” She hated that she couldn’t keep the brief flicker of worry that washed into her tone, and she drew back when Victoria pulled back to stare at her. She studied Victoria’s features, feeling oddly vulnerable at the intense look in her eyes.
“She’s got nothing on you, Taylor.” Vic’s voice was soft, and Taylor flushed softly and glanced away, ignoring the rapid beats of her heart. She bit her lip and tried to change the subject carefully.

“So,” Taylor spoke, coughing at the odd cracking in her voice, blushing harder. “I guess she goes to Arcadia now?” She glanced back at Victoria, who was sitting there and studying her with an amused smirk, before speaking softly.

“Well, your dad did use Leviathan to crush Winslow into rubble as they ran past, not that I blame him, so they had to split the students up between other schools. Some people moved away, but most of the wealthier kids ended up at Arcadia, and a bunch of the rest ended up at the Catholic school.” Taylor felt that familiar flicker of warmth in her chest she did every time she heard about the fate of Winslow High before shaking her head and glancing off through the trees, smiling when Victoria curled back into her side.

“Well, hopefully, she’ll be less confrontational with someone that could bend her in half.” Taylor’s voice was soft, but even she could hear the doubt in her voice when the subject of Emma’s obsession with her came up. Victoria’s snort and faint comment of ‘Let her try’ probably shouldn’t have warmed Taylor’s heart so much, but it did.

They’d ended up joining Warren and Will for a bit before heading home for dinner. Rather than eating even more leftovers, Taylor had cooked them up some steaks on the barbecue, and they’d eaten them while watching television. Taylor could tell that Victoria had been bothered by Amy’s continued absence, but she seemed intent on giving the other girl space.

When Victoria had spread her books out on the coffee table once dinner was finished, Taylor had excused herself and headed out to the garage. She’d spent most of the day yesterday while Lisa and Vicky had been occupied at her parent’s house working in the garage with Ralph, checking the various bits of equipment that her father had kept out here to allow him to keep his truck running and the house repaired.

She’d initially intended to machine the Saber-pike’s main body herself, but upon inspecting her father’s lathe, Ralph told her that it wouldn’t be much use for anything harder than aluminum. She’d asked a few of her father’s friends and found a shop that did custom work not too far from the house and, she’d called in the order for the main body of the weapon. She’d been surprised at the speed which they’d finished the order, and they’d called to say she could get it before she’d gone to classes this afternoon.

Entering the garage, she flicked on the lights, moving over to the case that her commission had come in. She carefully opened it up, pulling out the bits of metal that had been carefully shaped and cut to her specifications. She drew each piece out one by one, checking it before setting it aside.

A four-foot length of nickel plated steel with an area for a leather grip to be attached, the outer frame for the lightsaber emitter. The exterior casing for the control mechanism and several long pins and bits of metal bracketing that had been expertly cut and tooled for what she needed. Taylor considered the various parts before nodding to herself. The sound of the door creaking open from the house startled her, and she glanced up.
Vic stood in the door, staring at her curiously and stalking over. Taylor glanced over from her workbench and smiled at her girlfriend, watching as the blonde peered down at the table.

“What’re you working on?” Taylor studied Vic before shrugging and gesturing at the equipment.

“It’s a new weapon, something a bit more personalized than the bo-staff. Bit more of a pain in the ass to make.” Taylor smiled quietly. Vic seemed to pause, blinking before turning toward the house. Taylor stared after her as she vanished into the house and then returned a few moments later with a box in her hands.

“Kid Win gave this to me.” She held it out, and Taylor accepted it, carefully hefting it up and ripping the paper off. Opening it up revealed the circuit board, capacitor, and power cell that she’d shown him. Taylor smirked as she casually set all three on the bench, placing the box aside. She had everything she needed except the emitter crystal.

She carefully grabbed the brackets and set to work, slotting the various bits together as best she could, getting the emitter array put together and attaching it to the power supply, and then carefully securing the boards to that, before slotting the entire mess into the emitter housing for the pike, carefully sliding it all in and letting out a sigh when it all fit. Now she just needed to get the crystal furnace from Dragon and-

“Taylor?” Victoria’s confused voice startled her, and Taylor had almost forgotten that she was there, glancing over to see the blonde staring down at the work table in confusion. Taylor glanced down at the emitter she’d assembled as if she’d done it a thousand times and held it up.

“It’s uh. It’s missing a part, but basically, it affixes to the top of this.” Taylor showed Vic, attaching the emitter to the sabre-pike’s frame, carefully securing it before hefting up the weapon. With the emitter connected it reached nearly five feet, almost as tall as Taylor herself. She twirled the weapon as she had in Satele’s memories, the actions a bit less sure in the real world. She came to a stop and grinned at Vic.

“It’s a solid weapon unlike my bo staff which collapses, makes it more durable, and once I finish the top part, it’ll have the ability to generate a glowing plasma blade. Kind of like Armsmaster’s halberd, but different.” She paused, studying Victoria confused expression before tilting her head.

“Are you a Tinker now too?” The question startled her and Taylor paused, setting the weapon down on the table before shrugging.

“Not exactly. I just know how to build certain things. That’s why I went to Win for parts; Tinkers are better, their powers help them build. I just know a few advanced toys.” She shrugged quietly, glancing at Victoria and blinking nervously at the oddly intense look that the girl was giving her. She shifted from foot to foot quietly waiting for the inevitable questions to come.

“Who’s Bastila?” Taylor froze in place, her face paling as Victoria asked the one question that she hadn’t been expecting at all. Taylor glanced at Victoria quietly, taking in the girl’s face, the look of concern, and she let out a soft sigh.

“Where did you hear that name?” She spoke gently, but the sudden deafening silence from the spirits in her head gave a good idea as to where, one that Victoria confirmed a moment later.

“Your dad. During the Leviathan fight. He pulled me aside, asked me to keep an eye on you, and
told me that when it was all done when the dust had settled, I should ask you who Bastila was.”

Taylor stared at Victoria quietly, considering her for a few moments before sighing and moving over toward her.

Victoria followed her when she moved past, and they ended up sitting on one of the planters in the backyard staring up at the few stars visible in the city. Taylor glanced at Vic, considering her for a few moments before speaking softly.

“So. You know how I triggered in the locker, right?” She watched as Victoria nodded and she glanced down at her hands. “Well. It didn’t really go, from what I gather, as most triggers do.” Taylor studied Victoria’s confused expression and sighed quietly. When the other girl slid over and wrapped an arm around her, most of the tension bled out of her, and she tried again.

“So, and bear with me here, there’s a thing called a Noetikon. It was created by these… people called Jedi a very long time ago…”

Chapter End Notes

[[DUN DUN DUN. So yeah. Stuff is going down — Lots of different balls in the air. We’ll pick up 7.3 after Taylor has explained everything, and probably the morning after as they talk about stuff, cause I’m not super interested in rewriting that info-dump, and I doubt you all want to reread it.

Amy’s found out about the ladies, which is a shame, but it seems like she gets it at least. There’s going to be a B-side for this chapter that follows Amy after she storms off, it’s kind of neat actually. It shouldn’t be too long maybe 3k words; it’ll be up some time later today.

Dean continues to Dean, and he has got a new friend, which is probably not for the best. But at least Vic got to make both Dean, and Emma pissed off at her in one fell swoop. I’ve been hinting that Danny let Leviathan crush Winslow for a bit now, and now we get to see the side effects. On the other hand, Dennis and Win are fun to write, even if they didn’t actually say much. There’ll be more Win stuff in a later chapter. There’s going to be a joint patrol between Taylor, Crystal, Chris, and Manpower at some point, so that’ll be fun.

If you’re confused about the dracopyromaniacs, it’s a reference to Carmilla, cause I was listening to it when I wrote. The song Vicky’s listening to is, as she said, from Dr. Horrible’s Sing along blog. Beyond that uh… Cold Pizza is an excellent breakfast, and uh. SEE YOU NERDS SOON WITH THE B-SIDE.]]
7.2 B-Side

Chapter Summary

[[So, you guys seemed very interested in directly seeing Victoria’s reaction to Taylor’s revelation, and since I’d planned on starting 7.3 with the morning after and uh. Taylor sort of reacting to Victoria’s reaction through narration, mostly in an effort to keep from oversaturating the Tay/Vic cuteness. The tail end of this b-side will include a compromise of sorts.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 8th, 2011
BBU, Brockton Bay

Amy had barely made it forty feet before the guilt she was feeling caused her to hurry her steps until she couldn’t feel the heat of Taylor’s eyes on her back. She eventually found her way to a different isolated bench, and she dropped onto it, letting out a quiet groan as she buried her face in her hands.

She wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry or scream in the end, she found herself laughing bitterly for a few moments before slowly leaning back. She sat there, staring up at the sunlight peeking past the canopy of the tree she sat under, and she took a single deep breath, holding it in until her lungs burned and then releasing it with a long slow sigh. She sat up and ran a hand through her hair, her thoughts turning inwards.

Amy knew that she shouldn’t have said what she did, she’d known that even before she’d said it. But she’d been so bitter, so angry. The unfairness of it all had struck her, and some part of her just wanted to hurt them both. And she’d succeeded, and it hadn’t made her feel any better at all. Amy glanced in the direction that she’d come from, the trees that littered the campus, blocking her view of where she’d left Taylor staring regretfully after her.

Victoria hadn’t even been a lesbian, Amy thought with an ironic twist her thoughts, and somehow she’d managed to come in and woo Taylor far more effectively then Amy herself had, despite Amy having been actually trying to do so, well, attempting to do so, even if she hadn’t been particularly effective. Part of Amy could admit that even going into the situation that she’d probably already lost, but part of her still wanted to be angry over it, even if it didn’t make any sense.

Being told off by Taylor of all people sort of dried up any aspect of that bitter anger. She’d looked into the other girl’s dark eyes as they’d spoke and it’d been apparent how much Victoria meant to Taylor. She’d been surprised, but she shouldn’t have been. They’d been drawn together for a while now, and they both seemed to make each other happier. Amy linked her fingers together, and she stared back toward the distant trees, studying the leaves swaying in the wind.

Victoria had been adrift for a long time, and Amy had once fantasized about being the girl’s port of harbour, a place for her to finally feel safe. The other thoughts, the darker ones had come later, but at first, it had all been about finally freeing Victoria from the heavy chains that had dragged her down when she thought no one was looking. And Amy had to admit that Taylor had done that. And, as hurt as she was, Amy still loved her sister and could admit to herself, that if this is what Victoria
wanted, she deserved someone like Taylor.

That she also seemed to make Taylor happier and more open was also an objectively good thing, Amy admitted as well. Considering the turn of her thoughts, Amy let out a long tired sigh before sitting forward and getting her feet under her. If she put aside her own desires for a moment, she could admit that objectively, she should be happy for them.

And, standing there quietly with the wind fluttering her hair around her, Amy could admit that deep down, perhaps she was. She doubted that it'd be easy to see it at first, but… she could learn to deal with this. Her expression hardened, and she firmed her resolve, glancing back the way she came. She considered going back, telling them that she was happy for them, but her determination crumbled before she took a step.

Maybe once the tempers cooled, she thought to herself before striding in the opposite direction. She briefly considered where to go instead, idly taking out her phone with the intention of calling Sabah. Something white fluttering out of her pocket and ending up on the grass startled her. She carefully ducked down, grabbing the note, only recognizing it once she’d opened it and considered the handwriting.

Lily’s dorm room. The girl had given her the address the night before as she was leaving, saying that it was just in case Amy ever needed to hang out, or talk, or get some space. The oddly concerned look on the girl’s face had confused Amy then, but looking back she briefly wondered just how much the girl had figured out. She considered the note for a moment before turning toward the residential area of the campus and set off quickly.

Amy wasn’t sure why she’d hesitated in the hallway outside Lily’s room, but for some reason, the idea of going to Lily like this because she’d found out about Taylor and Victoria struck an odd chord in her chest that made her reconsider knocking. She stood there outside the door shifting back and forth, considering just taking out her phone and calling Sabah and just, hiding out at the girl’s shop for a few hours with some ice cream and a sympathetic ear. She’d almost mentally talked herself into going when the door to Lily’s room suddenly swung open.

The other girl froze as she was coming out, an electric kettle in hand and she stared in confusion at Amy lurking opposite her, her mouth opening and closing before her cheeks darkened and she scrabbled backwards to shut the door. Amy’s mouth fell open as she took in Lily’s haphazard appearance, studying the girl’s wild unkempt dark hair, and the comfortable grungy clothes that she wore. She peered past Lily before the door could be closed to see that a tornado had apparently attacked the girl’s room.

“Amy!” The girl’s voice was a touch higher than usual, and she quickly raised a hand attempting to smooth down her wild hair as she continued to blush in an oddly endearing way. Amy shifted from foot to foot, staring at the other girl as she babbled on. “W-What brings you here?” She spoke nervously, and Amy found herself smiling softly.

“I was uh. Well,” Amy paused, frowning in thought, considering if she wanted to tell the truth before shrugging. “I was standing here and mentally debating if I should knock on your door or not.” She stared at the girl’s dishevelled appearance, chuckling softly before speaking.

“Though, considering the fact that you look like you just crawled out of a shipwreck, I’m more
worried that I haven’t stopped by sooner. What’s, uh… What’s going on?” She considered the girl for a few moments, chuckling when Lily nervously shifted from foot to foot.

“Just uh. I missed a lot of class staying in the hospital so long, and unlike you guys, my identity is a secret so they couldn’t say it was for medical reasons, so I have a lot of work to catch up on. I’ve been binging, you know? So I could be around for the stuff on the weekend, and to have time to hang out with you guys.” Amy glanced at Lily as she spoke, peering past her again before chuckling and reaching out for the kettle.

“How about I fill this, and you can tidy up a bit before I get back?” She spoke softly and watched a brief look of relief flash over the other girl’s face as she offered over the kettle. Amy took her time, walking down the hall toward the bathrooms and fiddling with the kettle, figuring out how to pop the top and filling it up. Sealing the top of the kettle and making her way back, she carefully dodged past a pair of girls coming the other way before knocking on Lily’s door.

There was the sound of a crash from within along with muffled cursing and Amy found herself grinning quietly as she waited patiently. It took nearly fifteen minutes before the door swung open to reveal Lily once more. The girl had clearly run a brush through her hair and tidied up a bit, but there were still books strewn all over the room. Amy offered the kettle over and watched as Lily took it and moved to plug it in.

Amy indulged her inner nosiness and slipped around peering at the books curiously. Intro to Calculus and Physics 101 had been tossed across the room like they’d physically offended Lily, and there were a few books carefully closed and tucked away on the desk that Amy figured that the girl had been done with. She slipped over to the bed, carefully picking up the book that had been tossed on Lily’s pillow.

‘Anatomy,’ Amy thought with an amused chuckle, blinking when a worksheet slipped out of the book. She ducked down and grabbed it, flipping it over and glancing at it curiously. Amy hummed as she considered the half-completed assignment before the sound of Lily coughing caused her to glance over her shoulder. She saw the other girl staring at her with amusement, and she felt her cheeks colouring as she tucked the girl’s homework away.

“So we’ve got tea. And basically just tea. Coffee is gross. Do you want the Tardis mug? Or the Dalek mug?” Lily held up the two mugs, and Amy found herself smirking as she dropped back to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Dalek works. Makes sense for yours to be the Time Lord, considering how bad you are at biology.” She grinned at Lily’s affronted look and crossed her legs, watching the girl mix up the tea. She accepted the cup she was given, taking a hesitant sniff of the beverage before setting it aside. She glanced up to see Lily’s concerned look, and she blinked tilting her head.

“Am I really that bad?” She pointed, and Lily blinked before flipping the book back open and pointing.

“You’ve only gotten this one wrong, but I could see how it could be confusing. You’ve mixed up Sebaceous glands and Sudoriferous glands. Sebaceous glands are the oily ones. Sudoriferous glands are uh, the sweat ones.” She tilted the assignment toward Lily, who let out a groan. Amy snorted softly before shifting closer and pointing.

“The trick I use is that if you cross your eyes, Sudoriferous could be odoriferous, which reminds me of like scent, and thus sweat.” She shrugged before humming. She saw Lily staring at her quietly, and she flashed the girl a nervous smile.
“If you’re so far behind on your work, I could help? I mean it was kind of my fault that you stuck around in the hospital so long, seems only fair.” Amy stared at Lily, grinning at her stern expression. When the girl didn’t argue though, she shifted back to rest against the headboard, flipping open the book and moving to read the next question, watching in amusement as Lily’s confused expression grew.

“So.” Lily’s quiet voice drew Amy from her focus on the black pepper steak that she’d been eating. She glanced over at Lily who was currently draped crossways over the bottom of the bed, having resumed her spot when they’d gotten back from the Chinese food shop near the university with their bounty. Amy wasn’t sure how comfortable Lily could be with her shoulders resting against the wall, as her legs hung down. The girl was quietly staring at her food, stabbing the noodles in the container with her chopsticks. Amy studied the conflicted look on the girl’s face.

“No that I don’t enjoy the company or the top tier homework help,” The girl picked a piece of chicken out of her chow mein with her chopsticks and nibbled on it before peering at her curiously. After staring for a few seconds, she sucked in a breath and continued softly.

“But, you haven’t really mentioned what actually brought you here. Somehow I doubt it was just to take in my sparkling personality.” Amy frowned at the tiny smirk that Lily shot her and rolled her eyes, lifting up her food and moving over to flop down next to Lily, pressing her own back against the wall and placing the food on her stomach.

“First of all.” She reached out and bonked Lily in the middle of the forehead with the bottom of her fist, getting an amused snort from the girl before turning back to her food and humming for a moment before actually answering the question.

“I did actually come here hoping that you’d be up for some company. You’re pretty neat, and I could have used some cheering up.” She glanced at Lily, studying the suddenly concerned look in her eyes. She waved the girl off softly before turning her attention back to her food, poking at it quietly before continuing.

“I found out that Taylor and Victoria had finally gotten together.” She glanced over and narrowed her eyes when Lily merely let out an affirmative hum. The girl glanced back at her, taking in that narrowed eyed look before casually making a shocked sound and grasping her cheeks in feigned shock.

“Oh my god~ What a shocking revelation.” The deadpan tone was a bit too much, and Amy found herself fighting back a smile as the girl studied her before shrugging her shoulders.

“I uh. I kind of figured. I thought they were together before, I saw Victoria leave Taylor’s tent at the training retreat, but they didn’t act like they were together. But uh, when they were like obviously not touching each other during the movies the other night, I figured that they’d just gotten together. They had this uh. Look about them.” Lily hummed, inspecting her chow mein before offering the box to Amy. Amy took the box, offering her own back, chuckling when Lily grinned and dug into the steak happily.

“Look?” Amy asked curiously before turning her attention to the food, twirling the noodles around the chopsticks, humming quietly.
“You know, like, new relationship googly eyes. Like when you can’t stop staring at them, and all you wanna do is just, smoosh their face up and tell them how cute they are.” Lily waved a hand and chuckled, and Amy glanced at her curiously, studying Lily’s expression, watching as her smile seemed to fade after a moment. Amy spoke when the girl stabbed her chopsticks into her food and resumed eating quietly.

“I uh. I wouldn’t know.” Amy’s voice was soft, and she watched as Lily glanced at her quietly. The girl lifted an eyebrow in confusion and Amy shrugged up her shoulders. “I’ve never uh… had anyone that I could smoosh up’s face.” Amy paused, frowning at the wording and blushing a bit when Lily snorted. She waved a hand in a way that basically meant; ‘you know what I meant.’

Amy twirled up more noodles, eating quietly as she did her best to get her cheeks to behave once more. She could feel Lily’s eyes burning into the side of her face as she ate, and she kept her gaze locked on her food, idly scratching the box with her thumb. After a moment, she let out a faint sound and peered at Lily.

“Did you tell anyone else about Taylor and Vicky sleeping in the same tent?” She studied the girl who blinked and shook her head.

“No, it uh. It seemed like it wasn’t anyone else’s business. Why?” Lily studied her quietly, and Amy hummed before shifting up a bit, speaking softly.

“Dean knew about her and Taylor’s sleeping habits, despite Victoria seemingly being pretty sure that no one but me, and the family knew about it.” She glanced at Lily for a moment before shrugging up her shoulder.

“She thinks that he was at the hospital and that’s where he heard it after he’d used his powers on Mom, and that’s what caused that fight, but that doesn’t seem like Dean, really,” Amy spoke quietly, idly tugging at her pants, glancing over at Lily’s curious look.

“She knows that he was at the hospital and that’s where he heard it after he’d used his powers on Mom, and that’s what caused that fight, but that doesn’t seem like Dean, really,” Amy spoke quietly, idly tugging at her pants, glancing over at Lily’s curious look.

“See. Dean’s a bit of an uh. Well, he’s got a stick up his ass. I can’t see him using his powers like that on someone since it’d be considered a crime.” Amy’s voice was soft, and she sighed, rubbing at her cheek. She glanced over at Lily, taking in the girl’s suddenly somewhat conflicted look. She studied Lily quietly for a moment before speaking.

“What’s up, Lily?” Her voice was soft, and she watched as the other girl started guiltily before sighing.

“It… It might be unrelated but,” Lily took a breath before barrelling on. “I’ve uh. I’ve seen Dean lurking around HQ a bunch with Armsmaster. He’s been doing training with Miss Militia as well, and it might be related to that, but they always seem to stop talking when I come into the room and back off, and he’s always coming out of Armsmaster’s workshop.” Amy frowned quietly and glanced down at her food with a frown. She couldn’t really see what that added to the situation, but it might be valuable information.

When Lily let out a long sigh, it drew Amy from her ruminations, and she blinked when the girl suddenly shifted up and stretched.

“Anyway. Enough about that. We’ve got terrible take out. Let’s toss a movie on and properly forget about your relationship drama.” Amy blinked and tilted her head at Lily, studying the girl with amusement.

“Is that the appropriate action in this situation?” Her voice was tinged with amusement, and she watched as Lily rolled her eyes before hopping to her feet. Lily went over to her desk and extracted a
large case that she unzipped and spread out.

“I’ve got a bunch of DVD’s, what’d you wanna watch?” Lily studied the cd’s, an odd mixture of actual professionally made DVD’s in English, an extensive collection probably from her old house, and a much more substantial assortment of blank DVD’s with titles scrawled on in marker, mostly in other Japanese. She considered the DVD’s humming and tapping one of the blanks.

“You some sort of pirate?” She smirked over at Lily where she sat on the desk chair, laughing when the girl spun it around and let out a playful ‘Arrr’ before leaning closer.

“Nawh. These are Japanese films. They get reproduced a lot like this cause actual copies are rare, since Kyushu. There’s not exactly a Japanese government to enforce copyrights anymore. Did you wanna see one? A few of these are dubbed, I used to watch them with Gertie.” The girl, paused, frowning softly, and Amy watched her. When the girl held out a hand, Amy offered the case over, watching when Lily seemed to perk up and flip through the DVDs with a soft hum.

“There’s one that I think you’d rather enjoy.” She drew out one of the cases and carefully set it in the disk tray. She loaded everything up, shifted the screen to face the bed and then flicked off the lights before flopping back down next to Amy and recollecting her food.

Amy studied Lily’s reactions at first, watching the smile on her face as the animated movie started. But soon the story unfolding on the screen of the young boy that saved a girl who fell out of the sky and then got dragged off on an adventure with her drew her attention. She’d quietly lay there, slowly eating the food and barely noticing the warmth of the girl next to her as she shifted closer.

The movie had proven to be cute, and Amy had been riveted. When the next film had been slotted in turned out to be about a witch working in a bakery, Amy found herself amused and charmed. The company and the atmosphere had been rather pleasant, and when the second film had ended with Lily yawning widely, Amy had been reluctant to go. She was somewhat amused when Lily had seemed equally unwilling to stop the fun.

They’d ended up lingering by the door for several minutes before Lily told Amy to text her tomorrow and then Amy had vanished into the hall doing her best to not dwell too deeply on the tension that had hung in the air between them. The cold air and the long bus ride hadn’t managed to dampen her enthusiasm, and she ended up smiling as she unlocked the door and bustled into the house with a shiver.

Quickly kicking off her shoes and hanging her coat, Amy saw the darkened interior of the house, and she first suspected that the others had gone to bed, but passing the living room and seeing Victoria’s books scattered around the furniture, and the light on down the hall confused her. She moved up the hall, peering into the lit up garage, taking in the empty space before peering out the back door.

She paused by the doorway, staring quietly out at the sight of Taylor and Victoria sitting on the planter and talking. The conversation seemed rather difficult for Taylor if the shaking in her form visible even from this distance was anything to go by.

Amy stilled herself but even holding her breath, the wind outside carried the words away before she could hear them, and she just watched them talking. She watched as Taylor hung her head and
muttered something drawing a sharp look from Victoria. Taylor continued to speak softly, and she saw the oddly painful look on her sister's face as she slowly glanced back down at her hands linked in her lap.

Amy stood there transfixed as Taylor finished speaking, her shoulders visibly slumping down quietly as she waited for Victoria to respond. She watched as her sister sat there and stared at her hands for nearly five minutes until Taylor bowed her head, and Amy assumed that she whispered something before getting to her feet.

Taylor took several steps away toward the house, and Amy began to panic about what she could possibly say when Taylor caught her here, but Taylor suddenly jerked to a stop, her arm pulled back into Vicky's hand.

Amy stepped into the doorway and watched silently as Vicky said something, and Taylor bowed her head before speaking again. She bit her lip watching as Taylor's shoulders began to shake before Victoria quietly spoke and then the girl suddenly rounded on her sister and threw herself into the older girl's arms. Amy watched fascinated as Victoria wrapped her arms around Taylor and gently held her as she cried, the look on her face oddly protective.

Part of her knew that she should go, that this was private, but another part of her finally understood. She stood there watching as Taylor clung to her sister like the other girl was the only thing keeping her on her feet, and she let out a gentle sigh. She watched them for a few moments as the wind whipped their hair around them, and then she gently closed the door and walked back up into the house.

She headed to the kitchen, seeing the wrapped plate of food waiting for her. She carefully put it in the fridge before making up three cups of hot chocolate. She left two steaming in a place that the girls would find it on their way in before climbing up the steps and heading into her bedroom. She set the drink down on her bedside before she gently flopped down onto her bed.

Laying there and looking around her room in the dark, she quietly let out a sigh as the dark shapes loomed just right around her. For the first time in nearly two months, she felt at home. She curled up with her phone and her drink, and she texted Lily, pointing out that twelve-thirty am was technically tomorrow. When the girl responded with an admonishment that she was going to be dead on her feet in the morning, she shot back a sarcastic reply as she sipped her drink, listening to the sound of gentle steps climbing the stairs and disappearing down the hall.

Chapter End Notes

[Hey. Guess what happens when you tell someone that you foresaw your father’s death, and their near death and you didn’t do anything about it. Taylor’s still got a lot of guilt. But Victoria’s surprisingly deft at handling her. There’ll be more thoughts on this from Taylor in 7.3 as we deal with Taylor’s day to day issues and we expand more on stuff.

Amy and Vicky will finally speak in the later parts of 7.3, and they’ll get a lot of stuff off their chests, and uh. *hums* Taylor’s going to be dealing with a Youth Guard person, cause that’s always entertaining. I doubt 7.3 will be a 10k monster, but it does move stuff along and advance specific plot threads. So, it’ll be neat.]
I’ll probably get it out some point Thursday or Friday morning. We’ll see how fast my muse flows. The movies that Lily and Amy watched were Castle in the sky, which seems like the kind of Movie that would have an impact with Amy, and then Kiki’s delivery service. Lily seems like she’d be a fan of the classics. Also, it occurs to me that lots of my characters bond over homework. Weird. ANYWAY. Looking forward to your feedback.}]}
Chapter Summary

[[7.2 and it’s b-side were both very well received, and that’s good. This chapter picks up in the morning of the day after Victoria and Taylor spoke and we’ll be starting with Taylor’s perspective here. In the b-side, you saw Victoria’s reaction, and stuff but now we’ll get to see into Taylor’s head and observe.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 9th, 2011
Taylor’s house, Brockton Bay

The soft music washing over her was oddly soothing to Taylor’s nerves. The girl quietly dipped her hands back into the soapy water, pulling out a plate and dragging a sponge over it, tilting her head up and listening to the sound of water running. The morning had been as quiet as she’d been expecting, but despite her expectations, it’d still surprised her. She’d expected a heavy almost charged silence, something akin to how the air felt just before a thunderstorm.

Instead, the silence had been almost contemplative. Everyone had paid attention to their own plates, lost in their own thoughts. Even Amy’s relating the tale of her evening with Lily, and the girl’s admission about what Dean had been up to hadn’t drawn more than a curious sound from Victoria. If Taylor was honest with herself, Victoria’s current attitude was more then a little terrifying to her. When she’d sat down on that planter next to Victoria, she’d expected that their relationship was over. Taylor had known for a while now that if anyone was going to be the one to figure out that her powers were all wrong, it’d have been Victoria. Her girlfriend was too close to the situation, and Taylor couldn’t stand to lie to her. She’d hoped that she might have had more time to enjoy the attention of the older girl, but she’d slowly and painfully related every single secret to the other girl.

She’d told her about meeting Bastila; she’d explained how her powers worked, how they were different than typical parahuman powers. She’d told Victoria about the Jedi, explained what they had been, and she’d even touched on the Sith, and that had led into explaining about her guides. The conversation about Taylor’s powers had actually drifted into talking about her Father, and Taylor had had to explain how it was her fault and the Noetikons that he’d died. She’d even told Victoria her greatest regret.

When the yawning silence had hung between them, Taylor had assumed that she’d finally done too much to be forgiven, and she’d slowly staggered to her feet intent on curling up on the couch and crying herself to sleep only to be stopped by Victoria. She’d stood there as the other girl kept her from leaving. When she’d brokenly muttered an apology, Victoria’s response had nearly broken her then and there.

‘It’s not your fault. I don’t blame you.’

Taylor had ended up in the other girl’s arms, and she’d cried for almost half an hour, mostly in shock as Victoria just held her close. Eventually, the conversation had dwindled, and they’d ended up
quietly heading inside. The cups waiting for them in the office had been a surprise, but the hot chocolate had been tempting, and they’d curled up in bed nursing them. Taylor had watched Victoria closely, and the girl hadn’t spoken, her expression drawn with concentration as she mulled over the thoughts.

They’d ended up sitting in the dark until Taylor had grown tired and curled up under the blankets, watching Victoria quietly think. Taylor had expected sleep to be difficult, but Victoria’s hand in her hair and the sound of her breathing had lulled her to sleep. Her dreams had been blissfully barren, and she’d awoken curled into Victoria’s side like everything was normal.

But that contemplative quiet had dragged on. They’d muttered their good mornings and spoken about their run, but the easy chatter and flirting from the door before had been gone, and a cold stone had begun to grow in Taylor’s chest. The run had been quiet, and breakfast had been equally silent. When the other two had vanished upstairs, their earlier start time meaning that they needed to shower and get ready first, she’d settled at the sink to do the dishes.

When her hands dipped into the water and came up with a lack of dishes up, she glanced down finding the water under the suds empty, all the dishes sitting drying in the rack. Taylor unplugged the sink, watching the water slowly drain as she listened to the water come to a stop, and the sound of footsteps moving around on the second floor before the water resumed. She glanced up and out the window taking several slow breaths as she did her best to keep calm, blinking her eyes quietly and savouring the brief burst of warmth and affection that drifted into her mind courtesy of Bastila.

She was still standing there like this when a pair of arms gently slid around her waist, startling her. The feeling of warm lips dragging over the back of her neck stilled her shock, and then the sensation of Victoria’s breath over her spine saw the tension slowly bleeding out of her form, her head slowly bowing. The arms around her middle tightened, and Victoria’s voice softly whispered into her ear. “I could hear you thinking from the second floor.” Taylor flushed quietly and let out a nervous chuckle, glancing over at Vic, seeing the other girl’s eyes sparkling with concern. The expression slowly cracked her control, and Taylor found herself sniffling. Victoria pulling her around was all the invitation that she needed and she buried her face into the other girl’s neck.

“Hey. Hey. Taylor, it’s okay.” The words were gentle, and for some reason, this made Taylor cry harder much to Victoria’s amusement. Luckily the bout of tears spent itself reasonably quickly. When her eyes seemed to have finally dried, she felt Victoria’s hands on her shoulders, gently pushing her back. She resisted for a moment before slowly slipping back at the touch and staring nervously toward the blonde girl.

“I meant what I said, Taylor. I don’t blame you.” Taylor glanced off quietly, feeling the other girl’s hand gently cupping her cheek, drawing her back up to face her. Taylor stared miserably into Victoria’s eyes, feeling so very confused.

“W-Why, I...I saw. I didn’t-” She frowned and heaved in a breath, Victoria’s soft voice stilling her response.

“You didn’t know that your dreams were actually prophetic Taylor. There was no way you could have guessed. We all fuck up when we first get our powers.” Victoria frowned quietly and studied her face before speaking gently.

“When I first triggered, I had to spend weeks training with Uncle Neil, so that I didn’t shatter everything that I touched. The first morning that I woke up after I triggered? I broke my alarm clock, my vanity mirror, my door, my bed, and my dresser.” Victoria spoke gently and then shifted a bit, her expression turning nervous.
“Even now, whenever I have my shield up, I have to be aware of everything around me constantly. I used to be too terrified to risk touching Chauncey.” Taylor chuckled, reminded of the name that Victoria had given the somewhat worse for wear stuffed bunny that currently lived on Victoria’s bedside table.

“That’s not-” Taylor paused when Victoria gave her a stern look.

“Taylor, it’s the same thing. We all fuck up when we first learn our powers; it’s all about moving forward.” Taylor studied Victoria before nodding quietly and shifting closer, letting out a gentle sigh when Victoria pulled her back into a hug.

“I’m still processing, and we’ll have to talk about things once I’ve got a handle on it, but I’ll tell you now, Taylor. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” Taylor shifted in the girl’s arms, burying her face into the other girl’s neck. As she stood there, Taylor shifted nervously as her mind raced. They’d barely been together a week at this point, and they’d not even gone on a date, and Victoria was still putting up with all of this drama.

“Vic,” The word drifted free into the other girl’s neck after Taylor had found herself thinking on that particular thought. She slowly pulled back, watching as the other girl glanced down at her lifting one of her eyebrows with a curious look on her face. The blue eyes staring at her robbed her of some of her confidence, and she reached out, gently tugging on the zipper of Victoria’s sweater, staring at it quietly.

“I was uh, thinking and, we have not really-” The sound of someone coughing caused her to screech to a halt, glancing over to see Amy standing in the doorway to the kitchen studying them with an almost amused smile on her face.

“I didn’t want to interrupt, but we’re already late as it is, and if you don’t want to miss our first periods, Vicky, we should get going.” Amy’s face seemed almost apologetic as she looked at her, and Taylor found herself blushing.

“I’ll be out in a minute. Get the truck started?” Victoria dug a hand into her pocket, pulling out a ring of keys and tossing it to Amy. The other girl caught it before nodding and heading off. When Victoria glanced back down at her, Taylor felt her mouth going dry and the words she wanted to say died on her lips.

“You were saying?” Victoria’s voice was laced with curiosity and Taylor flushed a touch before shifting up on her toes.

“It can wait.” She muttered before pressing a quick kiss to Victoria’s lips, her nervousness waning when the other girl responded quickly before pulling back. Victoria seemed to stare at her for a few moments before nodding and glancing outside.

“Alright, well, I’ll see you after class?” She spoke softly, and Taylor nodded.

“Yeah. I’ve got a meeting with your aunt and someone at the PRT Base, but I’ll head to the University after. Maybe we can get something nice on the way home for dinner. What does Amy like, she’s been oddly, uh… nice, considering.” She saw as Victoria tilted her head to the side.

“I think Amy’s healing after school, but we’ll see.” The sound of the truck’s horn honking shocked them both. Taylor flushed and moved to untangle herself from Vic, squeaking when instead of letting her go, the blonde dragged her back in and planted an actual kiss on her lips. The worm contact lingered for a moment, causing her heart to race a bit until Vic suddenly pulled back, offering her a wink and disappearing out the door to the sound of more honking.
In Victoria’s wake, Taylor stood there in the middle of the kitchen blushing bright red and carefully dragging the pads of her fingers over her lips.

“I’m sorry about this, Taylor.” Sarah’s voice was oddly apologetic, and Taylor glanced up at her quietly, carefully adjusting the way her vest hung over her torso, the garment having bunched up oddly during her jog over. She glanced at the older woman, feeling a bit out of place in her civilian clothes when Sarah was dressed as Lady Photon. Sadly, as she wasn’t going home after this, and she didn’t want to have to change here and then come back later, it sort of ruled out wearing her costume.

“The Youth Guard has been trying to arrange a meeting with you for a couple of weeks now, ever since Leviathan, but they have gotten very insistent over the last week.” Sarah’s clipped voice made her irritation plain, and Taylor found herself studying the tension along her jaw and the irritated glint in her eyes. Sarah seemed genuinely bothered that she’d been maneuvered into this. When the woman looked like she might continue, no doubt intent on explaining why it had been necessary that they do this, Taylor gently cut her off.

“Sarah...” Taylor paused, chuckling. “Sorry, Lady Photon. It’s fine. If this makes your job easier, it’s fine. But I should probably know what to expect before we head in there.” The older woman studied her for a few moments before letting out a sigh and crossing her legs.

“Since we’re only affiliated with the PRT and not in fact sponsored by them, or part of the Protectorate or the Wards, this meeting is more of a courtesy. The Youth Guard representative, Miss Gimble, has expressed that she has ‘concerns.’” Taylor found herself chuckling when Sarah did air quotes.

“We’ve tried to get her to speak with us about what’s going on, but she seemed very insistent on sharing those concerns with you, specifically. So we’re sort of going in blind here. Carol’s best guess is that it almost certainly has something to do with your emancipation.” Taylor glanced up, curiously at Sarah, tilting her head. Sarah took in her confusion for a moment before continuing.

“As rare as it is for normal people to get emancipated, It’s almost unheard of for Parahumans to do so. The only reason we managed it for you is because you were an orphan, your father provided a letter of intent that he had notarized and left with Carol, and you’ve got a job, a house, enough assets to cover your own living expenses till you hit 18, and you’re taking care of your education.” Taylor frowned for a few moments. Before they could continue their chat, a short, plump woman with bright red hair came down the hall toward them. When Sarah fell silent, Taylor followed suit and watched the woman approach.

“Miss Hebert! I’ve been hoping to speak with you for several weeks. I’m Cindy Gimble.” The woman held out her hand, and Taylor glanced at Sarah before turning and reaching out, accepting the woman’s hand, shaking it quietly. She was surprised when the woman gently gripped her hand with both of hers, staring at her in confusion when she leaned in.

“Miss Hebert! I’ve been hoping to speak with you for several weeks. I’m Cindy Gimble.” The woman held out her hand, and Taylor glanced at Sarah before turning and reaching out, accepting the woman’s hand, shaking it quietly. She was surprised when the woman gently gripped her hand with both of hers, staring at her in confusion when she leaned in.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Miss Gimble.” Taylor tried nervously, blinking when the woman smiled softly at her and then released her stepping back.

“You may call me Cindy if you like, Miss Hebert.” Taylor stared at the woman in confusion, taking in her appearance. She was short and plump with a round friendly face that was lined with faint
wrinkles that implied that she smiled a lot. She was dressed professionally, but not as harshly as Piggot or most of the PRT administrators moving around them. Her outfit was warm and decorated with a few different pins that drew Taylor’s eyes. When the woman took her hand back and grasped the folder, Taylor stared at her own name inked on it, feeling oddly nervous as she studied the manilla cardstock.

“You can call me Taylor then. I think we’re supposed to be meeting someplace nearby?” She nervously rubbed her neck and chuckled when the woman flashed her a grin before gesturing for them both to follow. She trailed after the short friendly woman, glancing back and studying Sarah’s face. The woman seemed to have assumed her command mask and trailed after them. Taylor followed along quietly.

After a short elevator ride, they were led to a small, well-appointed office on the middle floor of the PRT building. As they entered, Taylor looked around and noted that the office lacked any personalization and was probably just here to serve as temporary housing for people like the Youth Guard rep. When Cindy took a seat behind the desk, Taylor smoothly slid into one of the chairs on the opposite side, crossing her legs.

“Taylor, I’m glad that we finally have a chance to sit down and talk.” The woman glanced at Sarah, and Taylor followed her gaze, but for the moment, it seemed that Lady Photon was keeping her own counsel. The woman turned back to her and Taylor shifted quietly in her seat. The woman studied her for a few moments and Taylor stared back before coughing softly and speaking.

”W-was there anything in particular that you cared to discuss? I’m already missing one class because of this meeting; I was hoping that I might make the other two.” Taylor tilted her head, watching with fascination as a look of shock spread over Cindy’s face. Taylor studied her quietly as she flipped open the folder she’d been carrying and moved to review the pages within.

“Oh. I’m afraid that you’ve got me at a disadvantage, Taylor. I was led to believe that you’re not currently attending high school. That was actually one of the things that I wished to speak with you about.” The woman glanced at her documents and then back up, but it wasn’t Taylor that responded but Sarah.

”W-was there anything in particular that you cared to discuss? I’m already missing one class because of this meeting; I was hoping that I might make the other two.” Taylor tilted her head, watching with fascination as a look of shock spread over Cindy’s face. Taylor studied her quietly as she flipped open the folder she’d been carrying and moved to review the pages within.

“Indeed? Well, they are partially right in the sense that Taylor’s not, in fact, attending a high school. Before his death, her father placed her in an accelerated learning program. Her powers mean that a traditional curriculum wouldn’t be engaging to Taylor. Last I heard from Taylor’s program coordinator, she was midway through her twelfth-grade coursework, and she’d expressed an interest in applying to colleges for the fall.” Sarah glanced at her and Taylor felt her cheeks flushing as she fiddled with her vest. She hadn’t thought anyone but Miss Hoida, her advisor, had known about that.

“And who exactly ‘led’ you to believe this?” Sarah’s voice was razor sharp, and she stared down Cindy, who squared her shoulders and stared right back.

“I’m afraid that my sources are confidential. But they seemed very certain that she’d dropped out of school entirely.” Cindy’s voice was firm, and she studied them both before Sarah cut across again.

“On top of that, she’s also enrolled in the Summer AP program at the local university. She’s currently taking courses in Psychology, Philosophy, and…” She paused, frowning and glanced over and Taylor chuckled speaking gently.

“Biology.” She smirked at Sarah, who rolled her eyes. The sound of a voice clearing across the desk did startle her though, and Taylor glanced over into the concerned eyes of Cindy. She studied the woman curiously until she spoke.
“That’s certainly impressive, Taylor, and I applaud you on your initiative with your schooling, but high school isn’t just about education. There’s the social aspect too. Wouldn’t you rather be interacting with your peers?” Taylor blinked slowly and stared at the woman, studying her apparently earnest expression.

Dipping into the force, Taylor carefully let her gaze drift over the woman’s face, taking in the minute details, how she sat, how she looked, every reaction painting her a picture. She seemed genuine, despite the blunder that she’d made. Taylor glanced at the file before her, studying the pages within before speaking slowly.

“You have… read my file correct?” She watched as the woman glanced down at the pages, blinking before glancing back up at her in confusion. She took in the woman’s lost look for a moment before speaking slowly.

“The reason that my father enrolled me in the online program after I triggered was that it was my classmates that caused me to trigger. I was the subject of an ongoing campaign of harassment both online and in person for the first year and a half of my schooling that became physical for the last year up until January of this year.” Taylor spoke quietly, watching as the woman’s face paled as she stared at her.

“In January they stuffed me into a locker filled with refuse which was what caused me to trigger. Truthfully, I’d be happy if I never had to set foot in another school. As for social interaction, I get plenty. I’ve made friends.” She glanced up at Sarah before shrugging.

“Victoria’s graduating this year, Lily too. They’ll be going off to college, and I’d kind of prefer to go with them.” She raised an eyebrow, and Sarah studied her with an amused smirk.

“Amy as well. She skipped the fourth grade.” Taylor blinked and shrugged in a ‘The more you know’ way before turning back toward Cindy, studying her still concerned expression. The woman gently folded her hands before her.

“Yes, that is actually something that I wished to speak with you about as well.” The woman carefully adjusted the file before her, studying the pages before lifting her gaze toward Taylor and speaking slowly.

“Another matter of concern for us is your… particular living arrangements.” Taylor felt a sinking feeling in her chest as she felt her gaze flicking to Sarah out of the corner of her eye. She studied the woman’s face as it darkened as her jaw clenched. She turned back to Cindy, taking in the woman’s concerned expression as she rested her elbows on the table.

“I was also led to believe that you are still living at your father’s home, without any adult’s on the premises, but you’re sharing the house with the Dallon sisters, and one Lisa Wilbourne?” Taylor studied the woman carefully, moving to rest her elbows on the table in a mime of the woman’s pose, staring at her thoughtfully.

“That is correct, though I would point out that there are always at least four PRT Troopers within shouting distance. However, something tells me that that’s not exactly what you were referring to.” She stared Cindy down, watching as the woman seemed to get a bit uncomfortable before letting out a sigh and plowing on.

“While the fact that the PRT is looking out for your physical safety is reassuring, I was more worried about the fact that you are all unchaperoned. I was also led to believe that you and the elder Miss Dallon were... “ Taylor stared at the woman as she searched for a polite way to phrase things. Taylor stared at her for a moment before sighing and waving a hand.
“Sleeping together. Yes.” She watched as the woman let out a sigh before shifting back in her chair. The woman casually shuffled the papers before her, working her way up to some sort of lecture. Something welled up in Taylor as she studied the woman, at first she thought it was Marr, but it lacked his raw malevolence. Just normal bitter anger.

“Taylor, I can understand the need for closeness after suffering a loss such as you have, but there is a reason that you should have someone caring for you. You’re entirely too young to be.” Taylor held up a hand, and the woman paused, and Taylor carefully slid back her chair, standing quietly.

“Firstly, I want to preface this all by saying that you seem like a genuine person, that legitimately cares for the young parahumans. I can appreciate the work you do, and I understand the need for the Youth Guard. You do good work, and the fact that people like Flechette or Kid Win or Clockblocker remain such grounded people is almost certainly due to the work that you or people like you have put in. For that, I thank you.” Taylor spoke softly, watching as the woman leaned back and blushed a touch, then she let out a sigh and continued.

“With that being said, Cindy, I’m not a child. My Father’s will made provisions for me and using them I’ve emancipated myself. We spoke to a judge and when he saw that I had more than enough assets to support myself, along with a well paying job, and that I owned a home. Taking all these factors into account, he had no reservations in allowing me to make my own decisions considering how close I was to my majority anyway.” Taylor watched the woman’s pleased expression shifting to one of surprise, and she continued.

“As for my guests, it’s my home, and I’ll open it to whoever I please. They all came to me seeking a place to stay, and I’ve let them into my home, and they’ll be welcome to remain as long as they need.” Taylor watched as Cindy’s surprised faded, an odd sort of appraisal drifted over her face, instead. Taylor stood up a bit taller.

“And finally, on the subject of my girlfriend. Firstly, we’re indeed sharing a bed, but that’s all that it is. My life hasn’t been a pleasant one and trust continues to be an issue for me. As do nightmares, and she’s been, as of yet, content to hold me to deal with the latter while being unbothered by the former.” Taylor watched as the woman’s expression became a touch sad, and she sighed as she bowed her head and spoke quickly.

“And secondly, as my Seventeenth birthday is in fact, in two days, when and if me and my girlfriend decide to change our sleeping arrangements from literal to figurative, the only people who’ll be consulted on the decision will be she and I,” Taylor spoke nervously before letting out a quiet huff. She saw Cindy’s lip quirking up into an amused smirk at the way she’d said that if she wanted to sleep with her girlfriend, it’d be no one’s business but theirs. The sound of Sarah’s amused chuckle saw her cheeks burning but the older cape cut in before she could shove her foot any further down her throat.

“Well said, Taylor.” Taylor watched as Sarah stared down Cindy before rising to her feet. “And with that in mind, I think she has addressed all of your concerns?” Sarah stared at Cindy until the woman let out a slow sigh and nodded. Taylor glanced at Sarah, watching as the woman turned to leave. Taylor moved to follow, pausing in the door and glancing back at the woman who was quietly fiddling with her papers, an irritated look on her face.

“Was it one of the Wards that tipped you off?” She saw the woman’s confusion grow before she tilted her head. “A protectorate cape?” The confusion flicked into surprise, and Taylor let out an irritated sigh.

“Taylor, I’m afraid that I’m not allowed to,” Taylor waved her off with a smile.
“It’s fine. Thanks.” Taylor studied the woman quietly and shifted by the door. “And uh, also... Really, though... Thanks.” She saw the look of surprise shooting her way, and she quietly shifted from foot to foot.

“When I was at Winslow, there were a dozen people that should have been looking out for me that didn’t. It was almost worse than the students treating me like they did. Even if someone did this to dick me around a bit, you seem like you genuinely cared, which... it’s nice.” Taylor smiled at the woman, flushing when the woman nodded and returned the smile. She glanced back at her for a moment longer before slipping out the door and closing it behind her.

She stared at Sarah standing in the corridor with a smirk on her face and whined.

“I’m going to class.” She began to step away when Sarah cleared her throat, and she paused.

“There’s training tomorrow. We’ll make dinner at my place; then there’s going to be some training after. It’ll take a couple of hours. Come around sixish, and make sure that Amy and Victoria show up?” Taylor paused, glancing at Sarah for a moment before something coiling in her gut made her speak.

“Make sure that Carol is there. We need to discuss something with you all.” Taylor stared at Sarah’s confused look before the other woman’s expression hardened, and she nodded curtly. Taylor studied her for a moment before turning and heading toward the elevator. If she ran, she could make the second half of her Psychology lecture. Maybe. Or at least grab a snack from the campus food court.

“You two are literally a college stereotype right now.” Will’s mocking comment made Taylor grin, and she followed in the older boy’s wake as he moved ahead into the small knot of people sitting on the grass in the shade of the giant oak tree. The teasing comment had been because Victoria and Warren had their acoustic guitars out and were plucking away. Scattered in a loose circle around them were Sabah, Amy and Lily, who seemed to be working on some project with their books spread out on the grass around them. Amy was pointing at something and explaining it to the other two.

Crystal and Eric cracked up at the comment and Warren flipped them the bird as Will approached them. The ‘Later’ he got in response drew amused snorts from most of the group, Taylor included. Will paused when Victoria nudged him and handed him her guitar with an admonishment to be careful before languidly climbing to her feet. Taylor stared at her girlfriend feeling a welling of nervousness growing in her chest at the dangerous grin on her face.

Taylor felt her eyes flicking in Amy’s direction, the fear in her chest loosening at the amused smirk on her face, and she shifted to the side, barely dodging Victoria’s grab and smirking as she circled to the left around the group, watching Victoria pacing toward her. She played hard to get for a few moments, smiling quietly when Victoria caught her. She grinned as the girl dragged her close and hummed faintly.

“And what’s this all about?” Taylor muttered, doing her best to ignore the looks from the others as Victoria’s hands slid around her waist. She flushed a bit when the other girl stepped closer and stared down at her. One of Victoria’s hands slipping up and tangling in her hair caused Taylor’s already pinkening cheeks to quite suddenly turn a brilliant crimson.
“We’ve been together for a little bit, now. I would like to make sure that everyone important knows it.” Taylor blinked and flushed when Victoria finally leaned in and claimed her lips, letting the kiss linger for a few minutes. Taylor did her best to ignore the playful catcalls and groans from the others as her heart fluttered in her chest. After a few moments, she slowly pulled back, resting her head against Victoria’s and staring into her eyes quietly.

Victoria’s lips were quirked into this mischievous little smile that made Taylor nervous. She glanced to the side, watching as the others chuckled and talked amongst themselves. Taylor shifted her head, her eyes ghosting toward Amy, sighing softly when Amy seemed to have turned her attention to the side, talking with Lily quietly. Victoria’s amused snort drew her eye, and she saw Victoria looking the same way that she had. When Victoria glanced back at her Taylor nervously wet her lips and spoke softly.

“So. Uhm. I had this idea. Maybe we could—” Taylor’s voice cut off once more at the sound of Crystal’s voice cutting across them both.

“We get it; you’re adorable. Now stop if before the frat boys show up with popcorn.” Taylor flushed, glancing away from Victoria’s amused smirk and huffing. The girl released her and then they walked over to the others. Victoria resumed her seat on the bench next to Warren and Will, and Taylor ended up parking herself next to the other girl’s legs, glancing over at Crystal’s shit-eating grin and Eric’s embarrassed smile.

“Congratulations.” Eric’s heartfelt words were a surprise and Taylor smiled back at him, nodding in thanks.

“Yes, but you shouldn’t skip Psych just cause you got a pretty girlfriend. I need my desk partner to explain all the big words to me.” Crystal’s teasing voice caused Taylor to whine.

“First off, why are you even in a first-year psych class? And second off, I wasn’t skipping class. I had to go to this meeting with your mom and the Youth Guard.” Taylor hummed faintly, seeing confused looks from Eric and Crystal. Victoria’s strumming slowed, and she glanced up, seeing the girl staring down at her, and she sighed.

“I’m sure you’ll hear about it soon enough. There were some concerns raised to the Youth Guard. About me, apparently, I’ve dropped out of school. And uh. Our living arrangements were mentioned. We cleared things up though, I think.” Taylor didn’t actually do air quotes, but the implication was there. She kept her head tilted back, staring at Victoria as her eyes narrowed. Studying her face, Taylor let out a gentle sigh and spoke softly to the blond girl.

“Vic, I’m fairly certain that it wasn’t Dean. The Youth Guard lady couldn’t tell me who put in the tip, but I did manage to weed that it wasn’t a Ward out of her. It could have been someone Dean told though I suppose. Judging from her reactions, I’m pretty sure that it was one of Protectorate Capes, but that’s not exactly a small pool that we’re working from. For all we know, Keltar caught us in the tent after your Mom did, and passed it along.” Taylor hummed in thought, watching as the angry look on Victoria’s face stilled a bit.

“...Wait. What’s this about my cousin and you in a tent?” Crystal’s voice startled Taylor, and she glanced up nervously at Crystal’s wolfish smile. Taylor considered what an appropriate response would be and settled for tilting her head back and striding over to the group working on their homework, leaving Victoria to chastise her cousin in her wake.

“Crystal, just because you can’t get a boyfriend doesn’t mean that you need to live vicariously through...”
Part of Amy wished that she’d blown off the healing and stayed with the others. She’d had a fun afternoon relaxing in the sun with the rest of them and chatting with the others. Things had been oddly pleasant considering the amount of drama that lurked around them. She’d felt like a normal kid for an afternoon just hanging out with her friends and relaxing. And then Eric had hopped up and pointed out that they should head off if they were going to get Amy’s healing done before it got too late.

Then it’d been dealing with pushy doctors and ungrateful patients. Eric did his best, but he was far less imposing than his father or mother, and Amy was sadly left mainly to her own devices to keep the doctors and patients in check. She’d gotten through the entire list of patients that had been waiting for her, and she’d been making her way out when the Protectorate had approached her. Apparently, a rather battered villain was currently secured at the hospital, and they wanted to know if she’d be willing attempt to heal them.

That was how Amy’d found herself standing in the room behind the three feet of steel staring at the battered form of one of the Empire’s heavy hitters, ignoring the furious woman’s gaze locked on her. Instead of reacting, she moved closer and spoke softly.

“Do I have permission to heal you?” The words were crisp, and Amy stared down at the rather battered form of Fenja laying across the bed before her, the woman’s body secured to the bed with half a dozen tinker tech restraints and a thick collar around her neck designed to put her down the moment it detected her body increasing in size.

The girl stared at the defiant look in the woman’s eyes, the thick dark marks of the bruises on her face, neck and arms standing out stark against her pale skin. From her position, Amy could see the visible outline of a cast on one of her legs. When the woman continued to remain brusquely silent, Amy shrugged casually and stepped away from the bed. The troopers in the room lowered their foam sprayers but kept them readied. She nodded to them before stepping over to the door.

She rapped on it and stared out the window at the face that peered in. There was a moment of focus before a series of heavy locks unlocking was heard and the door swung open. She stepped out, nodding quietly in Triumph’s direction as he escorted her out into the hall. The golden figure waved a hand, and the door slammed shut once more the locks securing once more.

“She refused to let me heal her.” She spoke softly and saw the irritated look flicker over the man’s face before he shrugged up a shoulder.

“Probably hoping to delay her trial. The Directors have all been leaning prettily heavily on this, though. If they have to CC her into her tribunal in a hospital, so be it. Thanks for trying, Panacea.” The man nodded, and Amy tilted her head, staring curiously back at the locked room.

“How did you end up catching her anyway?” She spoke quietly as she glanced at Triumph; the man let out an irritated sound before shrugging. “Truthfully, we were just there at the right time. We stumbled across Kaiser with her and Menja fighting off Lung and Bakuda. When we showed up, Bakuda activated some device teleporting their forces away, and Kaiser tried to run. We’re pretty sure that Fenja ended up staying behind to distract us while the other two got away.” Amy blinked as she listened to Triumph, frowning quietly before nodding and shifting smoothly around the man.
Amy walked down the hallway she caught the flash of blue and white that hinted at her cousin in costume, and she moved toward him. As she drew closer, Amy saw Eric waiting at the end of the hall, chatting quietly with one of the younger nurses, and she smirked as she sauntered up.

“...and there I was, just me between my sister and Trainwreck, and I’m doing my best to keep my shield up cause he kept hitting me with this power junk-tech armour of his. I knew that my goose would be cooked soon if I didn’t do something, so I-” Amy smirked and sidled up next to Eric and cut in with a sweet voice.

“Cowered behind your shield until Glory Girl showed up and smacked him with a truck several times until he crawled away to hide?” Amy grinned as Eric jumped and then turned to her with a look that promised swift and violent retribution. She smirked over Eric’s shoulder at the nurse she’d spoken with a few times, the girl chuckling before glancing Eric up and down before holding out a hand.

Eric stared at her in confusion before offering out his own as if to shake. He froze when the nurse smoothly flipped his hand around and moved to use a pen to write something on it. She finished writing, capped her pen and then released him. Amy grinned quietly when Eric staggered back and stared at his hand in confusion. The nurse smiled to herself when Eric moved to trail after her, following her toward the elevator.

Amy blinked when the boy let out a whine and glanced at him, seeing him facepalming his visor. She studied Eric for a moment before tilting her head when he turned that glare on her again. Seeing her confusion, Amy's cousin held out his hand, and she found herself flushing bright red as she did her best to keep from laughing.

‘Tell your friend to call me, she’s cute’
‘###.###.####’

Despite his embarrassment, even Eric was chuckling when they exited the elevator, and they padded across the lobby toward the large glass doors that were the only things standing between them and freedom. As they stepped out into the cold, Amy moved toward Eric and froze when a figure stepped out of the gloom and into view.

Amy stared in confusion at Victoria standing there in her civilian clothes. Simple black jeans with a sturdy belt, a scruffy t-shirt, and a heavy scuffed up leather jacket. Her hair was pulled back into a pony-tail, and she studied Amy quietly. Amy glanced at Eric, who stood there, shifting back and forth nervously as he lingered close by. Victoria spoke, drawing her attention.

“I brought the truck, Ames. I figured maybe we could grab a bite to eat. Talk maybe?” Amy stared at Victoria’s earnest face and studied the girl, being oddly reminded of the times that Victoria had floated around her use that same expression to beg the girl to go patrolling with her. She found herself smiling at the memory, and she waved off Eric who seemed relieved at the permission, and he quickly took off.

Amy turned back and studied her sister’s relieved look for a moment before gesturing for her to lead the way and following when the girl turned and headed through the cold night air toward the dinged up pick-up truck across the lot.
Amy stared at the rolled up bags in her lap, the warmth of the food soaking into her legs through the heavy robe that she wore. She glanced around quietly, watching as the streetlights moved past. She wasn’t sure where they were going, and she’d wished that she’d been following the streets to try and figure out where they were going. When the truck pulled out of the city streets and onto the less sparsely populated streets that wove their way up toward the mountains, Amy began to wonder what was going on.

She found herself somewhat confused when Victoria pulled the truck off the main road and down onto what certainly looked like an unlit service road that headed out into the woods. She stared at Victoria quietly, and the girl seemed to be flicking her gaze between the road and a pad of paper that she was holding against the steering wheel. Amy watched in confusion as the truck trundled it’s merry way through the overgrown road until the branches that were scraping over the windshield and the roof of the truck suddenly gave way to reveal a wide flat lot with short, squat posts evenly spaced over it.

Victoria navigated the truck between the pegs and then took a turn and the truck’s lights smoothly washed over a decaying drive-in screen, and Amy found herself staring around in fascination, leaning up against the window to see the antique rusted radio receivers the hung forgotten from the posts or lay scattered around the lot. Victoria ended up pulling into a spot and taking a deep breath before glancing at Amy and smirking at her fascinated staring.

“Like it? It’s apparently the best place to see the stars in the city.” Victoria turned and cracked open her door, hopping out. Amy sat there in her seat watching as Vicky leaned back in and peered at her.

“Your coat is in the back by the way.” Amy blinked and glanced in the back and let out a sigh seeing her jacket and gloves. She set the food aside, shucking her robe and grabbing her coat. She pulled on her gloves and wrapped her scarf back around her neck before following Victoria out into the frigid air.

She stood quietly next to the truck, resting one of her hands on the hood and staring up in awe at the glowing wash of sparkling light that stretched from one horizon to the other vanishing into the glow to the east. She glanced toward the city before turning back to the moon and letting out a long sigh.

“Woah.” The word was uttered softly, but Victoria responded readily enough as she grinned over the head of the truck at her.

“You can say that again. Grab the food?” She smirked before shifting up and climbing atop the hood of the truck. Amy stared at her in bemusement for a few moments before rolling her eyes and slipping back into the truck. She grabbed the bag and carried it back out sliding it over the hood of the truck toward Victoria before using the tire to boost herself up onto it.

She slid over and rested her back against the windshield next to Victoria, peering at the girl as she rested the bag of burgers on her stomach. When Victoria reached in and grabbed one and pulled it out, Amy playfully snatched it from her sister, earning a squawk of irritation as she unwrapped it and took a bit, staring up at the stars quietly.

The two lay there in the darkness, barely able to see each other, just eating in the near blackness. Victoria seemed to get lost in the stars humming some faint tune or another and just enjoying the food and the company.

Eventually, Amy was full of warm food, and she shifted, dragging her arms out of the sleeves of her jacket and wrapping them around herself, laying there like a burrito and she found herself studying the profile of Victoria’s face. She almost thought that Victoria hadn’t noticed, but after a few
moments, the girl spoke softly.

“Thanks for the hot chocolate. That was you, wasn’t it?” The words were gentle and curious, and Amy studied Victoria for a few moments before nodding and glancing back up toward the sky once more, shifting atop the car hood quietly.

“I got home late,” Amy admitted quietly and let out a quiet hum. “I figured you’d gone to bed, but I saw a light on in the garage, went in there to shut it off, and saw you two talking in the backyard,” Amy spoke softly, glancing over to see Victoria’s lips pressing into a thin line.

“She seemed really upset, and I think I sort of got it then,” Amy spoke quietly and slid a hand free from her collar, scratching her chin. She peered over, seeing Vicky staring at her curiously and she let out a sigh.

“She’s… She sat there, and I could tell from where I stood that telling you whatever she was telling you was the hardest thing that she’s ever done, and she still did it. And then she got up with every intention of walking away even though that looked like it might kill her.” Amy spoke softly and let out a gentle sigh.

“And then you took her in your arms, and it was like you were the only thing keeping her moving at that point. You’ve got a connection there that I never quite had with her.” Amy spoke quietly and shrugged as she snuggled down into her coat.

“You seem to make each other better, and if anyone deserves that, it’s you two.” Amy huffed softly, squeaking when Victoria suddenly pounced on her and hugged her, tightly flailing her burrito-fied body as she tried to escape.

“V-Vicky, stop!” Amy whined softly at the action, feigning indignation, though the casual affection made her smile broadly as she felt Vicky release her and flop back down next to her. She stared up at the sky quietly, studying the stars and humming. An amused wicked smirk grew on her lips, and she let out a hum.

“Hey. Vicky.” Her voice was lazy, and she glanced over watching as Vicky let out a curious sound glancing at her curiously.

“Who’s the better kisser?” Amy grinned at Victoria’s indignant snort and the shove that came her way, enjoying that flicker of warmth that washed through her as she harassed her sister. Something that she hadn’t felt in nearly a year. A long pregnant pause dragged out for a few moments and then Victoria’s voice came across soft and laced with embarrassment.

“Taylor.” Victoria’s comment hung in the air for a moment before she let out a quiet huff. “She’s… Intense. Intense is a good word. It’s this… odd kind of power when she focuses on you, and when we kiss, I can tell that the only thing on her mind is me. It’s a bit… well, it’s nice.” Vicky’s cheeks were coloured darkly, and Amy studied her carefully. The comfortable silence dragged out between them for several moments before Victoria finally spoke.

“About earlier. When Taylor showed up with Will, was that-” Vicky’s voice was soft and Amy quietly thrashed around until she could get her arms back into her cold sleeve, reaching out and bonking Vicky on the middle of her forehead.

“It’s fine.” Amy paused, considering her own reactions, a soft sound emerging from her lips as she thought. “I- I expected it to be worse, and I’m envious but.” Amy tilted her head quietly in thought. “I think it’s better this way.” Amy nodded silently, studying Vicky's for a hint of what she felt while her sister merely smiled enigmatically at her.
“So. Did I mention that I got a phone number today?” Amy spoke lazily, watching as Victoria suddenly rolled over and stared at her with a look that clearly said that she hadn’t, in fact, mentioned that.

“So. Eric was chatting up this RPN on the intensive care floor, and I walked up…”

Amy let out a tired yawn as she watched the streetlights drifting past overhead. She stared at the streets as they wandered past. They’d spent nearly three hours chatting under the stars and catching up, and it’d been oddly refreshing. When the conversation about ‘Girls’ had finally waned, as mind-boggling as the idea of discussing such a thing with her sister was, they’d ended up talking about other things.

Amy had listened when Victoria had haltingly explained how she’d felt before she’d managed to find a way to break her shield and Amy’d felt even worse as she listened to how alone Victoria had felt even with her and Dean there. Victoria hadn’t let her apologize, but they’d ended up curled up against each other as Amy quietly related her own tale about her complicated feelings.

She finally explained everything that she’d been feeling. Her existential dread, and the dark feelings that had come with it. The lust for Victoria, and the jealousy and the anger. She’d slowly bared her soul and listened as Victoria sat next to her and stared at the stars quietly. Eventually, the girl had pointed out that they were pretty fucked up and for some reason, that’d made Amy laugh.

When Victoria had gently pointed out that they’d have been a lot better if they’d actually discussed their issues with each other, and Amy had ended up agreeing when the older girl tentatively requested that they might have an agreement never to let something like that fester between them again. The rest of the cold burgers had been eaten, and then they’d escaped the chill by climbing back into the car, and headed toward home.

As they pulled into the Docks finally, still nearly fifteen minutes from home, Amy let out another yawn before sitting up quietly and glancing over at her sister, watching as Vicky blinked her eyes a few times before slowly yawning herself. She studied Victoria’s face and spoke casually.

“You know that Taylor’s been trying to ask you on a date all day?” The words were soft, and she watched as Victoria’s lip curled into an amused smile as she nodded. Amy gently leaned back into the seat and studied that smirk before speaking chidingly.

“I know that teasing her can be fun, but maybe you shouldn’t be so mean to her, you know? She’s pretty new to all this.” Amy’s voice was soft, and she watched as Victoria’s smile seemed to fade, and she considered the road for a moment. Vicky hummed faintly as she considered the wheel before nodding quietly.

“Alright.” Vicky paused and then smirked quietly. “Actually, remember that favour you asked me about before you left for healing.” Amy stared at Vicky blinking as she tried to connect the dots, it took her a moment, but she let out an amused snort, rolling her eyes at Vicky’s wicked smile returning. The sight of Taylor’s house creeping into view kept the conversation from going on and Amy smoothly slid out of the truck, slamming the door before heading over to open the garage. Once Victoria had pulled in, Amy pulled the garage door shut and then headed for the front door, pulling out her keys.
Coming into the house, Amy took a moment to lock the door before slipping out of her coat and shoes, hanging both up by the door. She walked past the living room, seeing the tv going but a lack of people within. She moved up the hall, smirking quietly at the sound of soft conversation from the garage. Amy walked around the corner and peered in, seeing Taylor within Vicky’s arms. The girl studied her sister as she watched Taylor try to stammer something out and fail slowly turning more and more red.

Amy found her lips curling into an amused smirk when Vicky planted a kiss on Taylor’s head and spoke casually.

“Taylor,” She paused, getting the nervous girl’s attention before speaking slowly. “Do you wanna go on a date with me?” Amy leaned on the doorframe, watching with a grin as Taylor’s jaw dropped and she flushed again before swallowing and nodding. Vicky seemed to consider her for a moment before speaking.

“We’ve got training tomorrow, so how about Saturday?” The words were coy, and Amy watched as Taylor’s face clouded with something, and Amy wondered if she’d say something, but instead, the expression turned into a gentle smile and Taylor spoke a bit calmer.

“Saturday sounds great, couldn’t imagine a better person to spend it with.” Amy tilted her head to the side before chuckling and heading back into the house, climbing up the stairs and heading toward her room. Flopping down on her bed, Amy considered the scrap of paper that Eric had copied the number down onto for her. She briefly entertained the idea of messaging the nurse before she shifted through her contacts, pulling up Lily’s message and sending out a text.

{Lily, you’ll never guess what happened to me today, it was hilarious…}

Chapter End Notes

[[ALL DEM FEELS. Also, the Empire is down to 2. So, we're done with 7.3. As we go in 7.4, we've got training to look forward to. Taylor's going to be getting some force training, and then they're going to be having a meeting with the First Wave, and then more practice. And dinner, and awkward, and to be honest, this next chapter is going to be a fucking blast to write. Other than that, we've got some new clues about what's going on here, but they'll probably not make sense in context until 7.4 at the earliest. Also, there's a good chance that the next chapter will include Vicky and Taylor finally sitting down and talking about Taylor's powers at length, so that should be a fun chat. 'Just how much are you holding back?' And all that fun. ANYWAY, Looking forward to your feedback, I'm going to get some fricken sleep.]]
Canon Omake: Traipsing through Memories

Chapter Summary

[[So. Fun fact, before I changed the perspectives for reasons that make a heck tonne of sense in the next chapter, Taylor’s perspective was, in fact, first, and this meant that this training session was included. I had intended to include at least two scenes of Taylor actually training her Force powers, and since I had to kerjigger the chapter to make the perspectives work, I’m going to wrap this up as an omake and slot it in for you nerds to read while I work on 7.4 so enjoy yourselves.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 10th, 2011
Hebert Residence, Brockton Bay

Taylor stared up at Bastila’s expectant face from her position in the middle of the basement. She studied the spirit quietly before letting out a quiet sigh and resting her hands against her knees. Taylor studied Bastila nervously, remembering the last time that they’d done this. After a few moments, deciding that she better just get it out of the way, Taylor inhaled a few times, focusing inwards and stilling her thoughts. She took a deep breath, allowing her nervousness to bleed away, the flicker of primal fear in her gut stilling as she drew on the Force and allowed it to drag her into a formless serenity.

She sat there with her legs crossed, hands resting on her knees, and she waited. She had expected to be able to sense the change when the real world faded away, and she was dropped into the memories contained within the Noetikon, but there was no seam, no smooth transition to follow. She wasn’t even aware that she’d been shifted across the divide until the ground beneath her sitting form suddenly jarred, and her eyes snapped open.

She was in a small room with seats on either side; wall hangings hung on either side of her and objects were kept within. Sound rushed in around her, and she was suddenly buffeted by the roar of the engines from beneath and behind her, the ship jarring with a crunch and she staggered to her feet. It took a moment to get her balance, but her body adapted fast, and she moved out and through the doorway ahead of her, the hatch opening quickly when she touched it, to reveal three figures in small chairs scattered around the cockpit of the shuttle.

“Sorry to disturb your meditations, fearless leader. But we’ve been discovered.” Tavon, the name of the boy, swam up into her mind and Taylor moved quickly past him, leaning down and inspecting the console, taking in the sensor readings. Two ships, interdictor class. They were firing blindly though.

“Not yet, they’re just getting lucky so far. They know we’re here somewhere, but not where exactly.” Taylor frowned as she considered the display before glancing over at the others. Forna
looked sick to her stomach, and Gorul was keeping his attention on the weapons. She set her gloved hand down on Tavon’s shoulder, moving to a nearby seat.

“I’ll try to get them off our backs. Just try to keep us steady.” Taylor glanced at the boy, watching as he nodded before dropping into the comfortable copilot’s chair and settling. She felt the ship jarring along with Tavon’s muttered apology, and a smirk crossed her lips. She pushed inwards, subsuming herself into the Force and pushing out into it, letting her ‘mind’ reach out toward the ships nearby.

‘Caution, nervousness, fear.’ Her mind broadcasted the emotions outward, coaxing them into the mids of the attacking ships. She felt the shots getting wilder, and she continued to gently push, feeding paranoia into the minds damaging their resolve all the more as Tavon sent the shuttle careening through space toward the ship that was off by itself. Not even the flagship of his fleet, this ship seemed ordinary, no markings beyond its distinct lack of other vessels around it. Opening her eyes, Taylor watched as the view outside spun wildly as the shuttle did a barrel roll toward the glowing barrier of the docking bay.

Taylor stared at the glowing red beams lancing past the viewport, part of her expecting the weapons to scream as they barely missed her vessel. Instead of voicing the thought, she savagely gripped the console and braced for a rough landing.

The ship flashed through the glowing ray-shield outside the bay and slammed nose first into the deck plating and scrapped a gouge from the port toward the cluster of mechanics and soldiers standing near the door. Taylor sat there in her chair, staring outwards toward the knot of people. She saw them reaching for their communicators, and she hopped to her feet.

The others had the same idea, and they poured out of the wrecked shuttle together,igniting their lightsabers in a mix of blue, green and purple. Taylor drew out her sabre-pike and followed in the wake of the Jedi. They all worked in tandem, using their weapons to deflect blaster bolts aside as they charged toward the fleeing soldiers.

Force powers came into play tossing the soldiers aside. The attacks were hard enough to render their targets unconscious, but Taylor herself was especially careful to avoid killing. Once the bay was empty, they met up near the massive blast doors, staring at the controls and catching their breath.

“They know that we’re coming, boss,” Tavon spoke quietly, wincing when Forna shot him a glare from where she was working on the controls to the door.

“Yeah, maybe crashing into their ship might not have been the most stealthy approach.” The sarcasm caused Tavon to flush red, and Bastila held up a hand.

“Peace. There’ll be plenty of time to heckle Tavon for his poor astrogation once we’re out of here with Revan. For now, let’s focus. We don’t have the option of stealth now so we’ll need to go hard. Cut a path through the ship to the bridge, that’s where we’ll find Revan.” She moved over next to Forna, staring down at the controls quietly.

“Look here; we’ve triggered a structural damage warning.” She pointed at a blinking red light. “That’s why the door is sealed. You can just.” She reached down, flicking a few switches and then twisting a dial which caused the door behind them to let out a hiss before slowly sliding apart.

“You just triggered a fire alarm. In a docking bay.” Taylor smirked over at Forna, moving towards the opening doors and peering out and down the hall in either direction. The other woman followed in her wake, whispering harshly.
“Usually a fire alarm in a docking bay causes the ray shield to drop and the atmosphere to vent. How did you know that would work?” Taylor smirked and shrugged over her shoulder before noticing a head peeking around the corner to the left. She drew back before they saw her and then waited a second.

“There’s a group down to the left. Doesn’t look like any Force-users.” Taylor glanced back at the others. Gorul shifted quietly and leaned forward, dropping low and peering around the base of the door with a grunt.

“Could try ‘Shock and Awe.’” He glanced at her and Taylor shifted back on her heels. It wasn’t a terrible plan. The others would go first, fall into the ambush and while the trap was sprung, she’d come out behind and use a Force Burst to blind the ambushers. It probably wouldn’t work more than once, but it’d keep the initiative on their side. Taylor studied the group before letting out a sigh and nodding. She waved a hand and growled as she was forced to stay behind and listen.

She stood near the door, waiting until the sound of a shout came and then blaster fire. She grasped the Force, drawing it into her hand and stepping out into the corridor. She raised her glowing hand, the light drawing the gaze of the soldiers. Once they were looking at her, Taylor shielded her face with her other arm and released to the technique. The shouts and curses from the other end of the corridor told her that the technique had worked.

Moving her arm, Taylor saw the others already moving to knock out the groaning soldiers, and she hurried to catch up. They moved quickly and as quietly as they could, doing their best to sneak past the increasing patrols as best they could, avoiding the lifts and using ladders and maintenance accesses to traverse the parts of the ship between them and the bridge.

The bad feeling that had been coiling in Taylor’s gut grew significantly worse when they emerged onto the command deck and found an utter lack of support personnel and soldiers, the doors all open leading in the direction of the bridge. She paused, staring down the long corridor worriedly, glancing at the others.

“Trap?” Gorul’s rough voice was thick with exertion and Taylor glanced up the corridor with a severe look.

“Obviously, but we sort of stuck having to trip it. That’s the only way to the bridge, and I can still sense Revan, he’s up there.” She frowned and glanced back at the others, getting nods. She sighed quietly before they moved off carefully. They’d nearly made it to the bridge when the doors between them and the bridge, and the blast doors behind them slammed shut, the side corridors opening to reveal four figures in black robes with rebreathers covering most of their faces.

The figures illuminated their sickly red lightsabers and charged, and the Jedi ignite their own weapons charging into the fray. The sound of lightsabers crashing off each other was deafening in the confined space, and the grunts of combat were evident. Taylor didn’t have long to think on it, and she immersed herself in the Force, wrapping it around herself and letting it guide her efforts as she reached out and drew the others into her meditation, augmenting them.

They moved faster, more precisely, and they worked in tandem, Taylor saw Tavon blocking an attack from one Sith, leaving his back open to another and she shifted, lashing out with her foot to distract her opponent, arching her back and striking out backwards with her pike. The weapon’s significantly increased reach intercepted the swing aimed at Tavon’s back and deflected the attack backwards, and she swung back towards her own opponent who had recovered.
She ducked under the wild savage swing, using the Force to launch herself up into the air, dodging over the second strike and she lashed out with one of her feet smashing it into the side of the Sith’s head and sending him crashing into a nearby wall. The Force screamed, and her weapon went up and over her shoulder, across her back deflecting the attack coming for it and then she spun savagely, using the weapon to sever the legs of her attacker at the knees.

The others were moving in tandem, the three of them cornering the other two Jedi. Taylor moved surely, using one of her armoured boots to slam into the side of the downed Sith’s head putting him out of the fight. She watched as the remaining two Sith fell under the assault of Tavon, Gorul and Forna’s efforts. Taylor gestured at the stunned Jedi that she’d been fighting, using the Force to rip his weapon from his hand and dragging him over to the door panel.

“Open it.” Her voice was low and laced with the Force, and she watched the Sith struggling to refuse before slowly reaching out and inputting the unlock code. Once the door swung open, Taylor used the Force to slam the sith face first into the bulkhead, watching as he crumbled.

The bridge crew were gone, almost certainly moved to a secondary location to keep the ship operating while Revan awaited them here. He stood in his ornate robes, staring out at the ongoing battle in space beyond them, seemingly ignoring them. Between Taylor and him were four more adepts like the ones they’d dealt with ignited their sabres and charged.

Gorul and Forna moved to intercept, and Taylor ignited her Pike, aiming and then launching the weapon like a Javelin. She watched as the weapon moved with Force augmented speed and slammed into the chest of one of the charging Sith, blowing him cleanly off his feet. Taylor lunged at a second target, leaping into the air and reaching out, her pike flying back into her hand and igniting as she spun down towards the Sith and struck out with the weapon.

She heard the others clashing with their foes, and she moved faster, putting her opponent on his back foot, smashing the metal of the pike’s haft into the Sith’s armoured body, the sounds of his grunts of discomfort and pain music to her ears as she forced him onto the backstep, using the blade of her weapon to casually deflect his attacks back and away from her.

The sound of painful choking reached her ears, and she glanced over, see Tavon suspended in the air before Revan, his glowing blade falling out of his hand as the Sith Lord held him aloft, staring dispassionately at his pain. Taylor felt desperation clawing at her, but she forced it away and renewed her assault on her penned in opponent, lashing out with the blade several times, forcing his weapon up and away from his chest.

She used the haft to slam into his inner thigh, causing him to gasp in pain and then her blade twirled up, smashing the lightsaber aside and out of his hand. When he turned to grasp toward it and return it, Taylor reached out and seized him, viciously slamming his body into the roof and then into the floor in an odd parallel to the attack that she’d once used to down Victoria.

The sound of a meaty crunch and flesh falling brokenly to the floor caused Taylor’s blood to run cold, and she turned to stare toward Tavon’s corpse where it lay before Revan’s feet. She heard the others moving up behind her, and she fought back the grief and anger she felt at Tavon’s death, glaring toward Revan quietly.

“You cannot win, Revan.” Taylor’s voice was crisp and precise, and she glared at him as she readied her weapon. The Sith Lord didn’t respond to her words, choosing instead to twirl his blade before him, preparing himself to kill them all. Taylor’s eyes saw a ghost of crimson against the blackness of
space, and she glanced over, seeing another Sith ship firing on them. She raised a hand shielding herself as the blasts ripped through the vessels, consoles around them exploding into Shrapnel.

Even with her shields, Taylor was blown off her feet. She lay there, head spinning and body aching. Taylor felt a sharp agony in her side as she sat up. Taylor pulled her robes to the side, growling at the sight of a bit of metal peeking out of her side. She ignored it for the moment, pushing herself to her feet and staggering toward the others.

It was harder this time, fighting off the grief and loss as she stared at the shattered remains of her friends, the blast had decimated them. She ached to take a moment to collect their weapons and close their eyes, but the ship shuddered ominously and listed to one side as the wave of fire from the other ship continued. She glanced at the bodies littering the deck and turned to make her escape. The sound of a weak groan startled her.

“Malak.” The words were laced with bitterness and pain, and Taylor staggered over to where he’d fallen. She stared down at the Sith, studying his maskless face, taking in the pale skin and the yellow eyes, and the scars that covered it. Blood was leaking from his lips, and a sizeable piece of shrapnel peeked out of his back in the middle of his ribs.

She stared down at him, and for a moment, a dark thought washed through her mind that she should kill him, or just leave him to die. But then the thoughts about what was at stake came to her. She crouched low and reached out, pausing when the Sith grasped her arm in fury and glared up at her, gasping out whistling words.

“L-Let me die. I’ll j-just betray you later.” The words were cold, more of a promise than a threat, but she ignored him, brushing off his weak grip and reaching into the Force. She brought her healing magic to bear and washed it over him, stabilizing his wounds as best she could. She felt the Force in his body reaching out, grasping at her as others had occasionally done. A bond. She prepared to brush it aside, to return her focus to the matter at hand, but then his words came back to her.

Filled with sudden determination, Taylor grasped the bond accepting and widening it. Revan would feel her pain. Feel her wounds. He would die should he try to kill her. Insurance, she told herself, watching as the bond slammed into Revan and his eyes started to roll. She moved, hefting him up from his side without the metal shard and hooked his arm around her shoulder.

It took a few minutes and a few harsh words, but she was able to drag him through the ship. She did her best, scrambling her brains and trying to remember where the nearest docking bay would be, where she might find a shuttle to escape this mess. The world faded into darkness as she hobbled along, the nearly insensate Sith Lord hanging from her growing to be more and more like dead weight as time went on.

\[\text{---} \]

The darkness cleared, and Taylor found herself standing without the weight of the Sith against her side, the pain she felt fading away. The murkiness of the memories cleared and she blinked, glancing around quietly. The bridge was different. Smaller. Two branches lined with computer consoles leading into a single control area that was far smaller than the Sith ship she’d been on. She moved
across the carpeted floors and into the main section, blinking at Bastila as she stood by the windows, staring out at a planet visible beyond.

“Taris.” The words were soft, and Taylor moved up next to her, and she stared out at the planet, staring at the glowing lights that illuminated much of the dark half of the planet. She studied it, the city seemed to cover the entirety of the dark side, and no doubt the lights.

“It’s uh. Like Coruscant. An ecumenopolis, right?” Taylor’d looked up the term after seeing Coruscant, and she stared in awe out the window, the heavy sigh from the Jedi startled her.

“It was. We’re aboard the Endar Spire. When this ship was lost, the planet below went with it. The Sith bombarded it from orbit until nothing was left alive but Rakghouls and the poor broken people that would soon be their food.” Bastila sighed quietly before glancing at Taylor.

“This is also the place that my adventure with Revan began in earnest, even if it wasn’t where we first met.” The woman studied Taylor quietly before moving over and taking a seat in one of the command chairs, gesturing for Taylor to do the same at a nearby one. Taylor settled and studied Bastila quietly.

“Do you know why I showed you that?” Her voice was curious, and Taylor frowned as she considered the various things she’d seen, the memories and the context and she frowned when only one thing seemed to stand out.

“The bond.” She muttered softly sighing when Bastila nodded in her direction.

“Taylor,” The woman’s voice was slow, reproachful, as she continued. “Force bonds are no small matter. As the memory showed, they could be used against you. Because of that bond, Revan was nearly incapable of killing me, any wound I suffered, he would have felt. Jedi are constantly cautioned against forming them too easily, and Force adepts like yourself with natural talents for them are taught extensively to control them. They can be dangerous.” She stared at Taylor quietly, and Taylor found herself frowning at the idea, shifting back and listening to a much calmer Bastila as she continued.

“Typically, bonds normally only form between Force sensitives. The most common is the one that comes from master to student. From long periods of intense training and companionship, and in this case it is a boon, it increases the coordination between master and student, and allows the sharing of thoughts, feelings, or emotions.” The woman studied her before continuing softly.

“But you’ve got a proclivity for bonds so profound that you can form them with non-Force adepts. The bonds themselves start off weaker, but bonds like this, they deepen and take root based on the depth of your reciprocal feelings.” Taylor tilted her head, and Bastila sighed, leaning closer and explaining.

“Mutual feelings will strengthen the bonds, be they respect, or affection, or even love. These things will deepen the bonds between you and your friends, Taylor. Even then, they are still weak, the effects more subliminal or subconscious, and they still wouldn’t reach the level of a master student bond where you can share thoughts or feelings. But as you’ve discovered, as a Jedi, you can intentionally deepen the bond.” Taylor blinked, images of her grasping onto her bond with Amy, forcing it wide open and funnelling her healing trance into it.

“And as you’ve discovered, with Force bonds like this you can share your gifts along them.” Taylor blinked and shifted, considering that quietly. She stared down at her hands and let out a sigh, but
before she could speak, Bastila smoothly cut her off.

“These gifts could save your life or those of your friends. As one of them is now aware of your gifts, she is the perfect person to practice with. A living person in on the secret would allow you to practice both battle meditation and how to use your bond more effectively.” Taylor stared at Bastila quietly and let out a sigh.

“I— I’ll ask, Bastila but—” Taylor paused and frowned. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to argue or to talk about things, but the feeling of eyes on her suddenly pierced through the veil of the memories, and she glanced at Bastila curiously.

The woman got a distant look in her eyes before chuckling.

“Seems you’ll be getting a chance to discuss things sooner than you expected.” The woman’s words accompanied by the feeling of warm pressure on her forehead caused her meditative trance to break, and she slowly opened her eyes. The warmth and pressure on her forehead drew back, and she stared up at the kneeling form of Victoria looming a short distance away. The serious look on her face set her heart to racing, especially when the girl lowered herself into a seat opposite her on the carpet and stared at her quietly.

“Hi, Vic,” Taylor spoke softly, studying her girlfriend. The brief gentle smile and the memory of the kiss on her forehead eased her apprehension a bit, but even then, she still fidgeted as she stared at the other girl. Taylor opened her mouth, trying to ask Vic how her day had been, or how she was doing, but the tension in the girl’s form told her enough, she slowly closed her mouth and studied the blonde for a few moments until Victoria quietly leaned forward.

“Hello, Taylor. I think,” The girl paused and frowned quietly before slowly straightening her back.

“I think that it’s time we actually talk about things. I’ve got some questions.” Taylor rocked back nervously and studied the other girl quietly before glancing at the image of Bastila that appeared and took a seat near them both, waiting. She studied the spirit for a moment before turning back to Vic and speaking gently.

“I’ll—” Taylor felt her heart sinking as she stared at the blonde, shifting nervously before tilting her head back and speaking slowly.

"I'll answer any questions that you have, Vic."

Chapter End Notes

[[BOOM. So this is basically where 7.4 picks up. I sort of concluded as I was writing that this stuff would be much more impactful from Victoria’s perspective. We’ve not yet seen her reaction and stuff, so it makes more sense for it to be her. This meant that I had to push Taylor’s perspective to the second half of 7.4, which sucks, cause that pushed out Sabah.

BUT! I’ve decided to still include Sabah or the parts that wouldn’t be a rehash in a Sabah B-side after 7.4. So you guys can expect 7.4 sometime tomorrow night, and then the b-side sometime Monday probably. It should be good. Promise. Other than that…]
Uh. Hope you liked the Training stuff. It's a good way for me to practice writing combat stuff in a way that's less. Uh. Random, cause I know what's supposed to happen in these battles, and I get to practice describing combat with a Lightsaber.

Anyway, looking forward to your feedback nerds. And I'll be around. Short shift tomorrow means that I can work on 7.4 a bit during the day before work, and it shouldn’t be out super late. Though uh. Since all the chapters in this arc seem to be turning into 9k+ monsters, there are no promises there. Long chapters are fun, even if they slow the update speed just a touch.

Side Note: This Omake is in fact, Canon to INFC post 7.3. I should specify that.}]

Chapter Summary

[[I did intend to put this out last night/early this morning, but uh. I basically got 8k words in, and I was still doing Victoria’s perspective, and I figured that I’d sleep on it and finish it today, so uh. Here’s your update.

7.3 unravelled things a bit and gave us a glimpse into the more mundane aspects of Taylor, Vicky, and Amy’s lives, but now we get to deal with the more exciting. So this chapter was initially supposed to be a Taylor/Sabah Chapter, for reasons that will become apparent… later. But uh. I ended up having to slot Vicky in for things to make sense, and that means that we’ll get to have a Sabah B-side, so I’m sure you heathens will enjoy that.

There’s a canon omake that shows Taylor’s perspective right up until Victoria interrupts her in this first section if you want to read that, it’s here. It might help put stuff in perspective, but beyond that, let’s get moving.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 10th, 2011
BBU, Brockton Bay

Victoria set her foot into the running board of the old truck, using it to lever herself up and into the bench seat. She dropped onto the ageing leather and tossed her bag in the middle as she pulled the door closed behind her. She sat there in silence for a few moments, turning and gripping the steering wheel, allowing her head to rest against it as she silently counted in her head. She felt the cold plastic on her forehead, and she took a few deep breaths before glancing up. Part of her expected to see dozens of eyes on her, as she had in the parking lot at school, but no one around her seemed to care, and she felt her shoulders slowly relaxing.

Ignoring that thought for the moment, Victoria reached over and popped open the glove box on the passenger’s side of the cab. Leaning over and stretching, she rooted around within, pulling out the twenty-year-old auxiliary to tape deck adapter that she’d found in there the other day and slotting it into the antique radio built into the truck. Once it was in place, she connected it to her phone and set some music to play, so that when she slotted the keys into the truck and started it up, the music immediately washed out over her.

Guitar strings and drums greeted Victoria and eased the persistent tension that had been clinging to her. She sat there, feeling the truck rumbling under her hands, the music wrapped around her and she felt the muscles along her back and neck slowly loosening as she let out a long breath. Glancing down at her bag, Victoria stared at the book peeking out. With an irritated huff, she shoved the book back into the bag and turned her attention back to the windshield, slowly putting the truck in gear. She set an arm along the top of the bench seat, glancing over her shoulder and staring backwards as
she pulled out of the lot. Since Amy was staying to work on something with Lily, Victoria reached out and cranked the music up as she pulled out into traffic, revelling in the sound.

Even now, listening to music, the words that they’d spoken about in class still went over her head, and she was finally confronted with the uphill battle that she’d signed on for. She’d expected that since she ‘understood’ music that she’d pick up the technical aspects, but half of what they’d been talking about had been like greek to her. Even now, with an example before her, it didn’t make sense. She growled quietly as she gripped the steering wheel, her eyes drifting around the cars around her, putting her foot on the brake as she saw the light changing ahead, drifting to a stop among the rest of the crowd.

At least, in that class, her stupidity had been her own private embarrassment, no one at the university stared at her. No one paid her any attention. She was another blonde girl in comfortable clothes. Her veil of anonymity remained intact. This was sadly not the case at her actual school. Victoria glared at the road as the light changed, watching the cars pull away. She wasn’t sure if it’d been Dean, or Emma, or even one of her old friends that had finally spread the word, but ever since that confrontation with Dean, people suddenly found her much more fascinating, and her comfortable curtain of invisibility had evaporated.

Everyone stared and had hushed conversations as she walked past. No one spoke to her, or interacted with her, they just talked amongst themselves and studied her as if she was some sort of bizarre science experiment that appeared in their midst. Victoria paused, blinking as she admitted that that wasn’t entirely true. There were a few students that still treated her well. Amy and the Wards remained friendly, and beyond them, a few students amongst the crowds had shot her a supportive smile or a brief nod that merely confused her more. She wasn’t sure what she’d done to engender such support, though the looks had undoubtedly made the rest of the day bearable.

It wouldn’t have been so irritating if the kids had kept their speculation to a volume that Victoria hadn’t constantly heard snippets. People were endlessly speculating about everything from her sex life, to the end of her relationship with Dean, to her status as a hero. They all chattered amongst themselves, and Victoria hunched down, ignoring it as best she could, doing her best to emulate Taylor’s stoic disinterest as she did her work. There were less than four weeks to tolerate being in that place and then she’d have her anonymity back. The thought caused Victoria’s body to relax a bit in relief as she turned off the street, pulling into a gas station.

She hopped out and checked her wallet before moving to pop the gas tank and fiddling with the gas pump. She carefully slotted the handle into the truck and set the fuel to pouring, staring at the display as her thoughts turned back to the school. Two other people hadn’t been following the pack, and both of them irritated Victoria as they refused to leave her alone. Dean, who always lurked at the periphery of her vision watching her with this look so heavy with suspicion and concern that it felt like weights on her back, and Emma, who studied her with such hate whenever they crossed paths, but at least the redhead had the sense to attempt to avoid her.

The machine let out a ding and a thunk as the tank filled, and Victoria pulled the handle free, slotting it into the machine and closing the gas tank. She considered the gauge, memorizing the amount before moving across the parking lot and into the small kiosk. She browsed the shelves as she waited in line to speak with the teller, grabbing a packet of M&M’s for Taylor and a bottle of chocolate milk before moving up to the counter and dropping her bounty. The bored teller scanned the items and rattled off a number that sounded like the amount of gas that she’d purchased, and Victoria nodded, fishing out her cash.

She dropped a few bills on the cheap plastic scratch ticket display and scooped up her goods,
returning to her truck. The candy was stuffed into her bag with the ridiculous homework, and she cracked the lid of the chocolate milk, taking a swig of the cold liquid before sealing it up and setting it on the bench seat and starting the truck once more, pulling out into traffic. She watched the cars coming down the street carefully, pulling into traffic and guiding the ageing truck toward home.

It was a short trip, and before her thoughts had a chance to turn any darker she was pulling into the driveway, leaving the vehicle outside the garage since they’d be leaving in a few hours. She hopped out of the cab and grabbed her bag, glancing over at Taylor’s handler leaning on her car and enjoying a smoke. She waved at the woman before closing the truck door and heading up into the house.

Victoria paused inside the door, hanging her bag up and kicking off her shoes. She checked the rack by the door and finding Lisa’s shoes missing she guessed the girl was still at work. Taylor’s shoes were there though, and she moved around the ground floor looking for her. She hadn’t found any sight of the girl, and she’d been contemplating going upstairs to see if Taylor was taking a nap, potentially with the idea of joining her, when she noticed the door to the basement was ajar, and she moved toward it.

The sign on the door finally penetrated her mind, and she found herself snorting as she pushed it open and stepped onto the stairs and descended them slowly, Jedi Temple indeed. When she reached the bottom, she looked around the basement, taking in the rugs that covered most of the floor along with the sizable collection of cushions. Taylor was indeed present, and Victoria moved closer, studying the other girl, seeing the way she sat perfectly still in a textbook lotus pose.

As she stood there and studied the other girl, Victoria was tempted to put off the questions hanging from her lips, to just curl into Taylor’s side and take a nap, but then an image flickered into her mind at the growing worry that seemed to drape itself around the other girl. Taylor clearly had something that she needed to say that she seemed to think would upset Victoria, and the worry grew with each day that it wasn’t addressed.

With a quiet sigh, she moved closer, watching as Taylor took a deep breath and seemed to smile just a bit. The warmth that grew in her chest caused her to skip over the gentle shake that she’d been intending, moving instead to merely lean in and feather a kiss to Taylor’s forehead. The girl in front of her let out a startled gasp before taking a deep breath. She didn’t pull back though, and after a moment Victoria drew back staring down at Taylor, watching as the girl stared nervously up at her.

Victoria watched Taylor for a few moments before shifting back, once more fighting her urge to sit against Taylor’s side and taking a seat opposite her to focus on her face. The girl studied her for a few moments before taking a deep, resigned breath.

“Hi, Vic,” Taylor spoke softly, and Taylor felt her heart aching at the sad look in her eyes. She studied the girl quietly for a few moments before shifting closer just a bit and speaking softly as she stared into the other girl’s eyes.

“Hello, Taylor. I think,” Victoria paused, frowning as she tried to figure out just what she wanted to say here.

“I think that it’s time we actually talk about things. I’ve got some questions.” Victoria watched Taylor rocking back on her hips. The girl’s eyes flicked to the side, and Victoria glanced over, taking in the empty space before realizing what the tic meant. She studied the empty space for a moment before Taylor’s voice drew her back.
“I’ll- I’ll answer any questions that you have, Vic.” The words came out slowly, haltingly and Victoria studied the other girl for a few moments before nodding quietly. Victoria considered Taylor for a few moments before shifting back and asking the one question that’s been on her mind since she found out.

“Just how much are you holding back?” Her voice was soft. She watched as Taylor blinked quietly and then shifted faintly and seemed to consider the question for a few moments. She studied her hands, sighing when she finally spoke.

“It depends on what you mean. If you’re asking how powerful I am now? I’m not sure. With what I know I’d probably rate at least a six in every category the PRT tracks except for Tinker, Breaker and Changer.” Taylor spoke, and Victoria shifted back shocked as she studied the girl.

“If you’re asking if I’m not using my true power, that’s not quite right. When I do fight, and I’m forced to actually fight, I typically go all out. I am still learning. It takes years to become a decent Jedi, and I’ve been at it for maybe four months.” She frowned quietly and then shrugged.

“I-If you’re asking if I have any more secrets, then the question is no. I’ve… I’ve told you everything now,” Taylor’s voice was soft, and Victoria studied her quietly, taking in the weary set of those shoulders. She decided not to let Taylor dwell on that, focusing on her responses.

“Every rating but Breaker and Changer?” She watched as Taylor studied her and she tilted her head. “I can see some things, Taylor, but, Brute? Stranger? Master?” Victoria peered at the other girl quietly. Taylor stared up at her for a moment, offering her a nervous look before closing her eyes and focusing. Victoria stared at her for a moment, blinking when suddenly she was alone in the basement. She glanced around staring at the empty space before something clicked in her mind, and Taylor was suddenly back where she’d been.

“Jedi have access to several abilities that… wouldn’t go over well if I used them, so I don’t, but I can use them.” Taylor studied her quietly, and Victoria shifted nervously as she felt her mouth go dry.

“Master?” Taylor blinked at her and sighed.

“The Sith have access to more Master-like abilities, but Jedi know a few. There’s the Mind Trick. You layer the Force into the voice and speak, and people obey. I’ve used it once.” Taylor stared at Victoria, and when she raised an eyebrow, Taylor continued.

“When I was attacking the Empire, I used it to put Purity down. I ordered her to sleep, and she did.” Taylor quietly picked at her shirt and Victoria studied her silently.

“The Mind Trick? Do all your powers have names?” She studied Taylor curiously, and the girl perked up a bit and smirked.

“Yeah. The Jedi were a large group; it made sense for them to name techniques to make them easier to teach. But they’re not exactly… imaginative. There’s Force Speed, Force Valor, Force Stealth, and… well, you get the idea.” Victoria tilted her head and studied Taylor.

“You always say ‘Jedi’ like you’re not of them.” She shifted closer, and Taylor seemed to start, glancing at her with an odd vulnerability in her eyes before her gaze returned to her lap.

“I-” Taylor paused, frowning. “I think that if I were back where the Noetikon came from, I’d never be allowed to join the order.” Taylor’s voice was small, and Victoria studied her quietly. She didn’t
have to prompt the girl because she continued in a soft voice.

“Jedi… They’ve got a code.” Taylor tilted her head and spoke softly, her voice whispering out an odd Mantra. “There is no emotion; there is peace. There is no ignorance; there is knowledge. There is no passion; There is serenity. There is no death; there is only the Force.” Taylor glanced up at her and shrugged quietly.

“Emotion, Passion?” Victoria’s voice was soft, and Taylor let out an amused chuckle.

“Jedi follow a form of fundamental Asceticism. No attachments material or personal. The Jedi live to serve the will of the Force, to promote the light and eradicate the dark. They would see this as a travesty.” Taylor gently gestured between them before tilting her head and quietly reciting something, apparently from memory.

‘A Jedi is a Jedi, first and foremost, and only. For a Jedi to divide his attention between the will of the Force and the will of others is to invite disaster.’ Taylor studied Victoria quietly, and the girl felt a welling of something in her chest, and she spoke slowly.

“Why?” The words were curious and laced with sadness at the idea of Taylor struggling through all of this alone, watching the girl as her shoulders slumped.

“You’ve seen why, Vic. At the flophouse.” Taylor stared back at her and Victoria blinked when the girl spoke softly.

“I was… You all were so hurt, and I was terrified that I’d never see any of you again. Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate and hate to suffering. Jedi can’t have that problem.” Taylor stared at her quietly and let out a sigh.

“You saw what my dad could do. Imagine if he’d had that power when my mother was killed in an accident, or when he’d lost just one too many contracts for the dockworkers. If he’d snapped with the Force on his side, he could have razed this world to the ground. I have to constantly be aware of what I do, how I act because if I go bad, Victoria… With the Force at my fingertips? Nothing and no one on this planet could stop me.” Taylor sighed and picked at her hands. Victoria studied her quietly.

“What is the Force? You mentioned it a lot and gave a brief explanation but… what is it?” Taylor stared at her quietly and frowned as she tilted her head.

“It’s like. It’s like trying to explain what the colour purple is to a blind person.” Taylor muttered before tilting her head, glancing over at the empty space once more and chuckling before speaking.

“Bastila explained it to me like this when I first awoke after triggering;” Taylor paused wetting her lips and speaking slowly.

“It is like a cloud, a mist that flows from living creature to creature. Set in motion by currents and eddies, it is the eye of the storm, the passions of all living things turned into energy, into a chorus. It is the rising swell at the end of life, the promise of new territories and new blood, the call new mysteries in the dark.’ Taylor stared over at her and Victoria shifted back on her heels, thinking on that idea for a few moments, studying her hand.

“Is she here?” She spoke, and Taylor blinked softly before pointing to an empty cushion to her left and Victoria shifted and glanced at it quietly, imagining a woman there for a moments before
“Is there any way that I could see them as well?” Taylor opened her mouth and paused, blinking and glancing off to the side at the empty space. Her mouth snapped shut, her teeth clicking as her cheeks rather suddenly turned a brilliant crimson. Taylor stared at her and coughed lightly before talking.

“Th-There might be a way, but uh. I don’t think we’re quite at that point yet.” Taylor’s response only made her more curious, and she leaned closer, prompting the girl to sigh.

“You remember when I mentioned the bonds? How I used the one I shared with Amy to keep her alive?” Taylor’s voice was quiet, and Victoria nodded softly, tilting her head as Taylor continued.

“I was able to do that because I used to the Force to widen the bond and shared my healing with her. Bastila seems to think that if I widened our bond sufficiently, you’d be able to perceive the spirits.” Victoria blinked, not seeing the problem, and Taylor rubbed her nose before continuing.

“There’d be other side effects. Opening the bond that much would leave you as open to my thoughts as the spirits are. We would hear each other’s every thought. And erm- every feeling.” Victoria blinked and considered that for a moment before blushing quietly. Taylor nodded at her, and she sank back onto her legs. Though, that did bring up another concern.

“The spirits are… always watching you, right?” Victoria spoke nervously, feeling her cheeks blushing even further as she stared at Taylor’s confused face. The girl stared at her quietly for a few moments, blinking before she tilted her head. Victoria had begun to pick up on those tells, noting when Taylor seemed to be paying attention to the spirit. She seemed to finally catch on, as her own cheeks which had faded quickly resumed their tomato paste coloured hue.

“I’ve got a switch of sorts that I can use to disconnect from the Noetikon temporarily. Uh. When we’re…” She coughed softly. “Alone, I generally close the link to the Noetikon down. Usually, erm, before Jolee has to start making comically exaggerated gagging noises.” Taylor’s cheek remained pink, and Victoria studied her quietly.

“How do those work, by the way? The bonds” The words were curious, and Taylor seemed to still, that familiar look of fear coming over her features. Taylor glanced up at her quietly before letting out an exhausted sigh and shifting forward to speak.

“Typically, they form between Jedi or other Force-sensitives, though a rare minority of people,” Taylor pointed to herself and continued. “Can form them instinctively. They’re sustained and strengthened based on our reciprocal feelings.” Victoria blinked at the words and Taylor sighed, pausing and trying again.

“They… They form between the people that I care about and me. The more that our feelings match up, the stronger the bond becomes.” Victoria nodded and studied Taylor, and a dark thought ghosted through her mind as she studied the girl.

“What other effects does the bond have?” She studied Taylor watching the girl tense quietly as she picked at her shirt.

“It… allows us to influence each other. Strengthens our emotional and personal bonds. It promotes understanding.” The words caused her stomach to sink, and she leaned forward, staring at Taylor quietly.
“Did- did this make you like me? Is this the reason that we-” Victoria’s words were soft and worried, and Taylor seemed to freeze, staring at her in confusion. She stared Victoria down for a few moments before slowly hanging her head. The sound of exhausted laughter startled her and Victoria shifted back, watching Taylor worriedly.

“I- I expected you to be worried that it’d changed you. And you.” Taylor quietly pushed her hair back, her eyes a bit red as she stared at Victoria. The girl advanced on her and Victoria didn’t pull back, squeaking when the other girl crashed into her in a hug that took them both down onto the carpet. Taylor’s face found its way into her neck, and Victoria held her quietly. It took a few moments, but the girl continued, whispering into her throat.

“This is why I like you, Vic. Because you found out that I accidentally created a bond between us that affects our minds, and your first thought wasn’t ‘What’d it do to me’ it was ‘What’d it do to you.” The words were gently spoken, and Taylor’s arms tightened around her, the dark haired girl soaking in the comfort of the contact before she could continue.

“It doesn’t create anything, Victoria. It can’t make us do anything. It’s more that, it… it helps us understand. Like when you kissed me, and I said that I couldn’t, and you didn’t run, or get mad. Instead, you sat there and listened as I talked. Things like that. It let us know that we could trust each other. It didn’t make us trust each other, but it let us know that we were both equally broken and we could.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and Victoria tightened her arms around the other girl, holding her close. She felt the girl’s tension bleeding away, and she frowned softly.

“You were really worried about this.” Her voice was soft, and Taylor nodded quietly against her neck. Victoria studied the pile of hair in her face for a few moments before gently drawing Taylor back, staring at her silently. She took in the girl’s sad eyes and the vulnerable expression on her face for a few moments, before muttering softly.

“I made my choices, Taylor. And despite what some people think, I don’t regret them. If that bond made things easier for us, then I’m glad that we have it. But even if it did, that doesn’t make any of this less real.” Victoria stared at Taylor’s face as the girl seemed to perk up before letting out a wet chuckle.

“Bastila is insisting that besides being a…” Victoria watched as Taylor froze and slowly glanced over her shoulder at the empty air for a few moments before finally slumping her shoulders and continuing as she made air quotes.

“Besides being a ‘marital aid,’ the bond is also useful in other ways. I can widen it a bit, not enough to share thoughts, but it could allow me to share some of my internally focused powers with you.” Victoria blinked at the implications of that.

“Like, your speed? And your endurance.” Taylor nodded quietly as she drew back, sitting scant inches from Victoria.

“We’d need to practice, but it’d mean that if necessary I could help you operate closer to your Glory Girl levels even without your shield.” Victoria blinked as the ideas came to her, being able to shrug off an attack with her shield and to keep fighting fast and hard. The plan had merit. She stared at Taylor, who recognized her eager look and snorted.

“I take it that that’s a yes.” She glanced off to the side before checking her watch. Victoria found her heart beating a touch quicker at the eager glint in Taylor’s eyes.
“...We’ve got a couple of hours before we have to go to the meeting.” The words were spoken softly, and Victoria blinked before rocking back. She considered the idea, tilting her head to the side in thought before shrugging and speaking gently.

“Couldn’t hurt to try?” She tried nervously, smirking when Taylor grinned at her. The girl shifted back a bit before taking a seat. Victoria sat where she’d been watching as Taylor assumed a more relaxed pose.

“I’ve done this once before, and it was in the heat of battle. I’m going to admit that I’ve got literally no idea what this will feel like for you. Best to uh... Prepare yourself?” Taylor flashed her a nervous smile that Victoria returned before settling down and closing her eyes. The silence dragged out between them, and Victoria began to wonder if it’d work before something shifted.

She felt warmth welling up from the back of her mind, apprehension and some lingering concern, but the warmth was more noticeable. She closed her eyes and thought about Taylor, and let her own warmth well up. She heard the soft gasp from across the carpet, and she opened her eyes, staring at the wide, confused eyes of the girl opposite her. Taylor took a few moments to get herself under control before nervously fidgeting with her shirt.

She clearly wanted to say something by the way that she opened and closed her mouth several times before shifting and biting her lip. She considered her lap for a few moments before losing a small sigh that was accompanied by a brief flicker of nervous disappointment in Victoria’s mind. She thought of saying something before Taylor leaned forward and spoke softly.

“Stand up. Might be best to try your kata. I’ll try to share the speed along.” Victoria considered Taylor before dropping into her first stance, carefully shifting along the Kata. She moved from pose to pose, slowly at first and then faster once she was comfortable. It took her a few moments to realize that she’d begun to move so fast her arms were blurring. She wasn’t at Taylor’s speed, but she could have easily fought Cricket with this speed. She turned to glance at Taylor, taking in the girl’s eager amusement.

“So. What next? What other powers does this work on?” Taylor studied her with amusement before closing her eyes and focusing again. Victoria felt the energy in her limbs stilling, and she slowed her hopping, moving more normally. It took a moment but something clicked in her head, and suddenly Victoria could hear everything. She listened to the slow, steady beat of Taylor’s heart and the soft breathing from the other girl. More distantly, she heard the soft breath of someone else, the rapid tap-tap-tap of a keyboard hinting at it being Lisa.

She stood there, staring upwards in awe as she listened to the cars rumbling by on the street and the faint murmurs of conversations just outside of her perception. She glanced back at Taylor’s amused smirk before dropping down next to the other girl, eager to share more of the techniques. To see the world as Taylor did.

Victoria coughed quietly as she considered the wheel, turning down the side street that led toward her Aunt’s home. She glanced over to her left, taking in Taylor’s still slightly blushed cheeks as she stared out the window of the truck. Taylor hadn’t quite been able to look at her since the rather...
abrupt end to their experimentation with the Force bond.

They’d spent nearly an hour drifting from power to power, Victoria’s amusement and excitement growing at the various powers that Taylor shared with her. She’d just finished testing out the Force Sight, staring around the house and seeing the dimly glowing form of Lisa puttering around in her room. Victoria could admit to herself that she’d gotten a bit excited, and in her joy at the game, she might have pounced on Taylor, laying a kiss on her girlfriend.

The intentions had been innocent enough, and the kiss had been gentle, for the first few seconds. Truthfully, the surge of complicated emotions and sensations that washed over them both hadn’t been ‘unpleasant,’ but it had left both of them lost to anything but the kiss for nearly twenty minutes. Eventually, Taylor had managed to push herself away despite Victoria’s whines of complaint at the loss of the pleasant contact.

They’d ended up sat there panting, their faces bright red and Taylor had relayed that Bastila recommended that they avoid doing that under the bond. The girl’s face had remained bright red from that point until now, and Victoria had felt a bit guilty. She felt even more guilty that she had also rather enjoyed the wide-eyed look that Taylor had shot her afterwards. At least at his point, Taylor wasn’t always staring at her as if worried that she might be leaving at any moment.

Victoria pulled the truck to a stop at the end of the driveway, parking behind her uncle’s car and next to her mother’s. She glanced out the windshield, taking a long slow breath, chuckling when Eric and Crystal emerged from the house tailed by Neil, all of them staring in confusion at the truck. Victoria guessed that the noise of the beast had almost certainly drawn them. She glanced at Taylor, reaching out and nudging her before she could escape. The blush remained on her cheeks, but Taylor flashed her a smile before climbing out of the vehicle.

Tugging out her keys, Victoria hopped out and closed the door moving around the truck and toward her family.

“And where did you find that relic?” Her uncle’s voice was laced with amusement and Victoria grinned at Taylor’s affronted squawk.

“It was uh- Taylor’s father’s truck. It survived Leviathan, and I’ve been using it to ferry everyone around. I’m the only one with a license.” She studied his amused expression before glancing over at Crystal and Eric’s confused looks. She coughed, and they both glanced at her.

“Is Amy here? She was supposed to hop over on the bus, but if she’s late, I might have to go get her.” They both glanced at each other before glancing back at her. The awkwardness in the air picked up a bit, and they spoke carefully.

“Did Taylor tell our mom to make sure that yours was here? Cause Amy seemed pretty shocked. She’s out back by herself.” Victoria blinked and glanced at Taylor, watching the other girl wince. Clearly, neither of them had thought to tell Amy about the change of plans. They sighed before Taylor headed in first, Victoria on her heels.

They dodged around the room that contained her mother, aunt and father and headed out the backdoor, heading toward Amy’s hunched over form. Victoria moved over first, peering over Amy’s shoulder as the girl stared at her phone, furiously typing out a text message. She waited till the girl had hit send and flipped the phone down before leaning over the back of the bench and speaking.

“What’s up, buttercup?” The words caused Amy to shriek, and her phone ended up on the grass of
the backyard, and she growled before reaching down to grab it and rounding on her. Victoria glanced over at Taylor, who lurked behind her and to the side, and she snorted. Coward.

“So.” Amy’s voice was laced with sarcasm. “Imagine my surprise to get here and see Mom sitting on the couch, saying that you two invited her here to talk.” She glowered at them, and Taylor cut across before Victoria could speak.

“It’s about the Dean stuff.” The words were gentle, and Amy glanced at her, frowning. “We’ve got to tell your mom and aunt about it. See what they think. Lots of different things are shaking loose, and if Dean’s doing stuff, the PRT needs to know.” Victoria shifted when Taylor glanced at her, studying her quietly. She bit her lip, but the girl didn’t say anything, merely turning back to Amy. Victoria followed her gaze and swallowed at Amy’s eyes on her as well.

Shifting nervously, Victoria met Amy’s eyes, doing her best to keep from squirming in place as it seemed like her sister was picking apart. Eventually, Amy seemed to follow Taylor’s lead, choosing not to say anything merely glancing at Taylor and nodding. Victoria let out a soft sigh as the two girls glanced at her and she slipped up, and as a group, all of them returned to the house.

Crystal and Eric were lounging around in the sitting room, and they gestured them toward the kitchen. Victoria blinked quietly, before realizing that with seven of them there, they almost certainly wouldn’t be able to fit into her aunt’s office. She followed Amy and Taylor down the hallway and into the kitchen. She studied the shapes of her mother, father, aunt and uncle, standing at the center island in the kitchen, hunched over it and talking in soft whispers.

The three of them lurked in silence by the door for a few moments before Taylor let out a polite cough that drew the attention of the adults that slowly rounded on them. Victoria saw the hopeful look in her mother’s eyes, and she did her best to keep her face impassive as Taylor stepped forward, speaking slowly.

“So. Uh. I’m sure that you’re all wondering why I asked you to be here.” She spoke faintly, and Victoria found herself smirking at the gentle self-consciousness that dripped from Taylor’s voice as she addressed the adult members of New Wave. She seemed to pause, thinking and Victoria’s uncle took this moment to chime in playfully.

“The thought had crossed our minds.” He gestured them over to the small island, and as one they moved, standing next to each other on one side of the island, opposite the older capes. Taylor took a deep breath and gently set her hands on the edge of the counter, staring at the older team members.

“We’re pretty sure that there was some… foul play at work at the hospital when we clashed.” Victoria listened as her girlfriend spoke softly, glancing over when Taylor gestured between herself and her mother. She watched her mother’s reaction, seeing surprise ghosting over her face. Taylor let the words sink in. After a few moments, Aunt Sarah’s voice gently drifted over the island.

“That’s uh, quite the accusation. What makes you think that something was going on?” Victoria studied the looks on the face opposite her, trying to figure out what they knew. She glanced at Taylor but saw the girl studying Amy. Her sister nervously shifted under the gaze for a few moments before leaning forward and speaking quickly.

“A few days ago, Dean showed up at our table at lunch. He asked me how we were settling in back at home.” Amy’s words were much more of a surprise to the other capes, and she shrugged.

“Yeah, that’s how we reacted. When I told him that we were still with Taylor, and mentioned that
we weren’t on great terms with Mom, he mentioned that we shouldn’t be too hard on her since she was only worried about Taylor and Victoria’s sleeping arrangements.” Amy studied the others, her voice quiet. Whatever she saw seemed to push her on, and she continued.

“Since I can guess that none of you told him or the PRT, Victoria assumed that he’d been there. She seemed to think that he used his powers on you, but that didn’t feel right to me. I talked about this with uh, Flechette, and she mentioned that Dean’d been seen with Armsmaster a lot lately. Miss Militia as well. She wasn’t sure what’s going on though, merely that they didn’t seem inclined to talk about things with her around.” Amy let out a sigh and glanced over at Taylor. Victoria watched the other girl take a breath before setting the device down.

“And then there’s the whole Youth Guard thing.” She gestured at Sarah, who nodded quietly. The others looked on in confusion and Taylor rubbed her face softly.

“Someone had told the Youth Guard representative that I had dropped out of school entirely and that I was living alone with my live-in girlfriend, getting up to all sorts of shenanigans.” Taylor’s voice was deceptively calm, and Victoria reached out, gently squeezing her side, causing Taylor’s tension to bleed away just a bit. The girl took a deep breath and frowned as she continued.

“After you left, Sarah, I uh. I used my powers on her and asked if a Ward was who submitted the tip. She uh, refused to answer but I managed to glean that it wasn’t a Ward, which would make the Dean being the mastermind of all this somewhat less likely.” Taylor frowned quietly and crossed her arms. Victoria turned back to her aunt, studying her face carefully. She saw the tightening of her jaw and the narrowing of her eyes.

“You’re not as surprised as I was expecting. What do you know?” Victoria spoke slowly, staring at the older part of the group, watching as her mother flinched back a touch. Aunt Sarah studied them for a moment before sighing and glancing toward her sister.

“Carol, show them what you found.” Victoria studied her mother as she dipped a hand into her pocket and pulled out a tiny plastic bag that held a silver disc the size of a large coin. She set it down on the table between them.

“I found this in my pocket as I was doing laundry a few days after… everything happened.” She spoke softly and glanced down at the item. Taylor stared at it quietly, reaching out and pulling it over, flipping the small device over in her hands and mulling it over.

“It looks like tinker-tech,” Victoria muttered as she studied the device over Taylor’s shoulder. Her father’s voice cut out her ruminations.

“It could be, Victoria, but without a friendly tinker to examine it, we can’t really be… certain.” Victoria glanced at the device and paused when Taylor let out a sigh, and shifted back, straightening her back.

“I uh. I might have someone who can help.” Victoria stared at Taylor in confusion, wondering if she was about to do something crazy. Expecting her to reveal one of the spirits she was just as shocked as the rest when Taylor pulled out her cell phone and set it face-down on the island, showing off the emblem that had been stamped into the backplate.

“Taylor,” Victoria admitted, as glanced up at her aunt as she spoke, that she could understand the nervousness in her tone. The idea that Taylor might get poached by a different superhero team seemed to cut through her, and she frowned softly. She glanced up when her aunt continued to
“Why, exactly, do you have a Guild-issued cell phone?” Victoria studied her aunt for a moment, glancing back to Taylor when she spoke.

“Dragon had some… adverse side effects to the Gestalt that my father did to battle Leviathan. She sent me the phone so that she could speak to me about them. I did my best to help her through them, and we got to chatting. She’s… a friend?” Taylor frowned as she considered the phone for a moment. Something seemed to ghost over Taylor’s face, her gaze flicking the empty space between Amy and her uncle and Taylor shrugged as she continued.

“She’s also helping me design a new weapon. Something a bit more potent than my current bo-staff.” Victoria blinked as realization washed over her. She glanced at her aunt, watching the look of trepidation on her face. Taylor barrelled on though.

“I could call her. She could at least take a look at the device?” Victoria studied her family, taking in the shock across the board. She understood it; one didn’t approach the world’s most famous tinker and just ask her for favours like that. Taylor seemed to shift nervously under their gazes before carefully taking her phone in hand and gesturing off to the side. Victoria watched her step away as she dialled the phone, staring at Taylor’s back in confusion.

Taylor stared at the phone as it connected, lifting the device up to her ear and listening to the mechanical ringing sound. She moved to lean against the counter near the back door staring out into the backyard. There were several rings before the call connected with a click.

“Taylor? Sorry, I’m a bit busy right now, could I call you-” The words were softly spoken, and Taylor spoke carefully, doing her best to cut the AI off gently.

“We’re pretty sure that one of the local tinkers attacked Victoria’s mom while I was in the hospital.” Taylor listened to the sound of surprise from the other end of the line and then Dragon took a deep breath.

“I- Harper. Stop for a second, I need to-” There was a burst of static and then Dragon made a sound of irritation, and the sound of electricity crackling was accompanied by a girlish shriek.

“Jesus, Tess! What the hell was tha-” Leets voice cut off and Taylor chuckled softly as Dragon seemed to smoothly ignore the interruption, her voice drifting back toward Taylor with a professional tone.

“Sorry about that, Taylor. You said something about tinkertech, are you certain?” The words were understandably cautious, since as far as Taylor knew there were three tinkers left in Brockton Bay at the moment and Dragon was friends with one of them and worked with another. Taylor let out a sigh before speaking softly.

“Victoria’s mother found a device in her pocket after we had our explosive argument, it’s about the size of a coin, and she claims that she had an explosive bout of anger right before we spoke.”
Taylor’s voice was soft, and she hummed. A faint sound drifted down the line, Dragon’s voice oddly thoughtful when she cut back in.

“You’re calling me on the phone I gave you? Alright, set it on the table, I’ll get Harper to assist.” Taylor blinked and paused before joining the others.

“Oh. Uh. If anyone asks, you’re building me a plasma pike. I uh. I’ll explain later.” Dragon took a breath as if she was about to speak before she sighed and hummed in agreement. Taylor moved over to the others, staring at them for a few moments before setting the phone on the table.

“Ready,” Taylor called, watching as the phone shot out a familiar glowing red device that hovered in the air over the phone itself. It shimmered and issued a bright red light that washed over them all and the room before two figures shimmered into being at the edges of the table composed of see-through amber light.

Dragon looked like she had when Taylor saw her last, barring the green scaled outfit that she wore. Leet was very different, dressed in cargo shorts and a t-shirt with a loose Hawaiian shirt draped over his shoulders. His blonde hair was spiked up, and he glanced around at the gathered capes nervously before leaning over and inspecting the baggy on the table with the device within. Dragon glanced down at it before nodding at the rest of New Wave.

“Taylor mentioned something about one of you finding tinkertech. This is it?” She pointed, and Taylor moved to open the bag, pouring the medallion out onto the table. Dragon joined Leet in studying it and Carol spoke almost casually.

“I found it in my pocket the morning after everything happened. I don’t remember picking it up though.” Taylor glanced up and spoke softly.

“The guy in the hoodie.” She saw Carol glancing at her in confusion and waved a hand. “When I got off the elevator there was this guy in a hoodie, he slammed into you, and then kept going.” Carol seemed to stare at her for a moment before frowning. Taylor tilted her head quietly glancing back at the glowing tinkers.

“I doubt that I could tell what it does without physically touching it, but uh. The power source seems pretty potent for its size. Looks like a miniaturized lithium-ion cell with a one-punch super output, it’s clearly a one-time use item. Though I wonder why it wasn’t designed to self destruct.” Leet frowned quietly as he stared at it. He studied the device for a few moments before glancing up at Dragon. Taylor watched as they shared a look quietly before Dragon sighed.

“I can’t tell you what it did, but I can say that it’s almost certainly a creation of Armsmaster. Or, I guess someone trying to impersonate him. The miniaturization is a dead give-away.” Leet considered the device before standing up and glancing at Dragon. The woman stared back for a moment before sighing.

“If you send the device to us, we can dismantle it and figure out what it did.” She frowned at the table. Sarah studied her image quietly before shifting closer and speaking.

“You’re friends with him, right? Do you have any idea why Armsmaster might have wanted to use something like this on Carol?” Her voice was laced with curiosity and Dragon quickly looked up before frowning.

“Truthfully, I’m not sure, Lady Photon. C-Armsmaster has been somewhat distant since Leviathan.
I’ve had my own issues going on, and with Leet joining the Guild we’ve been busy on projects as well, otherwise, I might have some idea what’s going on.” Taylor studied the AI for a few moments before she shook her head.

“But if you’re asking why he might have done this? I can only guess, but judging on the effects? A device like this might confuse master programming, much like Gallant’s powers do. If this was Armsmaster, I doubt that he would do anything like this for petty reasons. Truthfully, I can’t see him getting involved in petty relationship drama otherwise.” Dragon sighed quietly before crossing her arms.

“Thank you for your help, Dragon. If you wouldn’t mind giving me a call later, we can exchange addresses, and I’ll get the object sent to you for review. It seems that we have other things to discuss.” Taylor felt her heart sinking as Dragon glanced at her, and she offered a sheepish smile. Dragon flicked her gaze back to Sarah before nodding smoothly.

“Of course, Lady Photon, I’ll make time to contact you tomorrow sometime; hopefully, you don’t mind a bit of business on the weekend?” Sarah nodded quietly, and Dragon glanced at the others, nodding quickly before the images of her and Leet flickered out and vanished. Taylor reached out and scooped up her phone, tucking it away as the others glanced at her.

“So. New Weapon?” The words that drifted Taylor’s direction from her boss were arch, and Taylor flushed quietly and turned to the older woman and started to speak quickly.

Taylor stared in mute confusion at the jersey that she held in her hands. It was sized for her, white with brown lettering that showed her name across the back, above the number 9. Her crest was on the front of the jersey, and on the matching brown shorts that had come with it.

She’d laughed when she’d been handed it and ordered to change, but everyone else had headed off to do so. Now that she had the bathroom to herself, she stared at the outfit before sighing and slipping out of jeans and her dress shirt, folding both along with her vest and laying them on the sink. She slid on the athletic clothing, getting flashbacks to gym class as she did. Once it was all in place, she pulled her dark hair back and tied it off before grabbing her clothes and heading down to join the others.

Victoria was waiting at the base of the stairs in her white and gold costume with the new mirrored capital ‘G’ logo she’d taken to wearing across her chest. Taylor fidgeted and whined at Victoria’s bemused smirk. She moved past her girlfriend, staring at Amy who looked just as irritated as her in her white and red jersey with its cross on prominent display.

“Any idea what’s going on?” She spoke as they walked through the halls, Eric in a blue and white jersey, and Crystal in an outfit similar to Amy’s barring the different symbol on it. They exited the house together and came to a stop, staring at the four older members of New Wave standing in the extended back yard.

They were all wearing similar jerseys and shorts, and Manpower stood at the front of the group, his large boot resting on top of a soccer ball. The goalposts that Taylor had earlier seen set up in the
backyard suddenly made sense. The group walked across the grass as one and came to a stop before the older members. Manpower didn’t wait for them to speak, casually dipping into an explanation.

“Considering the fact that we’re all here, it was decided that powers training might not be the best idea for tonight, so instead we’re going to do a team-building exercise.” He gestured back at the other members, and Taylor took in the amused grins on the older cape’s faces. Standing here facing them like this it was clear that they’d all been doing this for years, judging by the way their muscles shifted and flexed as they stretched.

“New Wave, vs the Second Wave.” Eric’s voice cut over both groups and Taylor blinked, grinning quietly at the younger boy. Victoria seemed to perk up as well, and Taylor chuckled speaking casually.

“Second Wave, I like that. Though it seems a bit unfair, there’s five of us, and four of you. And you’re a bit old.” Taylor’s voice was teasing, and she saw Manpower stare at her before smirking and placing his fingers in his lips, whistling softly. Taylor stared at him in confusion before, as one, new wave glanced off to the side. Taylor followed the gaze, watching the door swing open to reveal a familiar dark-skinned girl in a typical t-shirt and shorts was making her way out the back door and down into the yard with them.

“...Sabah? Did she?” She glanced at the others who all looked confused, but it was Sarah that responded.

“Join up? No. But I found out that she’s been patrolling, and I figured that I should speak with her. I invited her out to training as well, and it was actually her idea to try this. Though I must admit, the merchandise ideas are certainly… interesting. These might sell.” Taylor glanced down at her costume and blinked at the idea of people wearing jerseys with her name and symbol on them. It made her feel rather odd.

Sabah quickly jogged up to the adults and then glanced over at them, offering the group a nervous wave. Taylor glanced at her team quietly and then leaned over and spoke nervously to her girlfriend.

“So. Uh. How well do you guys know how to play soccer?” The nervous looks that she got in response didn’t engender a lot of faith in her team.

Taylor whined as she stalked over to the closest shady spot to the where they’d been playing and just flopped over face down on the loamy earth, burying her face in the grass. The cool plants felt refreshing on her heated skin, and she lay there silently. It’d been a slaughter, the other team had gotten fifteen points before they’d gotten two, and that had just been the beginning.

Without their powers, it’d been a question of physical fitness, and besides herself and Victoria, none of the younger members did any more physical training beyond what the team insisted on. The adults, on the other hand, were all active heroes that were always in motion. They were faster, bigger, and they’d apparently played before. Sabah had been the real star of their team, and Taylor suspected that the girl had played the game in her youth quite a bit.
Taylor, with her thin frame and long reach, could dance circles around most of the older members, but Sabah seemed like mist in close and she’d barely been able to keep the ball away from the girl. Add to that they’d placed Victoria’s uncle in the goal, the giant of a man had arms like a gorilla, and it made it even harder to get any headway the few times that she’d managed to get the ball away from Sabah and up toward the other end of the playfield.

Several times, Taylor’d been tempted to cheat, to use her connection with Victoria or the others, or to tap into her battle meditation to make things easier for her team, but something stilled her hand. Part of her figured that Neil was trying to make a point with this, and glancing over she saw him talking severely with the rest of her team. She understood the general idea, sometimes powers weren’t enough, sometimes even their team wasn’t enough, and it could one day come down to who could run the fastest or the longest, or both.

When Neil turned and headed toward the house, the rest of her team turned and headed toward her. Taylor slowly rolled onto her back, laying there and staring up at the sunlight peeking through the foliage overhead. She listened as the others flopped down around her and she chuckled when someone dropped right next to and flopped overtop of her middle. The sound of Victoria groaning into her stomach, caused her to raise a hand, slowly patting the other girl on the head.

She glanced around and saw that the others were all sprawled around her, panting as they savoured the way the shade and the soft breeze felt on their skin. Movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention, and she watched as Sabah lingered a short distance away, the nervous look back on her face. Taylor rolled her eyes and waved the girl over. The motion cause Victoria to lift her head, glancing over and snorting.

“Yeah, Yeah, C’mon over, you traitor.” Victoria’s voice was laced with playful teasing and Sabah seemed to relax as she moved over and dropped down amongst the group. Taylor glanced over at her, smirking when Victoria dropped back down against her, lazily resting a hand on the girl’s head once more.

“So. This torture was your idea, hrm?” Taylor eyed the dark-skinned girl who looked affronted for a moment before straightening her shoulders.

“They wanted to test your physical fitness and teamwork skills, and it’s been years since I’ve had a good game.” Sabah playfully buffed her nails. “Sadly, I’m still waiting for the latter.” Taylor found herself grinning when the others let out groans around them. She rolled her eyes before dropping her head back down to rest against the grass, glancing over and snorting.

“Still, it’s nice to see you having fun, even if it is having fun kicking our asses. Kind of feels weird for all of us all to be together like this without Lily, though.” Taylor spoke lazily as she lay there, staring at the leaves.

“She’s got training with the Wards today,” The comment came in an odd stereo and Taylor blinked glancing between the sprawled out form of Amy on her left, and the shape of Sabah reclining against the trunk of the tree. Both of them stared at each other before chuckling and speaking.

“I think that’s why your training was today, too; the Wards were doing something as well.” Sabah shrugged and tilted her head to the side as she glanced around.

“Otherwise, I’m sure she’d have been here to watch and cheer me on,” Sabah smirked wider at Amy’s scoff from Taylor’s other side. Taylor glanced up at her and Sabah smiled quietly.
“Thanks again, by the way for taking her in so easily.” Taylor tilted her head to the side and studied Sabah as the girl loomed over her. The older girl studied her as well before shrugging.

“I could tell from talking with her online that she was pretty lonely in New York. She’d lost her only family out there, and she didn’t seem to get on well with the Wards either… And she just… dropped everything to come out here, hoping for a fresh start and friends, and I’m glad that you guys adopted her so quickly.” The girl shook her head sadly as she picked at the grass and Taylor tilted her head quietly, wondering how much of Lily’s situation reminded Sabah of herself.

“It’s like uh. The Rudolph movie. With the uh. Misfits song.” Sabah stared at her in confusion, but the amused laughter coming from Eric and Crystal told her that the joke had landed. When they started singing the song in question, Taylor pointed at the figures in blue and red as they sang the song badly. Sabah listened quietly before letting out an amused snort and throwing a handful of shredded grass at Crystal.

The singing cut off when the blonde girl gagged and rolled over spitting the grass out of her mouth, Eric devolving into laughter at his elder sister’s issues. Everyone chuckled at the sight, though things settled back into a companionable silence for nearly fifteen minutes until Neil appeared out of the house and called the group up for dinner. Taylor watched as the others groaned and dragged their grass stained and dirty forms to their feet and staggered off toward the house.

Taylor tried to shift, but the dead weight of Victoria curled into her chest left her trapped for the moment. She turned, studying Victoria’s finally peaceful looking features, smiling. It wasn’t until she coughed that Taylor had noticed that Sabah had lurked back behind the rest. The older girl studied her and Victoria for a moment before smiling quietly and hopping to her feet.

“You two look good together. Good luck, I’ll keep a plate warm.” Taylor stared at Sabah as the girl shrugged before turning and stalking off. She gently reached out and dragged the tips of her fingers over Victoria’s cheek, the contact the girls’ forehead to furrow as she buried herself into Taylor’s chest. A blush grew on Taylor’s cheeks as she gently nudged the other girl.

“M’not hungry, tired.” the words were petulant and tired, and Taylor found herself smiling. She watched the grumpy expression on Victoria’s face for a moment before leaning up and pressing a tender kiss to the girl’s forehead.

“Vic. Dinner’s ready.” The words were gentle, and she found herself laughing when Victoria’s arms tightened around her as she sleepily muttered.

“M’not hungry, tired.” Taylor gently studied the sleepy blonde, speaking softly.

“Let’s just go get some dinner and then we can go home. Alright?” Victoria whined before one of her eyes opened and she let out a sigh, slowly pulling back and sitting up. She rubbed at her eye tiredly, letting out a sigh as she loosened her hold. Taylor made sure that Vic was stable before she slid to her feet, offering a hand to the other girl and dragging her up to join her on her feet.

She didn’t say anything when Victoria leaned into her side as they walked up to the house, and she allowed the girl to pull their chairs close together so that Victoria could rest against her as she picked slowly at her food.

Taylor for her part quietly listened to the conversations going on around them with a smile as she ate slowly, occasionally making eye contact with one person or another and smiling at the gentle looks that were tossed her way.
“I thought she was older, at least eighteen, or nineteen...” Taylor spoke quietly as she sipped at the grape soda that’d been provided with the meal, glancing at Sabah curiously. The girl shrugged faintly as she sipped at her own glass.

“The same age as Victoria, really?” Taylor muttered in disbelief, staring over at Sabah quietly, leaning forward on the couch, resting her elbows on her knees.

“Isn’t she supposed to still be in school? Victoria’s got like three and a half weeks left? And she’s been here for a while.” Taylor stared at Sabah quietly, blinking when the girl got a thoughtful look on her face, staring at the swirling liquid in her glass.

“She was in some sort of prep school. They used a college term system, apparently. So she had her credits. She ended up missing her graduation and her prom though, because of everything with the timing.” Taylor frowned at the idea, quietly swirlng her glass, sighing before quickly downing the rest. She paused, glancing up curiously at the rest of the kids that had scattered around the room, talking to each other.

She looked around and frowned at the lack of her girlfriend. Victoria had vanished to use the washroom nearly twenty minutes before, but she’d yet to return. She coughed lightly to get the attention of the rest of the kids before speaking.

“...Where’s Vic?” Taylor spoke curiously. Crystal glanced up at her before pointing off toward the hallway that led to the kitchen and the backyard. Taylor frowned and slid to her feet and shot Sabah an apologetic look that the older girl waved off. She moved down the hall, checking the rooms to either side. Taylor peered in at the small den as she passed, noting Neil and Sarah were murmuring with each other. She frowned before walking through the empty kitchen toward the open doors that led into the backyard. Angry voices reached her, and she quickly stepped out the door.

A short distance away, Mark and Carol stood facing away from Taylor and toward a furious looking Victoria. Taylor stared at her girlfriend who’d changed back into her loose sweater and jeans. The wind was blowing her wild blonde hair around her head, and Taylor curiously took in the angry look on the girl’s face. As she got closer, the wind carried the words being said to her.

“...just want to talk with you Victoria.” Carol’s voice was low and plaintive, and Taylor felt her frown deepening as she stood by the house, watching quietly.

“No, Mom,” The words that came back from Victoria were laced with anger. “You don’t want to talk with me, Mom, you want to get rid of your guilt, and I’m not terribly interested in hearing it. I’ve had a long day, one of the longest in my life and I’d very much rather go inside, say goodbye and then take my girlfriend home and go to bed.” Victoria’s voice was laced with such exhaustion that Taylor was tempted to break past them and scoop up Vic, though Carol’s words cut across before she could move.

“Victoria, you heard Dragon. There’s a good chance that I was hit with something. I-” The woman’s
voice was uncertain, and Victoria’s bitter laughter seemed to shock enough to cause her back up a step.

“You what? You are not to blame? We’ve all gone through Master training mom. Do you think that Dean’s never hit me with a blast by accident? Did I rampage through the streets, beating anyone that I came across.” Victoria’s voice was cold, and she stepped closer to her mother, shrugging off her father’s hand on her shoulder.

“No, it didn’t make you treat Taylor like that, the only thing that it made you do, is ‘maybe’ make you harsher then you intended. But you still wanted to say all that shit to her.” Victoria glared at her mother. Taylor loomed their quietly as Carol nervously fidgeted before speaking.

“Victoria, she’s-” Taylor frowned when Victoria surged forward with a growl.

“This isn’t about her mom. This isn’t about what you said to her, or how you acted, which were both pretty shitty, by the way. Taylor had forgiven you for all that before we found out about the shit with Dean. No, this is about the shit you did to me.” Victoria stepped close and glared at her mother.

“You tried to take my choices away, mom. You decided that I wasn’t fit to decide who was worth risking my feelings on.” Victoria spoke quietly as she stood there, and Taylor watched silently as Carol seemed to shrink a bit before speaking softly.

“I-” The woman seemed to freeze for a moment before collecting herself.

“I’m your mother, Victoria. It’s my job to worry about you and to try and keep you from making mistakes, you’re not an adult yet, and-” Victoria stepped back and rolled her eyes.

“And what? You’re an adult, so you get to decide for me? Do you get to choose how I’ll live my life for the next four months?” Victoria’s words were low and furious, and Taylor studied the blonde quietly.

“You could have come to me and talked to me, mom. You could have explained your concerns, and we could have talked about them. But you didn’t. You didn’t because you knew that despite whatever you would have said, I might still decide that she was worth it.” Victoria’s voice was calm, and Taylor watched Carol’s shoulders slumping.

“And you know what I would have said if you did, mom?” Victoria studied her mother’s reaction as she spoke.

“She is worth it, even if she refuses to see it. She cares so much for everyone else, to the point that it’s unhealthy at times. She’s saved all of our lives at least once. Amy only survived that fucking attack because of her.” She stared at her mom, and Taylor watched Carol’s lack of reaction and sighed.

“So, you know, then. Do you want to know who else she’s saved, mom? Me. After Amy’s secret came out, she just…” Victoria turned and let out a growl.

“She sat me down and just let me be myself for the first time in so long. She showed me this… this artifact of her mothers and she distracted me when all I wanted to do was punch a path through Brockton Bay until Lung or Kaiser got in front of me, and she just smiled and acted like it didn’t matter.” Victoria frowned and Taylor watched as the girl turned back toward her mother.
“She needs me, Mom, and because of this shit you keep pulling, she’s terrified to show me that. She acts like she’ll be fine if I were to leave, but she clings to me like the world would fall away if she were to lose me, and I have to pretend that I don’t see it because she insists that I should have a choice.” Victoria’s words were laced with pain and Taylor frowned down at her hands as she considered them.

“She needs me, Mom. She cares about me without any reservations of judgements. She doesn't think I could be better, or I could be great. She just cares about the mess that I am. And I need that. I’ve had the longest, shittiest fucking day in recent memory and all I wanted to do was go home and curl up with my girlfriend and sleep until it was tomorrow, and if I’d told her that, she would have skipped all this with me. But I could tell that she was legitimately upset that we were fighting and she wanted you to know that you weren’t at fault for what happened, so instead, I had to shut up and come here. And here you are once more violating that bizarre trust that she has in you.” the words were soft, and Taylor watched Carol's shoulders slump. Victoria stared at Carol for a few moments before shaking her head and storming past her mother. Taylor’s eyes widened as Victoria caught sight of her, but the girl didn’t react beyond storming through the house. Taylor followed on her heels, glancing at the others. Amy perked up from where she was talking with Crystal as Victoria stormed down the hall and out the front door.

The others stared at her, and she shrugged quietly before glancing out the door. The sound of the truck roaring to life startled her, and she moved to dodge out of the house, grabbing her bag on the way with her clothes and phone. She got out to the driveway watching as Victoria paused after shifting the truck into gear. She stared at her for a moment, and Taylor jumped, realizing that Victoria was waiting. She quickly moved to climb into the cab, the other girl barely waiting for the door to close before she pulled out of the driveway and away.

Taylor stared at Victoria for a moment before pulling out her phone and quickly texting Amy about what had happened and apologizing. The comment that came back about Crystal offering to take her home soothed Taylor’s worries. She glanced over, watching as Victoria hunched down over the wheel, her entire form tense. The tense silence dragged on for several minutes, Taylor watching the irritation on Victoria’s face grow until she pulled off the road and into the parking lot of a strip mall. Taylor glanced out the window at the darkened stores, staring at several that were just empty.

Victoria’s fingers tightened on the wheel as the truck came rolling to a stop across three faded parking spots and then she turned off the engine and forced her door open, hopping out and slamming the door in her wake. Taylor sat in the truck, watching as Victoria took several steps away from the vehicle and toward the nearby light post that was flickering on and off in the growing gloom.

Taylor sat there in the darkened truck interior for a few moments before slowly opening her door and climbing out. She carefully walked across the parking lot, studying Victoria as the girl rested her hands on the concrete pillar that the streetlight had been installed on, watching as Victoria’s shoulders tensed at her approach.

“I get it, Taylor, I fuc-“ Taylor moved up behind the girl quietly, slowly gripping Victoria’s arm and spinning her around. The movement cut off Victoria’s self-reproachment. Taylor stood there, staring at Victoria, taking in the girl’s angry eyes and the tense hold of her shoulders. She considered the girl quietly before reaching out her hand and tenderly cupping Victoria’s cheek and staring her in the eye. Taylor took a deep breath and then spoke carefully.
“I do need you, Vic. You keep me going.” The words were soft, and she watched Victoria’s hard expression flickering with shock. She stared into the girl’s eyes as they softened, frowning when they misted up. Victoria crashed into her chest and Taylor wrapped her arms around the other girl as Victoria’s face found it’s way into her neck. Taylor stood there quietly, holding Victoria as the wind whipped their hair around them. She silently pressed her nose into Victoria’s hair and spoke softly.

“I’m sorry.” The words were gently spoken, and she felt Victoria’s arms tightening around her, Taylor let out a quiet sigh as she held Victoria and bowed her head once more, speaking slowly.

“I’m not going anywhere, Vic, and you don’t have to either. You make things more bearable, and I’m sorry if I made you feel like you couldn’t tell me that I did the same for you.” Taylor drew back, watching as Victoria pulled back and stared at her. She studied the girl’s exhausted face for a few moments before brushing her hair back from her face carefully.

“Let’s go home.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and she shifted closer as Victoria watched her, staring for a few moments before finally nodding. Taylor let Victoria drag her back to the truck, and despite the ridiculousness of it, she allowed the girl to drag her into the middle of the bench seat so that Victoria could keep them touching even as she drove.

Taylor finished brushing her teeth, spitting the water out into the sink and then rinsing her mouth. She pulled the towel off her hair running a brush through the damp locks for a few moments. Taylor took out her hair dryer and spent a few minutes, making sure that she wouldn’t have to sleep with her hair wet. Once she was finished, she carefully checked herself over in the mirror before making her way across the hall toward her bedroom. She opened the door and paused quietly at the sight of Victoria.

The other girl was sitting in the chair by the vanity, brushing her now dry hair as she read something on her phone. That wasn’t the startling fact. It was that she was wearing an attractive shirt that she hadn’t been wearing when Taylor went for her shower. Taylor moved over and carefully plucked at the cotton of the oversized shirt and stretched it out a bit, taking in the broad crest of the Jedi order spread over the back of the cotton shirt. Taylor considered it for a few moments before she stared down at Victoria’s eyes in the mirror.

“And what is this?” She spoke curiously. Victoria glanced up at her and shrugged quietly.

“While you were busy talking with Sabah, my aunt confronted me with some of the prototypes for your merchandise; I might have told her I’d show you these.” Taylor grinned quietly as she tilted her head, snorting when Victoria stood up to reveal the matching pyjama pants with Taylor’s crest on them.

“Well, I suppose that I’ve seen them. Though now I’m tempted to request that she doesn’t sell them, they were certainly made for you.” Taylor took in Victoria’s blush in amusement, shaking her head and heading toward the bed. She pulled back the blankets before crawling in and watching as Victoria set her brush down and crawled in next to her. The phone dinged, and Victoria flicked it open, moving to respond to a text. Taylor shimmied in close to the girl and glanced up, seeing Lily’s
face on the screen.

“I’m telling her about Sabah’s great betrayal. She’s helping us plot revenge.” Taylor rolled her eyes and shifted over, moving to curl into Victoria’s side, burying her face into the girl’s chest and snuggling down happily. She listened silently to the sound of Victoria’s phone, making the clicking sounds as her thumbs typed and the repetitive staccato lulled her into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

[[So, uh. That was twelve thousand words. Geeeeeeeze. This chapter was exciting, lots of character stuff and we chug along on the mystery, though more things will become revealed as we go along. Taylor and Victoria are talking still, and it’s good stuff. We finally get to see just how stressful this all has been for Victoria, which is good, and we get some stuff on Sabah. There’ll be a b-side tomorrow that explains how she ended up here. It makes sense in context.

I’ve not got a lot to say about this chapter, but I did add in something cute at the bottom to offset all the emotions at the top, just cause. Also, I love the idea of Taylor being blindsided with the idea that they’d be selling merch with her crest on it. Made me snort.

As always, looking forward to your reviews, and I’ll be around! Though I do gotta run to the store before it closes, so I should get moving here.]]
7.4 B-side

Chapter Summary

[[This particular B-side ended up turning into more of an Interlude as I went on. But I'm gonna post it anyway. It covers Sabah’s perspective leading up to the Soccer Game and stuff. As I was making it, I realized that it'd make more sense for it to take place a bit before the rest of 7.4, so I changed the timing. It's not terribly long, but it does introduce some small themes in her ongoing character arc.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 6th, 2011
Sabah’s shop/Apartment, Brockton Bay

Sabah’s hips swayed in time to the music playing from the small speaker as she set the peeler aside and swept the mango skins to the side of the cutting board, lifting up her chef knife and smoothly slicing the peeled fruit into cubes. She carefully checked the fruit for imperfections before tossing it into the bowl with the quartered strawberries and the mixed grapes she’d already prepared.

She lifted the cutting board and swept the bits of fruit that she’d cut away into the compost under the sink before placing the board in the sink to be washed later. She was washing her hands when the doorbell rang, and she glanced up. She didn’t have any appointments today. She glanced toward the side room where her costume was, but the persistent ringing of the bell drew her down the stairs, as she wondered if one of her friends had decided to swing past without calling.

She paused by the counter, staring through the glass door at the shape of a young man standing there, hands in his pockets. She moved over, slowly opening the door and peering out quietly. She took a moment to stare at the young man. Dressed in a red jacket, blue jeans and a black t-shirt, he looked perfectly normal. Tall and slim with short brown hair and brown eyes. There was something familiar about his smile though…

“Uh. Hi. Parian’s not actually here at the moment.” She smiled quietly at him and then glanced around to see if anyone else was there before studying the brown-haired man quietly. “Is there something that I can help you with?” She saw his lips quirking up before he shrugged.

“Oh. I was hoping to speak with her about some business,” The man glanced at her and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Are you one of her employees then? Perhaps you can help me in her stead.” Sabah stared at him in confusion for a few moments before shrugging up a shoulder and stepping back, letting him in.

“What were you hoping to commission? You should be aware that Parian’s backlog is about three weeks long, so you wouldn’t be getting your piece until sometime in July, longer if it’s overly complicated.” Sabah closed the door behind the man and turned to study him as he walked around the open front area of the shop, inspecting the various boxes that had been stored here.
“A costume.” He smirked over his shoulder. “I’m a cape, a superhero, and I was thinking of getting a new look. I heard she did Glory Girl’s rebrand, and well, I figure if I come up with a design that’s not too offensive, we can get it past the PR guys.” He turned and grinned at her crossing his arms. The wild grin was what finally caused things to click in her mind, and she narrowed her eyes.

“A costume?” She spoke softly, and the man laughed softly.

“Dang. Think you could tell my wife that it took more than ten minutes? Battery will never let me live this down.” He studied her for a few moments, and Sabah found herself shocked at his youth. She’d expected him to be older, but he looked like he was barely any older than her, as if he could have been attending classes with her and she just hadn’t noticed. The stern expression that crossed his face was a surprise, and he curiously glanced around, crossing his arms and speaking slowly.

“You should be more careful Parian, I wouldn’t think it’s wise letting strange men into your shop like thi-” He froze as the pins that had been woven into her hair and threaded into the lower parts of her pants slid free and hovered ominously around him. She stared at him, arching an eyebrow when he nervously held up his hands.

“Point taken.” When his voice squeaked as he responded, Sabah found her lips curling into a grin. She stood still and stared at him, contemplating just throwing the man out on his ass. In the end, she merely rolled her eyes before gesturing him to follow her as she headed toward the back. They climbed the stairs together, and when they reached the flat, Sabah floated the pins onto the counter to be worked back into her hair and clothing later.

She headed toward the sink and split the fruit into two bowls and added some cold yogurt to each, handing one bowl to Assault and gesturing toward the couch. She grinned when he stared down at the healthy snack with a grimace. She watched him sit down, moving over to the side and grabbing her over-sized book off the drafting table and dropped it on the table as she took a seat next to the other cape.

“So. Costume then? What’s up with your current one? It seems to suit you, even if it’s a bit… subdued?” She watched as the man dropped down next to her and poked at his bowl, taking a scoop and tasting it. He seemed to consider it for a moment, shrugging before digging in. As he ate, he carefully spoke between swallowing a mouthful and taking another bite.

“Well, I mean. Something to break up the lines might be cool? Spikes or something.” He grinned at her and Sabah rolled her eyes as she hunched down over the pad quietly, writing ‘Spikes?’ at one point and then moving to prod the man with more questions.

Sabah curiously studied the drawing. In truth, it wasn’t terribly different then Assault’s current costume though she’d found herself making subtle changes to make it seem more like Battery’s costume, so they fit together better. He kept suggesting ‘cool’ features to add to it, and she was repeatedly required to point out that no matter how cool a giant red Oni mask might be, he probably wouldn’t get it past PR, and even if he did, he would probably get stabbed by Oni Lee just for the disrespect.

She glanced over the unmasked cape as he rested over her couch, with his back on the seat, his legs
hanging over the back of the couch as he stared at the TV upside down. She stared at him in amusement for a few moments before turning her attention back to the drawing, quietly tapping her pen on the paper. She leaned in, carefully sketching in the new mask that was a bit more substantial than a coloured slab of plastic.

“Hey.” The man spoke, and Sabah glanced back, seeing him staring at her, his phone now resting on his chest. She hadn’t even heard it go off. She blinked at him as he shifted up and peered down at the pad, letting out a whistle.

“Fancy!” He smirked at her as he spun around on the couch, putting his feet back on the ground and smoothing out his pants.

“So, I’ve actually got to go on patrol soonish.” He smirked over at her and Sabah tilted her head. He studied her for a moment before waving a hand.

“And, by soonish, I mean that Battery’s already on her way here with my costume, but I figured that you might wanna tag along again? It’d be fun.” He stared at her and Sabah felt her lips curling down into a frown. It’d been a spur of the moment thing the last time, but she wasn’t sure if she should-

“W-What’re you doing?” She stared at the odd face that Ethan was making, his eyes wide, and his lips curling down into a full exaggerated pout. She glanced away and squirmed, carefully lifting a hand and pointing at his face, doing her best to not look in his direction.

“Stop that, it’s terrifying.” She grabbed a cushion from beside her and smacked the cape in the face with it, causing him to let out a whine. When she pulled the pillow away though that pout was still there. She glared at him for a few moments before throwing her hands into the air.

“Fine! Just stop doing… whatever that is.” She growled when his face broke out in a grin and slid to her feet, heading for her work-room.

“Score one for the puppy dog pout!” Sabah stared at him in confusion, slowly opening her mouth, trying to speak and then closing it before turning and disappearing into the nearby room to slip into her costume and make sure that her constructs were ready to go. It took her nearly fifteen minutes to exit, and she blinked at the distinct lack of Assault on her couch. She glanced over at the rinsed dishes in the sink before descending the stairs curiously with Abbot and Costello carefully picking their way down in her wake.

She walked down into the shop space and walked across it, blinking as she exited and stared in confusion at Assault who was in his costume now, and Battery who stood next to him, her face lined with exasperation. Sabah nervously smirked at the pair, getting an odd look from the woman who gestured at Assault.

“I apologize for him. Thanks for babysitting.” The comment drew a squawk of indignation from the man who crossed his arms and huffed. “He claimed that he was going out to buy milk, and then never came back.” She glanced at Assault, who shrugged his shoulders and buffed his nails on his armour.

“I was playing nice with the other kids, Puppy. Wasn’t that what you wanted?” Sabah stared at him and found herself smirking as Battery let out a low growl. She grinned at the woman and then glanced around.

“You uh, wayward husband invited me to join you on patrol. Where were we heading?” She
noticed that Battery perked up and shot her a curious look before pointing.

“Just around downtown, street-level patrol, you know. Walk the streets, take pictures with the kids, keep an eye out for pickpockets. You sure you wanna come?” Sabah seemed to consider for a moment before shrugging quietly. She could do with the exercise, and it might be fun, Sabah had to admit. She glanced up at Costello and then turned back to Battery, nodding firmly.

The woman seemed to grin and then hooked her arm into Sabah’s, causing the girl’s cheeks to darken. Though the blush quickly faded when Assault did the same thing on her other side. Sabah glanced over at the man and hummed casually.

“If she’s Dorothy, and I’ve got the tinmen, does that make you the scarecrow or the cowardly lion?” She grinned at his outraged look before setting off, the other two capes easily matching her pace as they headed away from the shops.

"Clearly, I'm Dorothy, and she's the puppy." Assault's voice was laced with wry amusement, and Sabah found herself giggling as Battery let out a long-suffering sigh.

― ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
“I got the deck as a gift from a friend. Despite how I use them they’re actually weapons. Very hard, and very sharp, but using them in a gimmick like that makes people ignore them. And I learned a few different spreads after getting them. I ended up studying the lore behind the cards and it sort of spiralled out from there.” She shrugged her shoulders and glanced at the capes who seemed to perk up with surprise at the news. Clearly, they hadn’t thought of the cards as weapons.

Assault seemed to find the idea hilarious, but Sabah watched as Battery’s face shifted into a look of worry at the thought. Seventy-eight cards that size with razor edges could do a lot of damage. Sabah studied Battery’s face watching as her jaw clenched, and she nodded, and she studied the woman, wondering what she was thinking before turning back to the street.

“So. Parian.” Assault’s voice was lazy as they rounded the corner and she stared at her shop in the distance with an almost disappointed feeling. She glanced back at the other cape and smiled curiously at him.

“We were planning on heading out for dinner after the patrol. Did you wanna come? We could relax; I could even introduce myself.” Sabah studied him curiously for a few moments, glancing over at the oddly uncomfortable look on Battery’s face with a soft frown. She studied the pair for a few moments before shaking her head.

“Maybe another time? I’ve got to get a few things done tonight, I already skipped out on all the work I was supposed to be doing, but maybe next time?” She glanced at Assault, flashing him a friendly smirk that caused him to grin and nod. The look of relief on Battery’s face made Sabah feel a bit odd, but she brushed it off and continued on to the shop.

They said their goodbyes at the next intersection, and Sabah headed for the shop after Abbot and Costello. She paused by the door, fishing for her keys as she found her mind drifting back to the odd patrol. She’d been surprisingly popular, much to Assault’s consternation. Several girls had come and asked for autographs or begged to be photographed with Abbot or Costello. Apparently, her boys were ‘cool.’ As she pushed the key into the door, a voice sounded behind her.

“Interesting costume.” The voice was calm, and Sabah froze, slowly spinning in place to take in the form of Lady Photon lazily reclining against a nearby streetlamp. She stared at her nervously for a few moments before slowly pushing to her feet. The door creaked open in her wake, and the older woman’s smile turned rather amused.

“Parian, right? Might I come in? I’ve got a few things to discuss with you.” She studied her quietly, and Sabah let out a sigh before nodding. She gestured the woman toward the small kitchen table and moving to make a couple of mugs of tea. She felt the amused eyes of the older woman lingering on her as she worked.

“How was the patrol?” The question was curious, and Sabah nervously added milk to her tea, trying to dispel the sensation that her mother had just caught her doing something foolish. It took a few moments, but she managed to straighten her back and glance over.

“It was fun. Street level patrols are different when there’s no fighting. I enjoy interacting with people,
showing them that we’re not so different from them. I even got to show off my cards.” She glanced at Lady Photon before slipping over and taking a seat, setting the tea, milk and sugar before the woman as she sipped her own cup. She watched as the woman in white added a bit of each to the cup.

“So. Parian. I imagine that my presence here is a bit of a surprise, but if you’ll pardon a minor breach of ‘The Rules,’ I would point out that if you associate with as many unmasked capes as you do, people will start putting things together.” Sabah stared at the woman for a few moments before slowly pulling off her mask and setting it aside. The woman’s smile seemed to grow a bit as she nodded.

“Sabah, yes? Crystal and Erik have mentioned you positively, and I loved the work you did for Victoria’s costume. You can call me Sarah.” Sabah stared at her for a few moments before nodding quietly.

“Were you hoping to take out a commission?” She tried hopefully, wincing when the woman merely stared at her with a look that she’d seen on her mother’s face before. Sarah chuckled as she set her tea down and spoke.

“Indeed, actually. We’ve been asked to expand our merchandise line by the PRT, and I was wondering if you had any ideas, but that’s not the only reason that I’m here. You’re a good friend of several members of my team Sabah, and while I applaud your civic-mindedness, we should probably talk about things now that you’re actually becoming more active.” Sabah stared at her for a few moments before sighing and nodding.

Sabah sat at her work station, casually working with some of her less used mesh fabrics, putting together the first of the test jerseys that she’d be supplying for New Wave. As she worked, she turned her mind back to the long conversation that she’d had with Victoria’s aunt, her mind considering the older woman’s words.

They’d ended up talking for several hours, and Sabah had to admit that Sarah brought up a lot of concerns. Despite the woman’s gently prodding she didn’t agree to join up with New Wave, though Sabah did eventually cave to the woman’s request that she attend a few training sessions, see how she liked things. After that, they’d got to talking about Merch and Sabah had had a particularly fascinating idea.

They were a superhero team, and few teams used the professional sports analogue for their merch. She’d dragged the older woman over the drafting table and had drawn up some mockups. jerseys with each member’s crest, name and number on them. Letter jackets, exercise clothing. Something that people could buy and wear to represent their favourite capes while serving a niche market for people that enjoyed that aesthetic.

Sarah had seemed fascinated, and when the woman had asked her to do some sets up for the upcoming training session in a week with a sizeable bonus, she’d agreed, pushing back most of her commissions to make sure that she’d have the time to get the work done.

Sarah had also ended up commissioning a second item for Taylor’s birthday that had been one of a
kind, and the older woman hadn’t stopped grinning about it. Truthfully, Sabah thought the birthday gift might be a touch on the nose, but part of her suspected that no matter how much Taylor might openly whine about it, the girl would also probably never take it off.

Chapter End Notes

[[Nothing too wild here, just Sabah getting on with the local capes and making friends. Ethan seems a bit more interested in befriending her, whereas I think the PRT’s interest has made Battery a bit more gun-shy about stuff, which is a shame.

We find out the source of jerseys and shorts that Sarah commissioned, though poor Sabah did have to rush to get them all done in four days, not to mention Taylor’s surprise gift. Sabah’s enjoying having some friends closer to her age, and this will be neat to explore.

So. Next chapter is Saturday the 11th, and that’s the date. Obviously, this is going to be a Victoria/Taylor chapter, and I can see how that’s starting to get overdone. 5 Chapters and four were Taylor/Vic, it’s sort of just how it fell, but I can promise that after that chapter, there won’t be a Vic one for the next… four? 7.6 is Taylor/Lily, 7.7 is Taylor/ERIC, 7.8 is Taylor/Amy, and 7.9 is Amy/Taylor. Oh. There’s a Vic B-side in 7.8 for reasons that make sense in context.

I work a short shift tomorrow so I will get as much of 7.5 done as I can, but considering what we’re dealing with, it probably won’t be out till some point Thursday morning or night. Sort of just operating on the safe side here. The chapters continue to grow longer which slows down my updates a bit, but you folks don’t seem to mind too much, and the story continues to unfold.]]
Chapter Summary

[[This monster both ended up being -way- longer than I was initially expecting, and I’ve been a bit distracted with birthdays and stuff the last few days. This didn’t mean that I couldn’t work on the story in my head, but I didn’t have a whole lot of time to actually sit down and let it spool out, which means that it just kept getting more and more detailed and intricate as time went on and uh. Well, I guess you guys have something neat to show for it.

Rather than ruining anything by talking about specific plot points, I’ll discuss the uh, few snags that I expect at the bottom, so I’ll see you, nerds, there. As for now? Enjoy the cuteness. I really enjoy the first part here, by the way. The first section where Victoria’s just sort of quietly freaking out. Amuses me.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

---

June 11th, 2011

Downtown, Brockton Bay

Victoria carefully studied the tickets in her hand, letting the tip of one finger drag over the embossed lettering on them. She studied the date, the words on the tickets for a moment before sighing and shoving them into her glove box. She glanced around at the street, watching the traffic streaming past in both directions, though no one seemed to pay the shop she was parked in front of any mind. Victoria puffed out her cheeks, checking her hair in the mirror for a few moments while reaching out for her bag.

The sudden loud vibrating of her phone drew Victoria up short and she smoothly shifted back, dragging out the device. The screen saying that she had a message from Taylor caused a surge of irrational fear to wash through her, but she quickly unlocked it and found herself grinning as she read the messages that were still coming in.

{Vic, what’d you do?}
{Your cousin and your aunt just suddenly showed up at my house and implied that ‘a little birdy’ had told them that I was going on my first date tonight.}
{I’m now being kidnapped, I hope you’re happy with yourself.}

She didn’t respond to the messages, laughing softly. She hadn’t in fact, informed Crystal or her aunt about the date, but considering the preparations that Amy was about to get started on, she imagined that her sister might have used this as a way to get Taylor out of the house. Seeing that no more grumbling was to be coming from her girlfriend’s direction, Victoria dragged her bag over and hopped out of the car.

Carefully shutting the truck door and locking it, Victoria shot Sabah a text to say that she was here.
The woman’s immediate response that she should just come in was a bit unsettling. Victoria opened the door, making a note to talk to Sabah about leaving her door unlocked this close to a gang war, and turned around to see the massive forms of Sabah’s constructs looming right inside the door. She froze, panicked, and it took her a moment to figure out that they were entirely immobile. She moved over, poking one, feeling it’s fake rubbery skin before sighing and plodding through the shop.

Past the counter, and through the workspace in the back, she opened to the door to the upper floor and ascended the steps. The sound of music greeted her when she opened the door to Sabah’s actual flat and she walked in, glancing around at the apartment. It looked much the same as it had the last time that she was here as she was helping Sabah transfer her waterlogged belongings from her old place to this one.

Considering the space for a few moments, Victoria paused at the door, taking in the backs of Lily and Sabah’s heads before stalking over to the couch, running into the back of it and flopping over face down between the reclined forms of the other two girls. Their amused chuckles soothed her rather antsy nerves, but she remained face-planted in the couch, letting out a low nervous whine. The gentle patting to the back of her head from Sabah caused her to blow out a sigh, shifting and wiggling until she was on her back on the couch, facing towards the roof.

“Everything alright there, Victoria?” Lily’s voice was teasing, and Victoria took a deep heaving breath before blowing it out slowly and staring upwards.

“I uh. I have no idea what I’m doing.” She glanced between the other two girls, seeing them staring at her in confusion. She quietly shifted in place, carefully arranging her thoughts before she continued speaking in a nervous voice.

“Like. With the date. I asked her out, like, I was the one that asked her to be my girlfriend, and I’m also the one that asked her on the actual date tonight, and I don’t know how that all works. Am I supposed to be the guy?” She glanced up at Sabah and felt herself blushing when Lily burst into giggles on her other side. She peered over in irritation as the girl managed to squeak out a comment between the snickers.

“I-I would think, Victoria, that half the point is that there isn’t a guy. But I mean, if you’re asking for practical advice? We might be gay, but. I think that technically speaking, as you’ve got a rather doting girlfriend, you’re probably the most accomplished lesbian in the group at the moment.” Victoria blinked slowly, sighing when that particular thought sunk in. Letting out a long slow sigh, Victoria glanced between the two curiously. Lily saw her look and spoke.

“I’ve uh- gone on a few dates, but nothing, like… serious.” She shrugged up a shoulder and then Victoria found her eyes peering at Sabah who just snorted.

“My parents are devout Muslims, and I spent most of my time in high-school teaching myself English while also studying to the point that I got into a decent engineering program on a scholarship. I didn’t have a whole lot of time to explore relationships. The closest thing I’ve ever had to ‘a date’ was when I took Taylor out for coffee forever ago.” Victoria blinked and paused, feeling something odd coiling in her chest. Her expression must have shown because Sabah gave her an amused smirk before clarifying.

“It was before I realized how young she was. She was what I’d assumed was this brilliant undergraduate that was constantly helping me with my homework and chatting with me when she wasn’t researching. And she had just jumped into a fight with Crusader to protect me, nearly getting skewered at the time.” Sabah ran a hand through her hair, her lips quirking up as she reminisced.
“Mind you, we got fifteen minutes into the coffee date, and her age finally came out, and she sorta poofed. And then showed up several weeks later at the same cafe with your sister.” Sabah eyed Victoria who puffed out her cheeks and glanced away. As she peered over, she found herself studying the minute tightening of Lily’s jaw as the other cape turned her attention back to the box she’d been wrapping in the shiny paper that still lay on the table.

Victoria lay there on her back considering the two girls, crossing her arms over her middle as her mind began to wander. She turned away from the pair, leaning back and letting her gaze drift slowly back to the roof. She lay there for a few moments before speaking softly.

“Like, I keep comparing this to my first date with Dean. He was like, this perfect gentleman with the door holding, and the chair pulling, and the paying for stuff. I’m not sure if Taylor’s expecting that out of me, but from what I remember, it ended up being really awkward and confusing. We barely talked, and the only reason that we managed to recover it at all is that we ended up hanging out after the date for a couple of hours and actually talking.” Victoria spoke quietly and lay there as Sabah let out a slow, confused hum. Eventually, Lily would glance back down at her and speak.

“You guys are already dating, right?” She spoke gently, and Victoria slowly nodded her head. “So there’s no pressure. You don’t have to impress her. Just. Show her you care, and maybe have some fun playing at being on a date. You guys skipped all the silly, ‘favourite’ question stuff, and the small talk. Maybe make a game out of it, tell Taylor you wanna play it like a typical first date, and you can use it to get to know her better.” Victoria blinked quietly and tilted her head, letting the idea roll around it. As she thought on it, Lily continued calmly.

“As for the other stuff, you already hold doors for Taylor, and the chair thing was originally actually more about not wanting to be apart from them. Like if you had Taylor on your arm, instead of just dropping her at the table, you escort her to her seat and pull it out to get an extra few seconds of her clinging to you.” Victoria, tilted her head considering the idea for a few moments before blushing once more.

“As for paying, generally from my experience, whoever asks usually gets first dibs on paying, and uh, be careful, this usually ends up turning into a fight with most girl couples. But if Taylor makes a huge fuss, don’t be taciturn about splitting the bill.” Lily leaned over to better see Vic’s face, and she stared down at her with a teasing smirk.

“You brought your make-up kit, right? And the dress that you wanted Sabah to tweak for you?” Vic nodded and blinked when Sabah leaned closer and eyed her curiously.

“What’s up with the dress?” Vic huffed and bit her lip as she crossed her arms.

“It’s just my lucky dress. I’ve gotten a bit taller since I bought it though, and uh. It’s a bit tight.” She ignored the amused looks from the others, reaching up and grasping the back of the couch with both hands and using them to lever herself up and over, once more landing neatly on her socked feet.

Hopping over to the desk, she grabbed her bag, carrying it over to the couch. She pulled out her make-up kit before offering the bag to Sabah. While the seamstress opened it up and rifled around within, drawing out the flattering dress, Vic found herself pinned by Lily’s amused grin.

“I was talking to Will the other day, and he mentioned something about a grand adventure you and Warren had been on over the last couple weeks to find the perfect gift for Taylor. I must admit to a certain curiosity compared to my own meagre offerings.” She gestured to what Victoria was pretty
confident was a box of homemade cakes that the girl had been talking about over the last few days.

“Taylor loves sweets in her downtime, those bean paste things looked pretty good, I’m currently looking forward to filching one from her later.” Victoria tilted her head to the side and hummed faintly.

“As for the gift, I’m not quite sure how well it’ll be received, it’s kind of something heavy to do for a birthday, but to be honest, I hope that she’ll like it.” Vic’s voice dropped a couple of octaves before she continued smoothly attempting to change the subject.

“So, Lily, not as innocent as we’d expected with all of your dating experience.” Victoria’s voice took on an amused tone, and she stared up at the younger girl, smirking when her cheeks pinkened just a bit. She considered the girl curiously, humming in thought.

“Were they other capes? Or just kids from your school?” Victoria spoke softly, briefly considering how hard it’d be to date someone that didn’t know your secret identity, having to conceal all of that while attempting to build a relationship with them.

“Girls from school, mostly. Nothing much really came of it. Saw a few movies, went to dinner, did some kissing.” She tried to speak nonchalantly, and Victoria studied her for a few moments, frowning quietly at the small distant look that came to her eyes. They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes before Sabah cleared her throat and cut across them both.

“What else are you wearing with this dress, Victoria? I imagine that it’d pair well with a sweater of some sort, and what about your shoes…” The conversation drifted into the subject of her attire for the evening, and Victoria found herself relaxing as the two girls got into the idea of helping her prepare.

Victoria pulled the truck to a stop in the driveway of her aunt’s house, considering the two cars parked there, and letting out a sigh of relief at the lack of her mother’s vehicle present. She checked the driveway for a moment before smoothly slipping out of the vehicle. She paused by the side mirror, checking her hair and make-up, smirking as she took a step back and considered the entire look.

She wasn’t sure if Taylor had seen her in a dress up close, her fashion had shifted quite a bit since she’d begun hanging out with the other girl. Victoria took a moment to consider the black dress that she wore, smiling as she noted how it rested nearly perfectly against her curves, and she adjusted the long charcoal grey cardigan that hung over the dress giving the outfit a much more casual feel. She adjusted the long sleeves of the garment before slipping around the truck and up the path toward the door.

She stood there on the stoop for a moment feeling oddly nervous as she shifted from foot to foot. She dipped her hand into the large front pocket on the cardigan and drew out her phone, considering it for a few moments, snorting at the words that Crystal had sent. She smoothly reached out and rang the doorbell instead of just walking in. She waited patiently on the stoop, wondering just what her cousin had planned for this.
When the door swung open to reveal Crystal doing her best to look stern, Victoria found herself fighting back a grin as she stood politely in the doorway. She stared at her taller cousin as the girl slowly gave her a once over and let out a haughty sniff. Victoria crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow.

“Here to take my Taylor out on a date, hrm?” She spoke in a face laced with judgement, and she stepped forward and casually tugged at Victoria’s sweater, smirking.

“And where do you plan on taking her?” Victoria glanced at Crystal and let out a soft snort before perking up and playing along.

“Yes, sir. I asked around, and Lily found this nice restaurant down on the boardwalk now that it’s back in full swing. I think she’ll enjoy the evening.” She glanced at Crystal, taking in the way the girl’s broad grin grew at being called ‘sir.’ The girl studied her before casually crossing her arms.

“Well, I suppose that if she wants to waste her time on you, I can’t stop her, but there are rules; first you will have her back here at Ten o’clo-.” Victoria found herself grinning when pale hands rudely shoved a squawking Crystal to one side, and Taylor came into view in the doorway with a glare on her face.

“Crystal, I don’t actually live he-” Taylor froze mid-sentence as she turned, staring at her and Victoria felt her cheeks heating as she shifted self consciously in place. She watched the way that Taylor stared at her and paused, finding her own eyes drifting over Taylor. She was shocked that Taylor had stepped out of her rather dapper current look.

Instead of a dress or skirt, Taylor had opted for pair of nice black shorts with a simple tank top; a sweater hung over her shoulders that Victoria was pretty sure was Crystal's judging by how large it was. But the effect was interesting, and Victoria found herself blushing as she dragged her eyes away from Taylor’s legs when the girl coughed and stepped closer, speaking softly.

“You, uh,” Taylor smiled nervously, brushing her hair behind her ear as she spoke. “You look great, Vic.” Victoria grinned as she strode up, reaching out to snag one of Taylor’s hands with her own and shifting in place quietly.

“You do too. I hope that they didn’t traumatize you too badly.” She smirked as she leaned close, taking in Taylor’s face and smiling. Movement out of the corner of her eye drew her attention, and she glanced down the hall visible behind Taylor, seeing her aunt looming by the kitchen and watching with open amusement. She turned her attention back to Taylor, speaking slowly.

“Ohhey, make-up as well, I feel spoiled now.” She grinned at Taylor’s bashful look, glancing at her for a moment before leaning up and offering her a quick, careful kiss to keep from messing up the different shades of lipstick that they both wore. She pulled back and glanced past Taylor at the grinning form of her cousin. Crystal peered at her with amusement before stepping forward.

“Alright, well if Victoria has reservations you two should get going. Have fun, and don’t do anything that I wouldn’t do.” She grinned impishly as stared at them. Victoria rolled her eyes, but Taylor shifting into her side saw her glancing over at the girl’s embarrassed face. She studied her for a moment before speaking low and teasingly.

“Right. So. I guess that basically leaves everything on the table then Taylor. Let’s go see if we can find an illegal poker game.” She grinned at Crystal’s indignant squeak, but she casually turned
Taylor around and tugged her toward the truck. The girl seemed to pause, glancing over her shoulder.

“I’ve uh. I’ve got some stuff here. My clothes and a few other things.” Victoria chuckled and waved her off.

“We’ll pick it up later, I kind of want to just get you out of here.” Taylor studied her for a moment before smiling quietly. The girl remained attached to her arm, and Victoria found that she enjoyed the sensation of the weight there. Victoria smoothly led Taylor over to the truck, opening the driver side and helping her up and into the cab. She watched as Taylor shuffled over to the passenger side and then she climbed in next to her, getting comfortable.

She turned the key in the ignition and set the truck to rumbling away. She glanced over when Taylor shifted closer and found herself smirking. She changed the truck into reverse, pulled out of the driveway and then put it into gear and set off. Watching the other girl staring at her out of the corner of her eye, Victoria found herself smirking. She rested her hands on the wheel, driving carefully down the street.

She didn’t have to wait long before Taylor unhooked her seatbelt, and slid along the bench, re-securing herself in the middle seat and gently leaning into her side. She grinned quietly as she checked the streets, comparing them to the directions that she’d memorized, taking in the top of Taylor’s head.

When they came to a stop at a red light, Victoria quickly reached out, grabbing her phone and scrolling through the music. It took her a moment to find the right song, and the light had changed, causing the car behind her to let out a honk. She rolled her eyes, tapping the screen and dropping the phone next to her as she turned her attention back to the road. As the song started to play, Victoria imagined that she could feel Taylor’s cheeks burning against her shoulder even through the sweater that she wore.

‘In the car, I just can’t wait. To pick you up on our very first date. Is it cool if I hold your hand—...’

It’d been about as challenging to find parking near the boardwalk as Victoria had imagined, and she and Taylor had ended up parking at a gated parking lot nearby and walking through the boardwalk. After they had left the car, Victoria had offered the other girl her arm, and they moved at a slow sedate pace through the pedestrians, heading toward the water.

Victoria had felt Taylor nervously drawing away as they’d approached the crowds and she’d paused, studying the girl’s expression curiously. When the girl nervously untangled their arms and stepped back smoothing out her sweater, she shifted in place, studying her.

“Everything alright, Taylor?” She studied the girl quietly as she fidgeted with her outfit before nervously looking her way.

“Oh. Yeah. We’re just… getting close to people.” She smiled quietly, and Victoria blinked softly, crossing her arms over her chest. Taylor stared at her silently and nervously stepped back before
fidgeting with her top.

“I uh… We’re both public capes, Vic. I assumed you didn’t want to be overly open about things.” Victoria stared at her in amusement before shaking her head and holding out her arm. Taylor froze quietly, her cheeks darkening as she considered the limb.

“Taylor, you’re my girlfriend. Half my school knows that I’m dating you, and to be honest; it’s only a matter of time before it gets out. I—” She paused frowned, considering her thoughts for a moment before shrugging. “I care more about doing our first date right, then about what people might say if they saw you hanging off my arm.” Victoria watched as Taylor seemed to fidget before stepping closer and retaking her arm.

Setting off once more, Victoria was amused to note that Taylor’s blush remained as they walked through the crowds, even after everyone seemingly paid them no attention as they moved along. They took their time wandering down the packed streets, and glancing in various windows, but Victoria could tell when Taylor’s hunger began to bother her when the girl started to look around for their destination. She waited for Taylor to voice the question though.

“Where’re we going?” Victora glanced down at Taylor, smirking at the open curiosity in her expression. She removed her hand from her pocket, where it’d been nervously fidgeting with her phone and pointed down the coast a bit at a part of the boardwalk that had been expanded out over the water. Lights hung around it, and it was fenced off.

“It’s a restaurant that Lily told me about. Japanese style barbecue, it’s apparently pretty decent? And the security around here is a bit beefier than normal to keep the gangs from making a fuss about it.” Victoria spoke quietly, smiling when Taylor nodded against her shoulder. They walked the short distance to the entrance to the restaurant.

It was really more of a gate sent into a medium height fence. They got in line behind an older couple that was speaking casually with the Hostess. Victoria smiled as she listened to them chatting about their anniversary with the friendly woman, and she took her time glancing around at the establishment.

It was fascinatingly designed, with nearly the entirety of the establishment exposed to the elements, though Victoria spotted a few well place poles that were probably meant to secure a tent of some sort when the weather turned. Large oriental lamps kept the seating area well lit, while long strings of hanging lanterns offered a more intimate ambiance. The couple ahead of them were admitted past the gate, and they vanished with a waiter and the young woman at the stand gave them a curious look before flashing them a smile.

“Welcome to Taiyo no isan. Do you have a reservation tonight? The wait times are a bit prohibitive otherwise.” Victoria studied the woman's openly curious look, but finding no hints of distaste or irritation, she slipped closer and nodded.

“Yes, two for Dallon? I called the other day.” She smiled when the woman considered the book in front of her before smiling and waving at someone across the deck. It took a few moments before another young woman joined them at the gate.

“Miya will be your server tonight, Miss Dallon.” The Hostess turned to the waitress and spoke quickly in Japanese. The waitress blinked slowly, glancing at them both curiously. She nodded at the Hostess before grabbing two menus and flashing them a friendly smile.
Waving them after her, the woman began to wave through the tables. Victoria glanced down at Taylor’s nervous expression as they trailed the Waitress. They were shown to a table near the seaward side of the shop, and the waitress watched in amusement as Victoria gently pulled out Taylor’s chair before releasing her.

She slid around the table and dropped down opposite Taylor and accepted the menu from the clearly amused woman that was to be their server.

“Any drinks?” Her voice was clear and accent-free, and Victoria blinked in amusement before glancing at the menu, considering the food on offer. She flipped through the menu and whistled in amusement at the fancy drinks on display, slowly dragging her finger along the listed items, studying the non-alcoholic beverages.

“Sparkling cider for me, please. Pear.” Victoria glanced up and smiled at the Waitress as she jotted it down, and she peered over at Taylor as the girl considered her menu for a few moments before chuckling and setting it down.

“Same works for me.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and she stared down, studying her menu for a moment before glancing her way. Victoria found herself grinning at the oddly nervous look on Taylor’s face. Once Miya had gone, a quiet heavy silence fell between them, and Victoria studied Taylor curiously as the girl fiddled with her cutlery before letting out a sigh.

“I-I’m not…” She paused and swallowed before glancing at the small plate on her table, nervously spinning it in place.

“I’ve never been on a date before. I’m not sure… I’m not sure what to do.” The words were soft, and Victoria chuckled, drawing Taylor’s eyes her way. She leaned forward and gently gripped the edge of the table with her hands.

“I was uh. I was pretty freaked out earlier too. Even if I’ve been on dates, this all still pretty new to me too. But I talked to Lily.” Victoria’s voice was soft, and she saw Taylor nervously perking up and staring at her.

“She uh, she said that we shouldn’t be so nervous. We’re uhm. We’re already together, right? So this should be fun.” Victoria watched as Taylor considered her for a few moments before nodding almost to herself and perking up a bit.

“She uh, she said that we shouldn’t be so nervous. We’re uh. We’re already together, right? So this should be fun.” Victoria watched as Taylor considered her for a few moments before nodding almost to herself and perking up a bit.

“She also suggested that we use this as a chance to do all the stupid things that we didn’t get a chance to do since we skipped all the casual dating stuff. Like. First date conversations.” Victoria smirked at Taylor, taking her minute confusion and continuing when she merely looked lost.

“Like. Getting to know each other stuff. Like discussing favourite colours, for example.” Victoria blinked when Taylor let out an amused snicker at that and lifted an eyebrow. She watched as Taylor seemed to reconsider her mirth and blushed prettily.

“I uh. I already know your favourite colour, Vic. It’s purple.” Victoria blinked at Taylor’s startlingly perceptive guess and as she tilted her head in her direction causing Taylor’s blush to darken as she nervously fidgeted with her sweater. When she didn’t ask though, Taylor eventually gave a sigh and muttered soft enough that only Victoria could hear.

“Vic, we take turns doing laundry.” Victoria blinked and then quite suddenly found herself blushing with a similar hue as her girlfriend. Seeing this, Taylor seemed to find it hilarious if the giggles she let
off were any indication. Victoria casually huffed, turning her blue eyes out toward the ocean. Eventually, Taylor’s chuckles faded, and she studied her for a few moments. Victoria felt somewhat on the spot when the girl hummed and spoke gently.

"For the record? Mine is gold." Victoria blinked at the comment before Taylor casually reached out across the table and tugged a few hairs from behind her ear and let the blonde locks fall in front of her-

‘Oh.’ Victoria a brilliant red which saw Taylor smirking before she glanced down at her menu and spoke softly, thankfully changing the subject.

“So, uh. Getting to know each other stuff.” She hummed before speaking slowly. “What’re you gonna go to college for? What’d you wanna do when you grow up.” Victoria perked up quietly and glanced at Taylor across the table. She blinked at the girl’s open fascination.

“I mean… I guess I’m gonna be a superhero still?” She quietly ripped open the paper on her chopsticks, snapping them quietly as she considered the menu.

“I meant besides that. You’re going to college, right? What’d you wanna study? What’d you wanna do when you’re not fighting crime.” Victoria glanced at Taylor and stared at her curiously. Taylor endured her looks for a few moments before sighing and speaking.

“I’ll go first then. I’m gonna study psychology, I think. Maybe try to be a therapist or a Doctor.” She glanced at Vic and seemed relieved at Vic’s smile.

“Like, Amy’s doctor, right? Mel?” Taylor blinked and nodded quietly, speaking slowly.

“Yeah, I’ve been emailing her occasionally to talk about it, and she’s been pretty helpful.” Victoria considered Taylor quietly for a few moments before nervously setting her chopsticks down. She glanced up at Taylor and studied the girl’s curious expression before speaking softly.

“I was uh. I was really excited when I got into the music AP program, and it’s fascinating stuff, but it’s a lot harder than I was expecting. I’m not sure if I’d have it in me to do an actual program in it.” She slowly closed the menu and frowned as she picked at the coarse fabric it was bound with. She let out a quiet sigh as she continued with a frown.

“Like, Warren helps a lot, and when he has time to fill in the blanks things make sense, but a lot of the time in class I’m just. Lost. I’m surrounded by all these people that have been playing their instruments since they were kids, and I’m just the strange girl that showed up late with a guitar she’s been plucking at for a few months.” Victoria frowned at her chopsticks, studying the kanji stamped on them.

“Do you enjoy it when it makes sense? When Warren explains it, it eventually makes sense, right?” Taylor’s voice cut across her melancholy and Victoria glanced up curious and shrugged up a shoulder.

“I mean, yeah. It’s like. When we practice, and I can’t get a kick to work right, and you sorta just. You show me just how to snap my leg, and it suddenly works, and everything makes sense, and it’s great. I like, get it. I can listen to songs and see the music sort of coming together behind the sound...” Victoria blew out a breath before she continued in a softer voice.

“But it’s hard. And I. I don’t like feeling like an idiot in front of the rest.” Victoria muttered softly,
blinking when Taylor’s hand came across the table and rested on hers. She studied Taylor’s hand for a few moments before glancing up quietly.

“Forget about the other people, for a second. Why did you join the class in the first place? What’d you want to do with it? You didn’t join to be popular or anything like that. You put in a lot of work getting in if it was just to see if you could.” Victoria blinked at Taylor and let out a gentle sigh.

“I—” She shrugged up a shoulder. “Warren told me about all the things you could do with a bachelor’s in music, and he mentioned teaching music. It was just an idle thought but… I mean it’s something I could be good at right?” Victoria peered over at Taylor, blinking at the grin on her girlfriend's face.

“Yeah, Vic. I think it’s something you’d be great at.” The words were gentle, and Victoria fidgeted, though a soft cough broke the charged silence. Taylor squeaked and drew back, and Victoria glanced up, seeing their server watching with an amused smirk. She set the ciders down and stared at them.

“Ready to order?”

Taylor shivered a bit as she sat in the truck, grumbling as she tightened her sweater around herself and checked her phone for the third time. Dinner had been fantastic; the conversation had been light and oddly flirtatious. And at this point, Taylor was very much looking forward to spending some quality time curled up against her girlfriend's side at the movie theatre. Truthfully, she wished that she were already there instead of sitting in the cold truck in her driveway. Taylor wasn’t sure why they’d had to stop at home on the way to the theatre, but Victoria had been insistent. She’d waited in the truck as Victoria grabbed a few things from the back of the truck and carried them inside, and she’d watched the lights flick on all the way upstairs.

That had been nearly fifteen minutes ago. She stared at the still silent house, rechecked her phone and let out a whine. They were going to miss their show time. She huffed as she tried to remember the name of the movie that Victoria had indicated that they were going to see, but her mind came up blank. Truthfully, the movie was of less interest to her then making fun of it with Vic would have been. She flushed as her mind drifted in other directions and shifted over, opening the door.

She hopped out of the truck, slamming the door in her wake and hurrying through the brisk night air, cursing Crystal for convincing her that shorts would totally be fine for an evening date. She muttered quietly as she slipped up the steps, debating on if she wanted to change into some pants since they were home anyway. She quickly tugged open the door and moved into the house, kicking off her shoes and stalking toward the stairs.

“Vic, if you ta—” The sound of breathing to her left caused her pause, and she turned to stare in confusion as the lights in the living room suddenly blinked on to reveal a surprising crush of bodies. She raised her hands, but her powers fizzled as she stared in confusion at every person that she considered a friend shouting at her. It took a moment for the raucous noise to pierce her confusion.

‘Surprise.’ She stood there in shell-shocked confusion, nervously grasping her sweater and staring in
mounting confusion at over a dozen people grinning her direction. She opened her mouth to speak, to say anything but that failed and she just nervously lifted a hand and waved. The amused laughter that came after was a relief. She scanned the gathered faces for her girlfriend, finding her lurking near her sister and cousins.

She narrowed her eyes, but before she could get to the other girl she was intercepted by Lily and Sabah, each of them toting a bright gift and she nervously fidgeted in place, as they spoke.

“Happy birthday, Taylor.” Lily’s voice was soft, and she casually shoved a present at her. Taylor stared at it in confusion, as she moved into the room and to the side, Amy and Victoria directing the rest of the group to the various amenities that were apparently scattered around her house. Snacks in the kitchen, music in the backyard, and so forth. Taylor stared at the box for a moment and then sighed, offering Lily a smile and speaking as she ripped the paper away.

“Thanks, Lily. You know that you didn’t—” She blinked in confusion at the box, carefully opening it and staring in fascination at the brightly coloured balls within. She studied the soft pastel colours before glancing at Lily’s amused smirk.

“I know I didn’t. But I’ve seen you snacking during study sessions, and I figured you’d enjoy something handmade. They’re called daifuku, I used to make them with Ge—” Lily paused frowning.

“My uh. My foster mom. Before she passed, they’re all the same flavour; just the mochi is dyed different colours. They should keep for a couple of days or so though.” Taylor blinked and nodded quietly. She studied Lily for a moment, tempted to hug the girl for some reason before closing the box.

“Thanks then. It’s uh. I’m honoured that you’re sharing this with me.” Lily flushed and waved her off before glancing around. She muttered something down about hunting down the others, and Taylor glanced over at an amused looking Sabah. The older girl smiled and held out a bag. Blinking in confusion, Taylor snagged it and pulled the paper aside, peering in curiously. Books, Taylor noticed, and she reached in, drawing out the first one and staring at the cover.

“You’re a hard person to shop for, Taylor, but, I figured that you’d enjoy these.” Taylor stared at Sabah quietly for a few moments and then carefully flipped the book open. Huh, Poetry. She slowly read the first poem, tilting her head. She skimmed past a few different poems until one caught her eye and she stopped to read, her cheeks flushing with colour. She glanced up at Sabah, taking in her amused expression.

“These are all full of lesbian poems, aren’t they?” Taylor narrowed her eyes at Sabah’s growing grin. She rolled her eyes, tucking the book away in the bag once more. Truthfully, the poem had been rather cute despite the teasing that she was getting, and she was sort of looking forward to curling up with Victoria later and perusing more of them. The wide grin on Sabah’s face didn’t fade, and Taylor felt her suspicion welling up.

“...What’d you do.” She glowered at Sabah and glanced over at Crystal’s slow amused approach, and she whined softly.

“You’re hard to shop for, and some people might have come to me for ideas.” Taylor glanced at Crystal, accepting the bag that she offered over. She didn’t even respond to the girl at first, peering into the bag at the collection of graphic novels within. She lifted her head and snorted softly before tucking the smaller bag into Sabah’s to keep things together.
“Thanks, Crystal, I appreciate the thought. And that you helped me get ready for my date, even if it was a subtle ploy to get me out of the house.” She smirked at Crystal’s surprise before sticking her tongue out at the both of them and moving around them. It didn’t take her long to track down Victoria, leaning against a counter in the kitchen, murmuring to Amy as she nibbled on a cookie.

“You! You let your cousin ambush me so you could sneak around my house planning a party.” She spoke slowly, poking Victoria in the back. She watched her girlfriend tense and slowly peer at her.

“Actually,” Taylor paused when Amy peeked around Victoria and offered her a nervous smile. She studied the shorter girl as she shifted in place, moving to step around Vic.

“That was me. I uh. I’ve been planning this for like a week. Also,” Taylor squeaked when Amy stepped forward and hauled back, punching her in the arm. She blinked and rubbed her arm.

“That’s for not telling anyone that it was your birthday. Luckily Aunt Sarah remembered.” She huffed faintly before glancing at Victoria. Taylor watched as her girlfriend turned to peer at her curiously, and she let out a sigh.

“I didn’t want you guys making a big deal out of it. I-I’ve not really done much with my birthday in the last few years. I uh. I had a bad experience with them. Last two years it was just dinner and movies with dad, and uh. Vic wanted to go out. I was happy to just uh,” She nervously gripped her shirt.

“I was happy to just do something nice with Vic.” She smiled quietly at her girlfriend, enjoying the blush on her cheeks. She glanced back at Amy, watching as she playfully rolled her eyes and pulled something small and wrapped in paper from her pocket, handing it over. Taylor blinked quietly, staring at the paper and frowning.

“Did you talk to Sabah about this?” She got strange looks from Victoria and Amy both, but she waved them off before slowly ripping the paper away. It was a magnet, small and obliquely shaped. It felt like wood, but judging by the weight, Taylor guessed it was plastic. Turning it over, Taylor stared at the image of her and Amy standing in the Museum, the short brunette waving animatedly at a painting as Taylor watched with amusement. She studied it for a moment before glancing at Amy.

“Where?” The girl chuckled and shrugged. “One of the tour groups saw us and snapped a picture, said they thought we were cute. They sent me a copy. There’s a place here in town that does custom printing.” Taylor stared at the image for a moment before moving over and sticking it right in the middle of the fridge.

“I love it.” She spoke softly, tapping the image. She’d need more pictures of her friends. Enough to cover the fridge, she decided. She studied the effect for a few moments before turning back to an amused Vic and Amy. She slid back over, watching as Vic perked up.

“I did get you something. It’s upstairs. Best not done in public, we can do it later.” Taylor blinked at Victoria, tilting her head quietly.

“You didn’t have to-” She paused as Victoria just touched her lips and smirked at her.

“Trust me, I had to do this, but as I said. Later.” She glanced over Taylor’s shoulder and snorted.

“Eric’s coming this way, and Lily, Crystal and Sabah are trailing him with big grins on their faces, Now I’m curious what exactly Sabah might have told us,” Taylor whined and flopped forward,
burying her face in Victoria’s neck, doing her best to ignore the boy calling her name.

Truthfully, Eric’s gift had been surprisingly classy, well considering what Taylor had been expecting anyway. Novelty t-shirts weren’t terrible, and it wasn’t as if she had to actually wear them. Though the sight of Victoria currently chatting with Warren and Will while wearing a shirt that said; ‘Fuck the black sheep, I’m the Rainbow sheep of the family’ on it was sort of hilarious. She briefly considered going over and joining the group by the kitchen table, but the sound of a voice clearing to her left startled her.

She turned and blinked at the slightly uncomfortable looking Lisa. The girl was holding a large parcel in her hands along with a smaller envelope. She offered both over. Taylor accepted them and blinked at the weight, grunting and setting them aside.

“Lisa, what is this?” She blinked when the girl shrugged smoothly.

“No clue, Dragon sent it. The uh, the card is from me.” Taylor stared at Lisa before taking the card off the top of the box. She opened it up smoothly and tilted her head at the oddly cute card within the envelope. Studying it for a moment, Taylor considered the kitten on the face before opening up the card to read the brief comment inside. She stared at the expensive looking gift certificate for a store she’d never heard of and frowned.

When she glanced up to thank Lily, she blinked at the utter lack of the other girl. She frowned quietly, setting the card back on the box and making a note to corner Lisa later and thank her. She considered the box and guessed what might be within so she just left it on the shelf in the garage to be dealt with later. She moved up and out of the garage and into the house, intent on joining Victoria when she was gently snagged by the arm.

Tugged to the side, she found herself standing before the forms of Sarah and Neil, and when the older woman offered her a hug, Taylor quickly accepted it. She stared at the two of them as they held large bags that showed Sabah’s shop logo on the side. She briefly wondered if the women would get in on the game that the rest of the teens had been playing, but Sarah’s expression hinted at a different sort of mischief. She noted Taylor’s glance at the bag and tugged her off to the side.

“This is for you, but wait a second before you open it.” She handed Taylor the large bag and Taylor blinked at the weight. She studied the bag a moment before glancing at Sarah. The older woman nodded at her husband and Taylor watched as Manpower’s seven-foot frame padded over and past Lily to loom behind the couch. He reached out rapping on Victoria’s head. Taylor laughed when Victoria didn’t stand up, merely bending her head over the back of the chair to stare up her uncle. Neil said something and then dropped the bag he held in her lap.

Taylor blinked when Victoria looked over her way in confusion, and Taylor merely returned the confused look with one of her own before shrugging. The girl studied her for a moment before shrugging as well, sliding to her feet and opening the bag, the others watching as she pulled the paper away. Taylor glanced off to the side, and noted Sabah in the door to the garage, watching with open curiosity.

Before she could ask Sarah what was going on though, Victoria’s small gasp and the sound of the
bag clattering to the floor drew her eye back to her girlfriend. She stared at Victoria, her eyes focusing on Victoria’s hands which were holding what looked to be an expensive letter jacket. White leather sleeves with a dark brown base, thick cloth patches of the Jedi Order’s logo on each shoulder, and on the left breast. Taylor blinked when Victoria turned the coat around to stare at the front, letting her see that instead of ‘Vigil’ the back said ‘Hebert’ over the letter 9. She stared up at Sarah in confusion.

“They’re one of a kind. Sabah made them especially for you. The others, that we'll be selling as merchandise, will have your cape names.” Taylor blinked at Sarah before staring at her own bag. She slowly reached in, her hand coming out with a golden coat. It was nearly identical to the one in Vic’s hand but for the golden colour of the fabric and ‘Dallon’ on the back along with a rather large number six directly below the bold lettering. She stared at it quietly for a few moments before glancing over at Vic, studying her broad grin as she gripped the coat to her chest.

“I-... Thanks.” she smiled quietly as she fiddle with the coat for a few moments before slipping off her sweater and draping the jacket around herself, sinking into the slightly too large jacket with a happy sigh. When Sarah stared at her quietly, Taylor found herself blinking.

“What?” She watched as Sarah seemed to corral herself for a moment before drawing out a leather folder and holding it up.

“Carol didn’t think it’d be appropriate to come, so she and Mark are out doing something tonight, but she did want me to give you this.” Taylor studied the leather folder for a few moments before reaching out and accepting it. She glanced nervously at Sarah before slowly opening it up and staring at the contents. Several pieces of crisp paper had been pinned within.

Taylor studied the first page, the printout of a google search with her name in the box. She glanced at Sarah, wondering if this was some kind of a sick joke, but she paused, frowning when she glanced back down. She frowned as she read the first few entries. She read the whole page as her frown continued to grow. She closed the pad, and set it on the nearby table, reaching into her sweater and pulling out her phone with trembling fingers.

Her hands shaking, she quickly pulled up google and typed her own name in haphazardly, having to correct it twice. The printout wasn’t wrong; the entries were as the page said — reports on her role as Vigil, discussions about her and her father, discussion about her trigger. None of the rumours or the groups came up. She frowned as she slowly clicked onto the second page, then the third, skimming as she stared in mounting confusion.

“You won’t find them there, Taylor, It’s been sanitized down to the twentieth page. Even the few links after that all lead to dead ends. Carol was very thorough. Other engines too, and with a few different search combinations.” Taylor stared in confusion at her phone before peering at Sara quietly.

“H-How?” She watched the woman’s face soften.

“A lot of cease and desist orders, a great many threatening phone calls, and Carol using her draconian temper to keep people quiet. She’s been working on it for a while now though, nearly two months.” Taylor stared in confusion at the leather folder on the table, dropping her phone on it and launching herself at Sarah and hugging her as tightly as she could.

“Why?” The words were soft, and Taylor shivered when Sarah’s arms came down and wrapped around her tightly in return, the woman speaking slowly.
“Cause the Taylor Hebert that I met certainly wouldn’t do what all those people were saying, and it was high time that someone finally stopped them trying to say it.” The words were gentle, and Taylor nervously pulled back, wiping at her face. She glanced over, saw the others staring at her and she nervously pulled back.

“I… I’ve got something I need to do.” She muttered, grabbing her phone and the folder and scurrying away from the others and down the hall toward the back door. She vanished out into the night as she wiped at the tears streaming down her face.

“Hey, mom.” Taylor’s face had long since dried when she spoke softly to the empty air, sat on the edge of the planter that held the three overgrown rose bushes that her father had always refused to trim. She felt the wind whispering through the backyard, blowing her hair about her face, and she imagined it was her mother ruffling it for her. She stared quietly at the grass before her and idly fidgeted with her jacket.

“It’s been a busy year. Good but busy, at least the last half of it. The first part-” She spoke softly, her eyes drifting up to the dark clouds that drifted past overhead, lit from below by the streetlights. She studied them quietly for a few moments before continuing softly.

“I know I said that I thought things were getting better last year, but uh. They didn’t really. I guess I’d just been hoping. If anything, they ended up getting worse, Mom. I ended up triggering. I’m a cape, you know? Sometimes I still can’t believe it. I’m not even a parahuman really, Mom. Just a piss poor Jedi, but I-” Taylor paused her muttering, and she glanced up toward the house, staring quietly over at the forms of Lily and Amy lurking by the house watching her. No one had come out to her yet, but they’d all taken a turn to watch. She studied them as they stood close together and spoke softly, but after a few moments, she turned her gaze upwards again, this time examining the dim stars that were visible past the light pollution.

“After you left mom, I used to dream of having powers. First to stop anyone else like you from dying. Then with Sophia and them to make them finally leave me alone. To finally have the power that no one could hurt me. But that’s not the best part of all this. It’s… I’m not alone anymore, mom. I’ve got friends again; they’re all here at the house for my birthday.” She glanced over at the sight of Amy and Lily peering at her, the form of her girlfriend speaking softly to them. Taylor studied the lot, watching as Victoria studied her before breaking away from the other two and approaching her slowly.

She stared at the sight of Victoria in that coat, watching as it hung down around her dress and she smiled when the other called slowed to a halt and lurked a few feet away. Taylor glanced at the blonde as she nervously fidgeted before speaking softly.

“You alright?” The words were laced with worry and Taylor nodded, letting out a tired sigh.

“Yeah. I’m alright. I got a bit emotional and took a break.” She glanced from Victoria to the house and then back to the sigh as another nervous silence dragged out between them.

“Amy said that she heard you talking.” Victoria’s voice was laced with curiosity and Taylor
considered lying about it before letting out a quiet chuckle and deciding just to lay it out.

“I uh. Before she died me and my mom used to come out here on my birthday and talk. Well, I say we talked but mostly I just. I just talked, and she listened. I’d tell her about stuff, things I’d been keeping from her, or my feelings and she just held me and listened. After she was gone, there was that uh. Well, the incident with Emma and I ended up out here, and it felt good to just. Let it all out, you know?” Taylor stared at Victoria, watching as she studied her in confusion.

“I don’t know if she can hear me, but it’s… it’s nice to get it off my chest, and I get to feel like she’s not completely gone.” Taylor studied Victoria quietly. She watched as the girl glanced toward the house and back at her.

“I could let you-” She spoke gently, and Taylor glanced at her and patted the spot next to her.

“You can stay if you want.” Victoria studied her before slipping over and taking a seat. Taylor smirked a bit and shifted over, gently moving Victoria’s arm up and curling into her side. She smiled when the older girl’s arm wrapped around her. She sat there quietly, soaking in the other girl’s warmth, speaking slowly.

“So, uh, This is my girlfriend, Vic, mom.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and she felt Victoria glancing at her before nervously shifting as if she was being watched. She smiled a bit as she nudged the other girl before continuing softly.

“Victoria Dallon that is. Yeah, those Dallons. I can just imagine you freaking out that idea now.” She saw the confused look from Victoria and shifted up a bit and studied her.

“Mom was a bit of a cape geek. I think it all started back when she was part of Lustrum’s movement before Lustrum died.” She saw Victoria’s eyebrow raise and smiled. “It was back when she was in graduate school. After she got her degree, she ended up here as a junior professor at the college, and that’s when she met my dad. But. Capes were sort of her passion. Her Master’s thesis was on Scion.” Taylor chuckled softly, peering at Victoria.

“It was called something like; Myth made flesh, Scion and the Modern Prometheus,” Taylor spoke gently and leaned on Vic.

“She kept up on the news, and she was a pretty active follower on PHO and stuff, I remember coming home one day four years ago, and she was just, crying.” Taylor glanced at Victoria and saw her putting the timeline together with a frown.

“See, I was always a Protectorate girl. Alexandria, Armsmaster, Mouse Protector? They were capital ‘H’ heroes, you know. Bigger than life. But mom was really into New Wave. I think she dug the whole. No secret identities thing. The big picture stuff.” Taylor rested against Victoria and let out a quiet sigh.

“She was a huge fan of your Mom, actually. She loved the whole, lawyer by day, crime fighter by night. She said it was empowering that there was a cape like that out there, a woman with a powerful job, that didn’t let people define her roles.” Taylor snorted quietly, glancing at Victoria’s conflicted look.

“I doubt that she’d be so fond of her now.” Victoria’s voice was soft, and Taylor frowned a bit before shrugging and grasping the leather folder.
“I think, even with everything that's happened she’d be pretty thankful.” She handed the folder over and watched as Victoria opened it in confusion, reading the page. It took her several minutes longer than Taylor to cotton on, pulling out her phone and double checking like Taylor. She stared in confusion at her phone, frowning.

“Did my mom-?” She spoke softly, and Taylor let out a sigh.

“Yeah, apparently she’s been working on it a while. Even with stuff, Mom would love that your mom helped me so much. She saved me from the PRT; she introduced me to all of you. She’s the one that convinced Dad that I should join New Wave.” Taylor paused, chuckling as she glanced around.

“I wish she was here, you know, Vic? She’d freak if she knew that I’d joined you guys. She’d be so proud.” She glanced at Vic quietly and smiled. “And I think she’d love you. After she forgave you for breaking my jaw.” She smirked at Victoria’s suddenly held a hand over her mouth and huffed at Taylor.

“Don’t tell your mom that, Taylor, I don’t want her to hate me. Mrs. Hebert, To be fair, she broke my leg first.” She pointed out, and Taylor rolled her eyes as she leaned on Victoria, her lips curling into an amused smile.

“And I had to do that because she was gonna turn Lisa into a meat pinata.” Taylor’s voice came out, and Victoria scoffed. She cut in before the other girl did.

“But it’s fine, mom. We made up. She’s… Victoria’s been a lot of help. I’m not sure I’d have made it this long without her. She’s kind of amazing.” Taylor’s voice was gentle, and she glanced up when Victoria tightened her arm around her.

“Your daughter’s pretty amazing too, Mrs. Hebert. She’s saved my life a half dozen times, and my sister too. She saved the city. And she’s a space wizard.” Taylor snorted quietly and rolled her eyes, leaning into Vic’s side quietly. She closed her eyes, speaking softly as she soaked in Victoria’s comfort.

“Actually, Mrs. Hebert, I do have a question. I could use your advice, since you’re pretty good with all this, dealing with Taylor stuff.” The words came out, and Taylor peered up at Vic quietly as she studied the sky.

“See, I know that Taylor and high schools don’t really mix well, but uh... my school’s prom was pushed back a month because of Leviathan.” Vic’s voice was gentle, and Taylor stared up at the girl in mounting confusion.

“And, I mean. I ended up buying tickets for it, but I don’t have a date anymore. There’s this one girl that would be pretty neat as an escort, but uh. I’m not super sure how I’d ask her.” Vic’s voice was soft, and she tilted her head to the side as if listening.

“She says that you should ditch this other girl and go with me, instead,” Taylor spoke teasingly and watched as Vic gave her an amused smirk. She studied the girl for a few moments and then tilted her head.

“So, Prom?” She asked quietly, and Victoria fidgeted carefully in place, letting out a sigh.

“It’s on the Nineteenth, and I wasn’t originally going to go, but... I just. I was in class, and Dean
was there, and these kids came in to say that it was the last chance for tickets and everyone was silent, and Dean was just staring at me like he has been doing for weeks. So I - I stood up and bought four.” She huffed as her cheeks darkened. Taylor considered the girl quietly for a few moments before drawing Vic around to face her.

“You really wanna go to this thing?” She spoke softly and watched as Victoria’s expression softened and became oddly vulnerable.

“I - It’s my senior prom, Taylor. And I’d like to go with my partner and dance some.” Her voice was nervous, and Taylor let out an amused snort. She leaned over, flopping her head down on Vic’s shoulder.

"Is Amy going?" She glanced at Vic, who blinked and shrugged quietly.

"Probably not, not without a date anyway." Taylor studied the girl quietly for a few moments before peering toward the sky.

"You know, Lily skipped her prom to come out here." She glanced at Vic, watching that familiar spark of mischief forming in her eyes as she tugged out her phone. She watched the girl rapidly typing out a message, but before she could read it, a sound of rage would issue from the edge of the house. Taylor glanced over and saw Amy glaring down at her phone. She heard Victoria's amused giggle as she typed something else into her phone and watched Lily pull her phone out. She saw Amy lunge and Lily back off, staring down at the phone in amusement.

"You uh. You know that she's going to murder you, right?" She glanced at Vic, who looked utterly unrepentant. She studied that amused grin before sighing and leaning back against her.

“Fine, but I think you should probably poke Sabah if you need a dress in uh… a week?” Taylor’s voice was low and laced with wry amusement. Taylor nudged her girlfriend and gently tugged at her dress with an amused smirk.

“You should feel happy that she likes you, Vic. Otherwise, she’d probably soon be getting tired of saving you from your own fashion sense. On the upside, Mom, you got your wish, and someone finally got her out of that skirt.” Taylor paused and smirked impishly as Victoria stiffened.

“Well, not like that. Not yet, anyway, but I have this other friend, Sabah. She fixed up Vic’s outfit, made it a bit less uh. Interesting from below.” Taylor smirked when Victoria bonked her on the head.

“I hate that joke you know, I did wear shorts under it. A whole body suit, even with the skirt, no one could actually see anything.” The girl continued on smoothly, ignoring the comment about getting her out of it, and they shifted closer together, quietly talking to the ghost of Taylor’s mother about their friends and their lives.

They’d talked to the ghosts in the yard for nearly an hour, only coming in once Taylor had lost feeling in her legs, the cold night air and the short shorts not mixing well. They made their way in for the cake, and Taylor had accepted the last few gifts before she quietly begged off saying that Vic wanted to give her a gift in private. The wolf whistles had been embarrassing, but she’d flipped them
all the bird and disappeared up the stairs with Vic in tow.

Taylor wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting when she walked into that room, but the familiar case sitting on her bed wasn’t it. She stood their stock still staring at the small black case with the clunky shapes scratched into it burned in her view. It sat on her bad as it had all those years ago when the bed had been in a different room.

Taylor staggered forward a step, staring at it quietly, her eyes taking in the clumsy butterflies and flowers that she and Emma had once spent a week over the summer carefully scratching into the case with screwdrivers before her father had caught them.

Taylor took several slow, hesitant steps toward the bed, dropping to her knees at the edge of it and drawing the black case toward her. It sat on her familiar bedspread and Taylor shivered quietly as she found herself remembering the last time that she’d seen it.

Dread welled up in Taylor’s stomach as she glared at her plate, slowly moving the food around on it. It was stupid, she knew, to bring it to school. But it’d been a rough three months. Emma refused to look at her, to talk to her directly, merely speaking around her as if she wasn’t there. The rumours, the lies, everything burned, and it was so hard keeping a straight face. She’d needed the support, the comfort and even touching it had kept her calm.

But she wasn’t calm now. She’d come to her locker before lunch and had found it broken open. She’d stared in horror at the empty locker and she’d searched over half the lunch. Eventually, the ache in her stomach had drawn her to the sweet promise of food and she’d found herself sat alone at a table in the back corner of the cafeteria, staring at the food that refused to make its way to her mouth.

The sound of tittering laughter was a common occurrence, and Taylor usually ignored it but a wash of dark fear ripped through her and she slowly, ever so slowly looked up. She saw the familiar black and brass case sitting on the table directly in front of Sophia, the girl’s long manicured fingernails resting on it. Taylor stared at the box before flicking her gaze up. Sophia was staring at her with this mocking look on her face and she felt the anger washing up in her.

She gripped her utensils quietly and turned to look at Emma, expecting that mocking condemnation, or some sort of hate, but instead the girl wasn’t even looking at her. A look of guilt flickered over her features as she stared at the box, studying it and gently tracing one of the shapes before sighing and glancing away from Sophia and the box and toward her left. Speaking to one of her new friends.

Taylor shifted, ready to slam to her feet, to storm over and attack the girls, get her property back. To run to a teacher to beg. But she turned and saw that smug self-satisfied grin on Sophia’s face. The girl was ready, and she knew that if she went for her, Sophia would run and she’d never see the flute again. She saw the casual malice in the look and she glanced at her plate, the rage and desperation in her begging to be released but she knew that she’d lost.

She’d never see the flute again, Sophia had a plan, she always had a plan, and no matter what she did that flute would never be hers. But. Sophia didn’t have to win. Taylor frowned quietly. Her mother would never have wanted her legacy to be used like this, she knew and Taylor slowly hunched back down in her seat, carefully wrapping a
placid expression on her face. She picked at her food, eating quietly as if she didn’t care.

Every time the sound of a clatter, or a ding came from across the room her heart ached, and she had to hold herself perfectly still from charging them. The low, irritated sounds coming from Sophia only grew worse and Taylor took some small satisfaction when the girl’s chair angrily scraped back and she vanished with a few girls in tow, disappearing out of the cafeteria with the box in hand. She didn’t follow, she knew that Sophia wanted that and instead she hunched down and stared silently at her food.

When she was sure the black girl was gone, Taylor glanced up, staring coldly across the room at Emma. She saw the brief flicker of surprise on the girl’s face, and the flash of hurt as she stared at her like she didn’t matter, like the betrayal that she’d done didn’t matter. She stared at her quietly for a few moments before glancing back at her food and quietly scooping up the last few morsels and taking her tray away. She felt the angry look burning into her back but she didn’t look back.

Taylor quietly considered that particular moment, the last time that she’d made eye contact with Emma before she triggered, the last time she’d reacted to anything she had done. At least externally, the disappointment and pain had lingered, but outwardly she was a rock, silently revelling in the dark looks this placidity brought from both girls. They’d craved her attention, they wanted to win, and Taylor had decided that she wouldn’t play at all out of spite.

The cough from behind dragged Taylor out of her musing and she shifted, carefully touching the case. She gently reached for the clips, carefully unsnapping them and pushing the lid open. The red velvet was as it had been before, and she gently lifted the silver instrument free of the case, carefully checking it over. Every ding, scratch and imperfection were untouched. She glanced at Vic before popping open the tiny storage space in the lid. She drew out the folded image within and opened it.

“...H-how?” She spoke softly, staring at the image of her and her mother sprawled out on the couch that still sat in the living room. Her mother was playing the flute and a much younger her was sprawled over the sofa, head in her lap, listening happily. She stared at the picture before glancing back at Vic. The girl shifted in place quietly for a few moments.

“I... So. When I said that I was spending all that time with Warren to practice for the class, I might have been exaggerating. That happened later, but it was Warren’s idea.” Vic came closer and took a seat on the floor next to her and Taylor stared at her quietly filled with confusion and wonder.

“I... After everything with your dad, I sort of started looking for a flute like this. I knew you’d lost yours, but... I figured you might have maybe wanted another one that was the same model, some small memento. It was a good idea, I thought, and I started looking.” Vic nervously bit her lip staring at her quietly.

“I went through your photo albums found one of her with this, and I went to a music store. But uh, there was an issue, it turns out there was only like four hundred of this particular model of flutes made though.” Vic ran a hand through her hair and sighed.

“I’d just heard that from the owner, and I was pretty down when Warren came in. He was getting new strings for his bass, and he saw me and asked what was up. Eventually, Warren dragged the story out of me, and we got to talking about it. He offered to help. So we started canvassing the city, seeing if anyone had one or knew where we could get one.” Victoria spoke softly and leaned against the bed, staring at her.
“We ended up hanging out a lot while it was going on, and he found out about my guitar, and we got to talking, and he convinced me to try out for the class. We didn’t think we’d ever find anyone with one of these, but then this guy calls us. Says that his dad owns a pawn shop, and he might have the flute we need. So, Warren and I go over, and he asks us why we need this particular flute model.” Victoria glanced at her and Taylor shifted closer, studying her face.

“I told him that my girlfriend’s birthday was coming up and she’d just lost her dad, and her mom once had a flute like that that’d been stolen, and I wanted to give her something to remember them both by.” Victoria takes a deep breath and snorts.

“And gets this big smile on his face, and then takes us into the back. Shows us this and opens it up, showing me that image and asks if that’s you. I say yes, and he hands me the case and says that two years ago a gangster came in, and tried to pawn it. The man asked him where he got it, and the gangster said that he was walking down the street and some crazy bitch hurled it over a fence and into traffic. He found it scuffed up in the street and grabbed it, and decided to make some money.” Victoria rolled her eyes quietly and fiddled with her shirt.

“So the owner gives the guy thirty bucks, takes the flute, assuming it’s stolen and puts it away till the cops come looking. They never do, and it just sits in his shop collecting dust. I tried to pay him back the money, but he just kept insisting that I wish you a happy birthday.” Taylor stared at Vic quietly watching as the girl continued to fidget. She sat there on her knees as her heart beat out a wild rhythm in her chest. Taylor tried to open her mouth, to say anything at all, as her girlfriend started to fret in place.

“I know it’s not really a gift, or anything, just recovering what was yours, but-” Vicky’s voice was low and nervous and Taylor, tired of not being able to articulate how she felt reached out with the Force, grasping that connection and spreading it open. She watched as Victoria paused her speech and perked up quietly, her eyes softening as she stared back. Their eyes remained connected as Taylor watched Vic nervously wet her lips, the other girl clearly trying and failing to find the right words. Or, at that point, any words at all. Looming there on her knees listening to the muted sounds of the party below, Taylor shifted back, gently setting the flute back in its case, and carefully latching the case shut. She turned and looked into Victoria’s eyes, waiting till she saw the other girl take sudden inhale before launching herself toward the other girl.

Taylor landed atop Victoria when the older girl crashed down onto her back. She felt the welling of feelings broadcasting up their link from Victoria, and part of her revelled in the nervous whimper that drifted from Vic's lips. That didn't stop her from silencing the sound as she leaned down and captured Vic's lips. She couldn't articulate her feelings just now, but this was something that she could do. The Maelstrom of complicated and confusing emotions within her surged upwards and swirled around Victoria's until they were lost to anything but each other and the ongoing kiss.

Taylor nervously adjusted her top, making sure that it rested properly on her as she loomed over her girlfriend's shell-shocked form. One hand drifted from Vic’s shoulder, moving up and slowly dragging its fingers over her lips. The kiss had been intense, and they’d been consumed by each other until Victoria’s phone had released a half dozen sharp warnings. Victoria had eventually pulled back, and they’d remained in place, panting softly. Even now, Taylor loomed above Vic, watching
as the girl stared up at her with wide fascinated eyes and she couldn't resist leaning in and kissing the corner of the girl's mouth.

Drawing up, Taylor studied her girlfriend, taking in her current predicament. Victoria was on her back, her jacket and sweater both cast aside and she silently lay there in that dress, her form somewhat shaky as remained stained dark with a rather brilliant blush. Taylor’s own sweater had fallen from her shoulders, and she was perched on her knees that rested on either side of Vic’s hips. Taylor stared down at the other girl, trying to catch her breath, to slow the beating of her heart as the older girl managed to wiggle around and snatch her coat, fishing out the phone. She checked it quietly before groaning.

“Amy’s coming. We should head back down.” Her voice was soft, and Taylor felt a flicker of disappointment, but she’d moved up and back, grasping Victoria’s arm and dragging her to her feet. She gestured for Victoria to go first and she quickly moved and changed into something a bit more practical, swapping out the shorts she’d been wearing for a pair of pants and throwing on the letter coat she’d gotten, slipping out in the hall to join Vic.

Together they moved to descend the stairs, though the sound of soft voices caused them both to freeze in place and Taylor strained quietly to hear Lily’s sotto voice speaking.

“Wait, Amy. Uh. Despite what your aunt said, I doubt that they’re uh. Up to anything. I heard from Warren what they got Taylor, and I think they might need a few more minutes.” Lily’s voice was gentle, and Taylor stood there, feeling a flash of warmth in her chest as the young girl spoke. Amy let out a huff, but a sound of agreement came. An awkward silence developed, and Taylor briefly considered sneaking back up the stairs with Vic when Lily’s voice came up the stairs once more.

“So. Uh. Amy. About that prom that your sister mentioned.” Her voice was soft, and Taylor winced at the low growl that drifted up toward them.

“Look, Lily. Victoria shouldn’t have said anything; you don’t have to... “ Amy trailed off, and Taylor leaned closer, straining her ears quietly.

“I know,” Lily’s voice was soft, and she shifted in place quietly. “But uh. I mean. If you had a chance, would you want to go? Most girls want to go to prom, right?” Taylor glanced at Vic, taking in the amused twinkle in her eye. She rolled hers as Amy spoke.

“I-I guess. But, like I said Lily, you don’t have to-” Amy cut off again as Lily spoke oddly nonchalantly.

“I know, Amy. But uh. I mean. What if I want to?” Her voice was soft, and Taylor held her breath as the four stood in another long awkward silence. It took nearly four minutes for Amy to speak in response, and the comment was a bit terse.

“I’m gonna kill my sister.” The words reached Vic, who had to cover her mouth to avoid chuckling, but then Amy cleared her throat and spoke slowly.

“D-Do you want me to pick you up, or do you wanna pick me up here? Or I guess we could meet-” Amy’s voice trailed off, and Taylor heard as Lily moved with a rustle of cloth.

“I’ll come here and get you. I did ask, after all.” The amusement in the tone was plain to hear, and Taylor shifted, pushing a reluctant Vic back up the stairs. She padded toward her room, opened the door and closed it loudly before walking back to the stairs. When she and Vic reached the bottom,
she found Lily and Amy standing on opposite sides of the hallway, not looking at each other and blushing faintly.

Since she was feeling so amused, she dragged Vic off without letting the girl comment, and she made her way toward where the rest of the guests were.

Chapter End Notes

[[I had intended it quote a poem in part 4, but uh, most of my poetry books are from 2014 onwards, so that’s a paaaain.

Huzzah, done. Only, 13k words. Jeeze. Taylor has her mom’s flute back. Those instrument cases, if they’re well made are pretty hard to break. One of my friends dropped a tuba down three flights of stairs, and it barely got scuffed. Also, we get to see some of the differences between this Taylor and canon Taylor. Sophia tried to destroy the flute, but some guy saved it, and that’s interesting.

Taylor doesn’t mention it, but the reason she sits there to talk to her mom is that her dad had her ashes scattered over the planter there with the rose bushes so she’d always be part of the house. Beyond that, there’s not much to overtly unpack here, beyond that there’s gonna be a prom thing happening soon.

Next Chapter is gonna have Taylor and Carol finally sit down and talk, cause Taylor kinda desperately wants to thank Carol for scrubbing the rumours from the internet like that. We’ll also be touching base with Lily, so that should be fun. Uhm, other than that, uh.

Looking forward to your feedback.]]
Chapter Summary

[[Just got another week of this crazy schedule to deal with and then I should have a bit more free time on my freaking hands. Now then, onto the chapter. We start with Taylor waiting to speak with Carol, and I won’t keep you guys too long with notes, so let’s just get into it.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 13th, 2011

Huronia Mall, Brockton Bay

Taylor listened quietly to the background chatter of the people around the food court as she stared down at the tall glass of iced sweet tea. Truthfully, she wasn’t as much of a fan of the drink as Victoria was, but when she’d been at the counter, she’d come up blank and had simply ordered the first thing that popped into her head. She considered the beverage with a small smile on her face, glancing down at her lap.

She studied the coat that she had draped over her legs, her fingers reaching out and tracing the bolded letters that spelled out her girlfriend’s last name, letting her mind drift in Victoria’s direction. Truthfully, she hadn’t intended on wearing it out today, she enjoyed the way it looked and the meaning behind it, but she suspected that if Carol had arrived and seen her sporting it, the woman might have just stormed out, hence why it was currently hidden under the table.

It’d actually been Victoria’s insistence that led to her bringing the jacket along, and Taylor hadn’t had the heart to argue with the girl after the confusing past few days that Victoria had evidently been suffering through.

Things had been… interesting since her birthday. Their schedules had primarily remained the same; they still awoke in the mornings and ran, and spent their free time together talking, working on homework or watching movies. Even their training had remained unchanged, focusing more on the physical aspects of their training, Taylor keeping the bond exploration on the backburner for the moment though Victoria’s fascinated observation of her meditations with the crystal forge had been amusing.

Truthfully, on the surface, nothing had overtly changed between her and Victoria, but there were several times that Taylor had glanced up from what she’d been doing to see her girlfriend staring at her with an odd mixture of apprehension and anticipation behind her eyes. The look often passed quickly, but every time it set her heart to racing.

It was oddly empowering being able to affect Victoria like that, and she’d found that her ability to make the other girl blush with casual flirting had almost tripled. Casual comments and playful teasing had quite suddenly started to leave the other girl stammering.

Taylor knew that she shouldn’t be enjoying it as much as she did, but another part of her also knew that it was an effective way to distract the other girl from her stressful life, and it made Victoria smile,
even as it made her cringe and hide. And making sure that there were more smiles on the other girl’s face wasn’t something that Taylor could honestly argue against.

The sound of high heels clicking on the cheap tile was her first sign that Carol was coming and Taylor glanced up from her spot at the table, watching Carol’s approach across the food court. She studied the tense hold to the woman’s body and found herself envious at the air of severity that hung around her despite the uncertain expression on her face.

When the woman came to a stop a short distance from her table and stared at her warily, Taylor lofted an eyebrow. It took her a few moments to realize what was going on, and she gestured for Carol to take a seat watching the minute flicker of relief over the woman’s face. The lawyer casually stepped forward, slipping down and into the chair opposite her, carefully smoothing down her outfit and then sitting there.

Taylor took a sip of the sweet beverage and studied the older woman carefully. At this distance, it was easy to see small glimmers of her girlfriend underneath the numerous layers of self-defence that hung from Carol. That same hesitancy showed through when Carol seemed reluctant to meet her eyes, and she nervously fidgeted with the salt shaker on the table instead of speaking. Taylor watched for a few moments before moving to rest her elbows on the table and speaking softly.

“Thanks.” She watched as the woman jerked back and stared at her in confusion, and she waved a hand.

“About the internet cleaning. Thanks. That’s… That stuff has haunted me for a long time, and I truly never thought that I’d be rid of it. That’s uh- That’s sort of become a theme for my last birthday involving you Dallons.” Taylor chuckled faintly and studied Carol’s curious expression. Taylor knew that she could speak again, push the conversation the way that she wanted, but she remained silent, waiting to see what Carol would say to that.

“I- You’re welcome, Taylor.” The woman studied her quietly, clearly considering the rest of her statement, but she didn’t pry, shaking her head and taking a soft breath.

“And, I’d like to thank you for taking the time to sit down and talk with me.” The older woman carefully crossed her arms on the table, assuming a stance very similar to what Taylor was doing. Mirroring, Taylor remembered from her studies, but she didn’t comment, merely studying Carol and waiting patiently.

“Does Victoria know that you’re here?” The question was laced with curiosity and Taylor nodded smoothly, watching Carol’s eyebrows raising in surprise.

“Vic’s… She’s got issues with secrets, which isn’t much of a surprise considering, well, everything. I generally do my best to avoid keeping any from her.” Taylor quietly ran a hand through her hair. She considered the drink before her for a few moments, taking up the straw once more and swirling it around the dark liquid as she continued to speak.

“I showed her your gift, and we got to talking. She’s uh. You earned some brownie points there, and when I said that I wanted to meet you and hear what you had to say, she agreed. Reluctantly. She wanted to be here, but I sort of had to put my foot down there.” Taylor glanced up at Carol, studying her expression carefully. She saw the confusion growing more profound.

“Why wouldn’t you want her here for this?” Carol’s voice was soft, and Taylor released the straw, moving to gesture with her hand.

“Several reasons, firstly, there’s a conversation that we’ve needed to have for almost two weeks that
wouldn’t go well with my girlfriend sitting next to me. And there’s also the fact that despite being impressed by your gift, Victoria is still furious with you, and I’d rather this meeting be about our issues with each other without throwing the spitting hell-cat that is your daughter into the middle of it.” Taylor’s voice leaked amused affection, and she watched as Carol’s lips barely resisted the urge to quirk into a tiny smile. Eventually, the older woman offered her an accepting nod before leaning closer.

“I suppose that I should apologize for what I said at the hospital,” Carol spoke carefully, perking up a blonde brow and Taylor let an amused chuckle, shaking her head before responding.

“Victoria wasn’t exaggerating when she told you that I’d already forgiven you for that.” Taylor’s response was soft, and she blew out a soft breath, taking in Carol’s incredulous expression for a few moments.

“I-” Taylor paused and frowned, taking a quick breath and pressing on stubbornly. “It’s not like I don’t understand your concerns, Carol. It’s not as if the fact that everyone that I’ve ever loved is dead has escaped my notice.” She peered over at Carol, watching as she flinched back a bit, her head tilting when the older cape swallowed nervously.

“That’s not-” Carol stuttered to a halt when their eyes met, and Taylor watched the older cape’s mouth press into a thin line as she probably considered what she’d been about to say. There was a moment of silence before more words spilled free from Carol.

“It’s not like that. I’m-” Carol tried again, and she looked flustered as she lowered her head quietly. Taylor studied the pained look on her face and frowned until the woman quickly soldiered on.

“I never meant to imply that it was your fault, Taylor. I just-” The woman stared at her for a few moments before letting her shoulders slumping as she spoke softly.

“She’s my daughter, Taylor. I can’t… I can’t imagine her suffering, and now… Now, if she doesn’t get killed, then she’ll probably have to suffer through losing someone that she loves. I didn’t want her to have to go through that.” The older woman spoke with such a desolate tone of voice, and Taylor quietly fiddled with her glass.

“I didn’t either.” The words were slow, and Taylor watched as Carol glanced at her with open confusion on her face. She frowned quietly and idly traced one of the long scuffs on the tabletop as she continued to speak.

“You think that I didn’t try to stop her? I told her to go. I told her that I wasn’t worth her time, that I was cursed. She refused to leave.” Taylor sighed softly and leaned back.

“I spent an entire night listing off the litany of people that have fallen or died around me, and I told her every one of my deepest regrets and in the end, she just… she held me in her arms and acted shocked and confused when I admitted that I was attracted to her.” She glanced up at Carol and let out a sad sigh.

“She looked at me with this profound fear and sadness in her eyes, and I could see that she was the one that didn’t think she was good enough, that without her aura, and without…” She frowned and glanced at her hands on the table.

“She acted like she was the one that wasn’t good enough, and I just couldn’t let her believe that.” She shrugged up her shoulders quietly, glancing up to see the conflicted expression on Carol’s face. She sat there under Carol’s piercing gaze for a few moments, doing her best to keep her back straight before the woman let out a long tired sigh.
“Neither of you are ‘not good enough’ for the other, Taylor. You’re both amazing girls.” Carol’s voice was soft, and Taylor felt her cheeks darkening as she glanced off to the side. The older woman’s gaze burned into the side of her face but Taylor kept her gaze on the nearby kids chattering by the counter of a nearby Cinnabon.

“Taylor,” The words drew her gaze, and she turned to stare at Carol curiously.

“My reservations were never about you as a person. I’d have never have suggested inviting you onto the team to Sarah if I’d thought that you were a bad person. Despite my reservations, you’ve been nothing but kind and caring to my entire family, and you do deserve happiness.” The words were soft, and Taylor felt her cheeks darkening as she glanced at the table.

“Which is nothing to say about the positive influence that you’ve been on Victoria. She’s been dealing with a lot lately, and she hasn’t had any accidents, and I think-” Taylor stared at Carol as she spoke, and she quietly cut the other woman off.

“Wait, it’s not just me, you know?” Staring at Carol, Taylor shifted in place, straightening her back and firming up her expression.

“I just let her know that it’s okay to be herself, and that self is pretty wonderful. She’s been desperately trying to be a hero for so long that she’d sort of lost herself in it. Everyone expected such great things from her, and I think you all forgot that underneath all of that she’s just a teenage girl.” Taylor studied Carol for a moment, watching her reaction as she spoke.

“She’s the one that saw the mess her life had become, and she decided to change it, I didn’t push her into that, and attributing it to me sort of cheapens all the growth she’s had since.” Taylor let her chin drop down to rest on her arms.

“She wants to be a teacher, you know?” She spoke slowly and glanced at Carol, taking in the blatant shock before shrugging her shoulders.

“We went on our first date on Saturday, while she was distracting me so your other daughter could throw me a surprise party.” Taylor smiled at the memories that came with the words, sitting up a bit straighter as she continued to speak softly.

“We got to talking, playing at being on a first date and asking questions, and she told me about it. She got into that music course; I heard that Mark was there, did he tell you?” Taylor flicked her eyes toward Carol, who nodded in answer to her question.

“She did great, and she made it in, but she’s never done music in school, so she’s pretty far behind. She has to work pretty hard to catch back up, and she hates that struggle, but she loves it, yeah?” Taylor stared at Carol, sitting back up with a sigh, searching for the right words before continuing carefully.

“She confides in me about the difficulty, and how she feels like she’s the slow kid in class, and I ask her what she would do with the class if she pursued it. Vic tells me that if she could, she’d love to teach music.” Taylor frowned quietly as she spoke, her hand closing into a fist as she stared solemnly at them, finally looking up and meeting Carol's gaze before continuing slowly.

“I told her she’d be a great teacher, and she looked so wistful. She didn’t argue, but I could tell from the way she sat there staring at her hands that she saw it as more of a pipe dream, something that she
could imagine or fantasize about, but not an option, really.” Taylor muttered quietly, feeling her fists tightening a bit. “It’s stuff like that. People have told her that she was Alexandria Lite so much that she doesn’t really think that she can be anything else. No one else seems to think that she can be anything else either. Everyone stares at her in confusion when she acts normal, and it’s not fair.” Taylor paused, frowning and doing her best to make her hands unclench as she waited for Carol’s response.

“How is she?” Carol’s voice finally cut over her and Taylor perked up and sighed quietly. She was tempted to hedge, maybe mention the awkward to disarm Carol a bit, but the naked concern in her girlfriend’s mother’s eyes saw her speaking slowly, explaining.

“Stressed.” She glanced at Carol and lifted a shoulder in response to the growing intensity in the woman’s eyes. “She doesn’t talk about it, but between Dean, Emma, and the rest of the school, I get the feeling that her time at high school isn’t going splendidly. She seems to be of the idea that if she can just hunker down and outlast the two weeks that it won’t matter anymore.” Taylor watched Carol’s jaw clenching, and she felt an odd sort of camaraderie with the older woman. She studied her for a moment, letting out a bitter sigh and continuing to mutter.

“That boy has a suicide wish.” The snort and wry look that her comment garnered from Carol saw Taylor glancing up, and speaking to clarify.

“Considering the amount of crap he apparently used to give her over her control, he’s been pushing his luck exceptionally hard with a girl that can benchpress a dumpster. According to Amy, he’s taken to staring forlornly in Victoria’s direction since she started flat out pretending that he didn’t exist.” Taylor frowned at her hands, feeling them clenching once more at the subtle anger she felt. She stared at the table under them and felt her mind drifting away. Taylor briefly imagined taking her sabre-pike and going after him. Even half-finished it was a dangerous weapon, and she could-

“Somehow I think she’d be even less impressed with you over whatever you’re thinking then if you were keeping secrets.” Taylor blinked and frowned, nervously glancing up toward Carol. She saw the compassionate look in the woman’s eyes and let out a long sigh quietly.

“I just- I hate the idea that he’s…” Taylor frowned as she stared at her hands. There was nothing she could do about this; it was part of Victoria’s life that didn’t involve her. She had to trust Victoria to do what she needed to do and make sure that the pieces she was there for were warm enough to make up for the rest. She frowned as she wondered what sort of crap he might pull…

“I-” She glanced at Carol. “I uh, I have an idea about perhaps… getting more brownie points?” She spoke softly, studying Carol. The woman tilted her head and perked up a bit at the idea. Seeing that she had her attention, Taylor continued.

“So, Vic’s school pushed back their prom until Sunday evening. The Nineteenth.” Taylor studied the woman as she blinked curiously.

“Well, Vic asked me. And I’m fairly certain that there’s going to be a number of parahumans there. Including Dean.” She saw Carol’s eyes narrowing, and she leaned forward.

“I’m a bit worried that he might try something. Considering the situation, I think that If you and Flashbang were to call and maybe offer to chaperone, that the principal might accept it.” Taylor nervously fidgeted with her drink.

“I doubt that she’d miss your presence, but if you were suitably subtle and did your best to keep anyone from bothering her, she might uh.” Taylor shrugged quietly and shifted back. “It’s an idea, right?” She stared at Carol, watching as the woman’s expression became thoughtful, the lack of
confusion or distaste making her relax quietly as it became clear that Carol was at least entertaining the idea. Her examination was cut short when her phone released a sudden trill drawing her gaze down to where it sat on the table.

Fishing it out carefully, Taylor flipped it over, checking the time and dismissing the alarm that was going off.

“Late for something?” The words drew her gaze back to Carol, and she smiled sheepishly.

“Not yet, but I do have to go soon. Crystal’s decided to take Lily and me out shopping since we’re escorting her cousins-” Taylor froze and flushed as she nervously glanced over, taking in the suddenly much more interesting expression on Carol’s face. She sighed.

“They’re just going as friends, I think.” She commented faintly and blinked at Carol’s amused snort.

“Is that your way of politely suggesting that I not stick my nose into this unless I want to get something slammed on it again?” Taylor flushed at the wry tone, but she shrugged her shoulders. She moved to pull out of the chair. She glanced at Carol as she held her coat in her arms.

“I wouldn’t have worded it like that, but uh. Maybe just let Amy come to you once she’s ready? I doubt that there’s anything going on there.” She saw Carol’s eyes on the coat, and she carefully flicked it out, letting the woman take in the design. The amused smile on the woman’s face was oddly reassuring.

“I won’t hold you any longer, Taylor, but uh. Thanks for talking with me.” Taylor nodded and slipped around the table. She’d been on her way past Carol when the woman’s voice reached her.

“Can you tell her something for me?” The words were soft, and Taylor froze, looking back toward the older woman. She studied Carol carefully, taking in the oddly earnest expression on the woman’s face, waiting to see what she’d say.

“Just- Just tell her that I think she’d make a pretty good teacher too.” Taylor stared at Carol for a few moments before offering her a quick nod, smiling as she tucked her hands into her jacket and headed across the mall. She briefly wondered if Vic would be mad about her revealing that dream, but she shrugged and hunched down into her bright coat. She could take it if it meant that things got even a bit better between those two.

---

Taylor checked her phone, studying the name of the store that she’d been told to meet Crystal and Lily at. She paced down the wide corridors of the mall, tucking her hands into her large jacket and nervously pulling it a bit tighter around herself as she ignored the various curious looks coming her way. In all honesty, the golden colour was a bit more ostentatious then she was used to.

Spotting Lily distracted her from her thoughts, and she nervously paced across the squeaky tile and came to a stop before the other girl. Phone in hand, Lily was leaning against a bit of empty wall near the shop they’d been told to meet Crystal by. The older girl was dressed in a simple outfit, jeans and a comfortable looking sweater with a loose spring coat over it. The girl seemed to be entranced by the phone, so when Taylor came to a stop before the girl, she quickly let out a polite cough, flashing Lily a smile when she glanced up.

The oddly pensive look from the older girl startled her a bit, and she sidled up, moving to lean
against the wall next to her. Lily studied her for a moment before glancing back down at her phone. Taylor followed her gaze watching as Lily finished typing in something and shot off a text message before sliding the phone smoothly out of view. Taylor considered the shorter girl for a few moments before slipping her hands into her pockets, speaking curiously.

“Hey, Lily. Guess Crystal’s a bit behind schedule.” She peered over at Lily, waiting for her to nod before glancing over at the shop they’d been standing near. She considered the mannequins in the window for a few moments, let out a slow breath at the awkward tension that lingered between them. She hadn’t really spoken privately with Lily up to this point, and she ended up blurring out the first thing that came to her mind in an effort to break the silence.

“So, uh. I might have told Amy’s mom that you’re taking her to prom.” She froze and winced, listening to the sharp inhale to her left. She peeked over nervously staring at the suddenly pale features on Lily’s face and biting her lip.

“So, uh. I might have told Amy’s mom that you’re taking her to prom.” She froze and winced, listening to the sharp inhale to her left. She peeked over nervously staring at the suddenly pale features on Lily’s face and biting her lip.

“Sorry. I was uh. Well, I was talking to her, and I ran out of time, cause I was supposed to be here, and it just sorta spilled out as I was explaining why I had to go.” She huffed quietly as Lily stared over at her, merely blinking several times before snorting.

“It’s fine, Taylor. We’re just going as friends. But uh. I’d suggest letting Amy know.” Taylor stared at her before sighing and digging out her phone. She called up her phone app, casually clicking on Amy’s face and typing out a quick message to the effect of ‘My verbal diarrhea might have caused me to mention that you’ve got a date for prom. Also, I might have suggested your mom supervise.’ Taylor huffed as she sent the message off, glancing at Lily.

“So, interesting shop for us to meet at-” Taylor blinked as her phone dinged three times in short succession. She glanced down at it, seeing Amy’s notification on the screen, and she sighed. Taylor glanced apologetically at Lily, frowning at the odd look in her eye before flicking the phone open and reading the increasingly irritated messages coming from Amy. She sighed and typed out an apology and a promise to explain later, before shoving the phone away and turning back to Lily.

“So. The shop. Was this your idea? Cause it seems a lot more like something that Crystal might do.” She pointed with her thumb at the Tuxedo rental shop and tilted her head in Lily’s direction. She watched the girl’s pale features turning toward the shop and chuckled at the look of distaste.

“Crystal seemed to find it amusing when she told me to meet you guys here. I think she finds the idea of us playing the gentleman to be rather hilarious. But, you’re right, I probably wouldn’t have picked it for myself, no.” Lily’s voice was droll, and Taylor considered her for a few moments before, leaning over and nudging the girl to garner her attention. She shot her a look that plainly asked why and blinked at the response.

“I’m not built like you.” Lily gestured to her own smaller, and softer build and then Taylor peered down, taking in her much more tall and lanky build. She hummed as she glanced back at Lily, listening to the girl’s ongoing comments.

“I- I’m not like you, Taylor. You’re built to wear stuff like this. It looks elegant, and it hangs off you well. It suits your shape. But I mean. I’ll just look like a girl wearing her dad’s suit.” She frowned at the tiles and sighed. There was something else lingering in her eyes, but Taylor didn’t press the issue, letting the girl keep her worries.

Taylor glanced back to the shop, considering Lily’s comments. She listened as the girl let out a weary sigh. She glanced down at the girl and studied her for a few moments before a smirk graced her lips.
"Hey," She tried, casually waiting until Lily stared back up at her before speaking, allowing her face to curl into a mischievous smirk.

“I’ve got an idea. Should keep you out of the monkey suits, and it’d help me make my girlfriend blush.” She grinned down at Lily who perked up a bit before something ghosted behind her eyes and sighed.

“But, Crystal said that Amy-” Taylor snorted quietly and leaned over giving Lily another nudge that saw the girl growling and nudging her back. Taylor grinned at the motion and mimed being knocked farther. She recovered, exaggeratedly staggering to her feet, winking at Lily.

“I think if Amy wanted a gentleman to escort her to the dance, she’d have let one of them ask her. I doubt that she’d be that grumpy no matter what you wear. Might as well lead with your best foot, right?” She studied Lily, frowning when the girl’s expression remained a touch dimmed but she seemed to nod in agreement.

“So,” Taylor moved back over and settled against the wall, studying the other girl and speaking softly. “I don’t think you’ve actually told me what your major is, Lily.” She smirked when Lily shot her a curious glance before shoving her hands into her coat.

“I’m doing the summer program for HHS. Health and Human Sciences. In the fall, I’ll probably declare Social Work as my major.” Taylor studied the older girl and let her gaze drift back over the corridor, watching the teenagers wandering back and forth.

“We’re all going into the Humanities; I shudder to think of what Amy will do being the only member of our group with a background in hard science.” She glanced over when Lily chuckled.

“Despite Sabah’s current major, she was once an engineer, and Amy’s still not sure if she’s gonna do pre-med just yet. It’s a bit of an ordeal, and she’s been flopping for a while. You’re taking a Humanities major as well though?” The girl glanced at her and tilted her head, and Taylor grinned as she glanced around for Crystal, seeing the familiar blonde head pushing through the crowd.

“Psychology, probably. And if Victoria can get enough help from Warren, she’s considering doing a dual major in Music Composition and Education.” She peered over at Lily, taking in her surprised expression before shrugging. The sound of feet slapping rapidly in their approach caused her to wink in Lily’s direction.

“Showtime.” She muttered as Crystal descended on them like a whirling dervish. The words screeched to a halt when Crystal got a good look at her, and Taylor felt her cheeks darkening when the girl walked over and lazily tugged the jacket out and peered at it.

“You look like a Hufflepuff.” The comment was casual, and Taylor snorted as she inspected the gold and white jacket with its black lettering. Glancing back up in Crystal’s direction, Taylor let out a casual shrug.

“Showtime.” She muttered as Crystal descended on them like a whirling dervish. The words screeched to a halt when Crystal got a good look at her, and Taylor felt her cheeks darkening when the girl walked over and lazily tugged the jacket out and peered at it.

“You look like a Hufflepuff.” The comment was casual, and Taylor snorted as she inspected the gold and white jacket with its black lettering. Glancing back up in Crystal’s direction, Taylor let out a casual shrug.

“And you’re late.” She smirked when Crystal rolled her eyes and mentioned a series of red lights that were out to get her. Once she’d calmed down, she moved on, quickly greeting a much less enthusiastic Lily. When the girl settled between them and grasped both of their arms, Taylor followed her toward the shop. She glanced over Crystal’s shoulder at Lily and smirked at the girl before quickly setting her feet and bringing Crystal up short when Lily did the same.

The blonde rounded on them and crossed her arms and Taylor assumed an equally stubborn dance.

“Lily and I are staging a mutiny. Feel free to tag along.” She playfully stuck out her tongue, casually
offering Lily her arm and grinning when the older girl took it. She turned, waving for Crystal to come along and making her way back through the mall toward a shop she’d passed on her way to meet Lily.

When they came to a stop before it, Taylor grinned quietly at the dresses on display in the windows. They weren’t exactly what one would call prom dresses, but they were undoubtedly fancy enough. She glanced over at Lily, seeing the grin on her face growing a bit and she nodded to herself.

“Mmmm, Fancy.” The words were playful, almost sarcastic, and Taylor rolled her eyes, moving to tug Lily along and into the shop. Taylor came to a stop near the front, staring around at the many dresses on display. She got a bit lost in the swirl of colour on display and didn’t notice Lily slipping away and vanishing into the aisles.

“With your colouring black, or dark purple, would probably be your best bet.” Taylor started and jumped, glancing over her shoulder and studying the saleswoman curiously. The woman smiled and gestured to a few dresses in the colours she had indicated. “Cocktail dress, I should think?” She spoke softly, and Taylor nodded, and the woman gestured with her head toward a nearby aisle and Taylor followed.

“Considering your build, I imagine that something with a full or mostly-full front and a plunging back would suit you.” Taylor followed the woman until she came to a simple black dress with a fascinating design. The dress tied behind the neck and was rather conservative in the front, and it’d fall past even her knees, but the design would leave her shoulders, arms and the lion’s share of her back on display.

Taylor stood there, considering it for a few moments, her cheeks darkening as she imagined Victoria’s reaction to this, especially considering how Vic had reacted to the shorts she had worn on the date, and she nodded quietly to herself. She spent a few moments speaking with the saleswoman, giving over her measurements and watching her vanish into the back to see what they had.

Rather than waiting around for her return, Taylor opted to wander off toward Lily. She came across the girl leaning against the edge of an aisle and staring up at a display that had been hidden toward the back. Taylor sidled up to the girl and stared up at the dress that had captured her attention.

“It’s not really a Kimono.” The words came from Lily and Taylor glanced from the dress to the girl and back. It was dark purple at the bottom of the skirt, the design like flowers pressed together, and going up, just above the knees; the flowers seemed to stop, and the dress became a softer purple, that changed around the shoulders into a pastel violet that went down the sleeves. A broad belt was wrapped around the middle.

“The fabrics are all wrong, too light, and I think, despite the appearance, it’s probably just one piece with the belt added on,” Lily spoke reluctantly, and Taylor glanced at her. Seeing the wistful look on her face, Taylor spoke curiously.

“I imagine it’d probably be easier to dance in though.” The words dragged a soft smile from Lily, and she offered a nod.

“Why don’t you get it?” She nodded in the direction and paused at Amy’s frown.

“It’s a bit expensive, and there’s nothing too close to my size.” The girl’s words were soft, and Taylor shook her head.

“But it’s what you’d want right? Why not grab it. Sabah could probably hem it in for you. Or I could, I guess. I used to do a lot of clothing repair around the house.” Taylor neglected to mention
that she’d only learned in order to keep her father from finding out that her outfits were continually being destroyed by Sophia and Madison, merely flashing the other girl a grin.

Lily flickered her gaze between Taylor and the dress for a few moments before letting out a sigh and slipping over. Taylor grinned as the girl started to pick through the dresses on display beneath the mannequin, looking for the closest design.

“Ow!” Lily jumped as the thin pin stabbed into her side and nearly toppled off the small box she was standing on. She glanced down at Taylor from where the other girl stood below her, a half dozen pins poking out of her mouth. Taylor wasn’t able to speak, but the exasperated look in her eyes clearly said; ‘If you’d just stand still then you wouldn’t keep getting stabbed.’

Lily huffed and then shifted back into place, standing as still as possible as Taylor continued to gently move along the sides of the dress, carefully pinching the garment, waiting for her to nod that it wasn’t pulling or pinching before pinning it and moving along. She seemed oddly apt at this sort of thing, and most of the issues came from Lily getting distracted and shifting idly.

The sound of her phone dinging across the room caused her to shift again, and she got another sharp jab for the effort. She sheepishly glanced down at Taylor, who narrowed her eyes at her. The girl quickly adjusted the pin before walking over and grabbing her phone. Lily accepted the phone and wiped open the screen checking the message.

{Crystal said that you guys ended up back at your dorm, Vic’s bringing us that way since she wants to chat with her girlfriend. We’ll be like 15ish minutes?} Lily inspected the message for a few moments before blinking and glancing down at Taylor.

“Uh. Your girlfriend is coming this way.” She held the phone out to Taylor. The girl’s eyes widened, and she shifted closer. Lily blinked when Taylor moved suddenly, quickly and precisely finishing pinning the dress before gesturing Lily down.

“I’ll step out and make sure that Amy doesn't walk in on you in your dress. I’d suggest changing if you still want in on the surprise plan.” Lily blinked before realizing what Taylor meant. They’d decided as they were paying for their purchases that they’d keep the dresses a secret, and had managed to convince Amy and Victoria’s cousin that it’d be a great prank to keep the older girl from spilling the beans.

Lily watched as Taylor slipped over and out into the hall, shutting the door behind her and she hopped down. She paused near her closet, staring at her reflection in the mirror. Lily reached up with one hand, pulling her hair back up into a bun and spinning left and right, inspecting the dress now that Taylor had pinned it down to her actual size. She flushed at the image, huffing quietly at her own silliness before quickly pulling open the closet door.

Taylor had hidden her own dress amongst the clothing hanging in there, and Lily quickly unzipped the dress, smoothly slipping out of the kimono-style gown. Reaching out and hanging the dress in the closet, Lily moved to attach it to a coat hanger before shutting the door. She skipped over to the dresser, grabbing a few things to wear, opting for comfort over fashion.

The sound of muted conversation right outside her door saw her quickly shutting the closet and then yanking on the shorts and tank-top that she’d grabbed, barely making it to the door when a knock
sounded.

She slipped over and opened the door curiously, watching as Taylor, Victoria, and Amy stumbled in. She moved back a few steps, dodging the mess of people as they spread out a bit. Victoria and Amy were dressed casually, both of them wearing jeans and long-sleeved shirts, though Victoria’s, which was almost certainly Taylor’s, was left unbuttoned and fluttering, showing off the shirt she’d worn under it.

Both of the girls straightened up and took a moment to glance around. Amy seemed to be looking for something in particular, but Victoria merely studied the room, and it took Lily a moment to realize that besides Amy, no one else had actually been in her room before today. Before she could get lost in her thoughts though, Taylor’s amused smirk drew her eye when the girl started to speak.

“I told you both. They’re not here. It’s going to be a surprise. Lily and I plan on knocking your socks off.” Taylor had casually slid over to her and Lily blinked when Taylor’s arm draped around her shoulders. She shifted nervously as the gazes of the other three settled on her. She took in the faint hue on Victoria’s cheeks and the brief flicker of suspicion there, but her gaze drifted over to Amy.

Part of her was worried to look in that direction, half expecting to see some lingering jealousy or envy on Amy’s face, but instead, she ended up blushing at the lingering gaze that Amy was directing toward her legs. The lingering silence was a bit uncomfortable, especially when she glanced up to see Victoria watching them both with this odd little smirk on her lips.

Eventually, Lily seemed to snap out of it, glancing around and blushing at all the eyes on her. She coughed into her hand, and Vic snapped into activity to change the subject.

“Anyway, that’s not why I’m here.” She set her hands on her hips and glared at Taylor and Lily nervously shuffled out from under Taylor’s arm, ignoring the girl’s playful look of betrayal as she shuffled over to stand by Lily, well out of the line of fire.

“What’s this I hear about my mother attending the prom?” She spoke softly, and Lily watched as Taylor flinched back a bit and sighed. Lily watched as the younger girl shifted from foot to foot for a few moments marshalling her thoughts before lifting her chin and meeting Victoria’s eyes.

“You don’t talk about it, but I know that Dean and Emma have been bugging you. This is important, and I told her that it might be a good first step toward earning your trust back if she came along and made sure that he didn’t do anything stupid.” Taylor frowned a bit, stepping forward. Lily glanced over, watching as Victoria visibly swallowed and shifted a bit further back.

“I’ll call her and tell her not to come if it bothers you, Vic, but I’d rather spend my night keeping you company. As opposed to, you know, having to beat the ever-loving crap out of your ex-boyfriend for saying something stupid and then spending the rest of the night getting grilled by the PRT.” Taylor’s voice was low and soothing, and Lily glanced over at Amy, blinking at her amused expression.

“Fine, just...” Lily glanced over, studying the myriad of emotions flickering over Victoria’s face. “Don’t do stuff like this without telling me, please.” Victoria’s voice was low, and Lily stared with open fascination as Taylor slid closer and gently lifted the blonde girl’s chin.

“I was gonna tell you once we met up, I didn’t expect Amy to rat me out. Though I only told Amy first, because Lily got all embarrassed that I told your mom that she and Amy were going to the prom together.” The shock on Victoria’s face made Taylor grin, and she peered over at Amy with a raised eyebrow.

“Didn’t get to that part?” The girl’s words were light and teasing, and Lily peered over, blinking
when Amy’s gaze flicked her way nervously before lifting her chin and meeting Taylor’s gaze head-on.

“It seemed less important.” The girl shrugged up her shoulder when Taylor merely snorted. Victoria watched the group for a moment before shaking her head.

“Taylor’s going to make tacos for dinner. Lily, do you wanna come?” She spoke slowly, and Lily blinked at the nervous swallow that came from Amy’s direction, glancing over at her suddenly pale face. She studied Amy’s worried expression before turning back and offering Victoria a nervous smile.

“Thanks for the offer but I’ve got some homework to deal with. Maybe later this week sometime?” She saw Victoria nodding as Taylor ducked over and grabbed her coat, throwing it on and heading for the door. When they reached it, they glanced back at Amy, and Lily peered over, staring at the younger girl as she affected an almost casual pose.

“I-uh. I think I’ll stay and give Lily a hand. Bio homework, am I right?” She laughed nervously, and Amy blinked curiously at the younger girl who seemed to blush as if realizing what she said and turning toward her.

“If that’s okay.” She added, smiling nervously. Lily stared at Amy and did her best to hold in the sigh. She considered the earnest look on the girl’s face before smiling softly and nodding.

“Yeah, I could use your help.” Lily felt her smile becoming much less forced when the other girl grinned thankfully back at her. Turning toward the door, she watched Taylor shrug casually, and then nervously stepped back at the narrowed gaze of Victoria. The girl wasn’t able to do much beyond stare though as Taylor dragged her out of the dorm.

“Thanks. So, uh. Homework?” Amy’s voice was a bit higher than usual, and Lily glanced over at her, watching as Amy dropped her satchel by the desk and then moved toward the bed.

Lily watched in amusement as Amy performed what had become her typical routine when she visited, perching on the edge of the bed, and then kicking off her shoes before finding a comfy corner to sit against. Shaking her head to clear it of the warm thoughts, she moved over toward the desk, fiddling with her computer.

“Uh, that was a bit of a white lie. I kind of just didn’t want to get dressed up and go out.” She smirked quietly over at Amy, studying the girl’s fascinated expression before coughing and then turning back to the computer, speaking as she navigated through the various menus.

“What about you? What’re you hiding from?” She spoke quietly, her voice dropping a bit as she considered what the likely answer was.

“When Taylor makes Mexican food, she plays for keeps. The last time my tongue was numb for nearly two hours after dinner. I uh, I figured that I could just pester you a bit and grab takeout on the way home.” Lily blinked at the answer, tilting her head to the side and smiling just a bit.

“And, well, I’d kind of rather not watch Vicky and Taylor badgering each other about whatever clothes they got. They can get a bit over-dramatic at times.” The faint wistfulness in Amy’s tone dimmed Lily’s smile, and she sighed a touch, moving to take a seat at the desk. She considered the screen for a few moments, quietly tapping on the desk before pushing her thoughts away and perking up.

“Well, since we’re both free from homework, I suppose we can just skip to the movies and junk
food?” She glanced over at Amy, her body relaxing at the amused expression on the younger girl’s face. The flicker of excitement behind those eyes saw her heartbeat racing a bit, the enthusiasm contagious.

“What’re we gonna watch this time then? I really liked that Nausicaa movie from last time, it gave me a bunch of ideas for my powers. Though uh, the PRT would probably disapprove if I made a full-sized Ohmu.” Lily grinned at the excitement, moving over and dropping down next to Amy on the bed. They’d watched a few more films since the first time that Amy had visited, but the girl seemed to have an abject fascination with the animated ones.

“Probably not a good idea, no. And hrn, well, I guess if you’re set on a Ghibli film we’ve still got.. ‘Howl’s Moving Castle’ to get through, as well as… “ Lily paused, shifting over and scooping her case of discs up off the floor, flopping back down next to Amy and skimming through the large case quietly.

“Uh. Totoro, or uh, Spirited Away.” She shrugged, flipping through the films quietly. When Amy reached out, she paused, staring down at a black disc that Amy was pointing at, staring at the scantily clad woman with a sword on it.

“What’s that?” Lily blinked and glanced over Amy with an amused smirk on her lips that saw the girl blushing.

“It’s '.hack//sign'. Science-fiction anime. It’s about these teenagers that play this virtual game thing, and then one of them gets stuck. It’s… interesting, but it’s not dubbed. We’d have to use the subtitles.” Amy seemed to consider it for a moment before nodding resolutely. Lily glanced at her with amusement, taking in her expression before smiling casually. She could understand the Japanese, so it was no skin off her back.

“Since you’ve got pants on, how about you go get us some take out, and I’ll fix stuff up so that you’ll actually be able to read the subtitles.” Lily moved over to the desk and fished through her coat, pulling out her wallet and fishing out a bill that she offered to Amy.

“Pizza? It’s close.” Lily nodded at Amy and watched the girl go, trusting that she’d get something edible at least before turning back to her computer and figure out how she’d move the tower to the opposite side of the desk to make turning the screen toward the bed simpler.

The music and rapid chatter were beginning to get annoying; Lily thought as she rubbed tiredly at her face, shivering a bit from the chill. She reached out for her pillow, finding it not anywhere near her face, and her blankets had vanished as well. She let out a tired whine and moved to roll toward the edge of the bed, thinking that she’d kicked both off earlier in the night.

When she crashed into something warm, Lily nervously jerked back, sitting up and glancing around blearily, sleepily taking in her surroundings. Her room was dark, lit only by the harsh light of the video still playing on her computer screen, and it left everything either starkly blue-lit or entirely in shadow. Glancing down, Lily took in Amy’s form slumped down on the bed next to her, a bit shocked by the fact that Amy was no longer facing the computer screen and was instead facing her.

Lily took the opportunity presented and studied Amy’s features, smiling softly at the view before her. The glowing lights shifted on the screen, and Lily watched the light dancing over the other girl’s
relaxed features. Amy had probably fallen asleep not much later then she had, and she was curled around the missing pillow. Lily considered the girl for a few moments before the sound of a bang on the screen startled her. She let out a soft grumble, moving to crawl over Amy, reaching for the keyboard.

She stilled as the film did feeling a hand tangling itself in the fabric of her tank-top. She shifted back, glancing down at the half-asleep form of Amy laying there, tightly gripping her shirt in one hand. Frowning she lowered herself back down, watching as Amy’s grip loosened but didn’t release her shirt. She peered at the girl’s furrowed brow and tightly pressed together lips, and her heart melted a touch.

Lily glanced past Amy, staring silently the screen for a moment, trying to do the mental math to figure out how long she’d been asleep. It looked like there were well into the ninth episode, and the last part she’d remembered was episode three. She glanced toward the half-finished Hawaiian pizza where it had been placed once they’d finished eating next to their phones on the cluttered desk. Letting out a soft sigh, Lily flicked her gaze around the dark room, wondering exactly what time it was. She briefly entertained the idea of just crawling over Amy to get out of the bed or even nudging the girl awake, but the peaceful expression on that face stilled her hands for the moment.

Gently lowering herself back down onto the bed, Lily stared at Amy’s face silently for a few moments, taking in the earnest peaceful expression. It was rare to see Amy as vulnerable as this, the constant minor tension about her body had fled, and she seemed oddly at peace. She watched her sleep for a few moments, feeling the hand on her shirt loosening a touch as Amy buried her face into the pillow and took a deep breath, muttering sleepily under her breath.

Ice washed over Lily as the words ghosted toward her, and instead of her own name, Taylor’s was mentioned, though any context was lost to the muffling of the pillow. She studied Amy’s face for a few moments before letting out a tired sigh and reaching out, slowly gripping Amy’s shoulder and giving her a shake. She watched quietly as Amy squeezed the pillow petulantly and snuggled back into it peacefully.

“N-Not yet, Lily. Five more minutes.” She muttered, and Lily stared at her quietly, studying the girl’s face. She sighed gently and chose to let Amy sleep, moving to try and sit up. The hand snatching her top again startled her, and she glanced down at Amy’s stern face, her eyes still clenched up as she hid in the pillow.

“Five more minutes, Lily. Sun’s not even up.” She muttered half asleep, and Lily sat there, heart beating noticeably in her chest. She stared at the younger girl before sighing tiredly and sinking herself back to the bed, feeling a touch more awkward when Amy shuffled closer once more, pressing the pillow into her side and shifting up onto it, Amy’s face resting atop the cold fabric of the pillow pressed into her shoulders.

Lily lay there nervously on her back feeling oddly warm despite the chill over her bare skin, staring down at the small freckled hand that remained resting over her middle. She watched that hand loosen its grip, the fingers splaying over her stomach in the blue light and she flicked her gaze toward the window. She stared at the moon, hanging in the sky outside, and she frowned.

It’s late, very late, Lily thought quietly to herself. She should wake Amy up, get the girl bundled up and home, it was a school day tomorrow and- Lily’s thoughts ground to a halt as Amy shifted closer once more, pressing the pillow into her side and shifting up onto it, Amy’s face resting atop the cold fabric of the pillow pressed into her shoulders.

Warm breath ghosted over her bare shoulders and along her throat, and Lily let out a nervous whimper as she stared at the severe girl curled quietly into her side, the arm still curled around her. Lily closed her eyes and muttered a prayer, but in the end, her resolve crumbled, and she sank back
Lily shifted into a more comfortable pose, doing her best to avoid dislodging Amy. She saw the suspicious narrow eyes of Victoria in her mind, but she banished the image as she studied Amy. She could deal with the fallout in the morning, and as it was, it was already so late that it would almost certainly make no difference if she dropped Amy off now, or at school in the morning.

Laying silently next to Amy for a few moments, Lily took a deep breath, banishing her concerns, and for a moment, allowing herself soak in the girl’s presence. She lowered her head, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes to let Amy’s scent wash over her. A mix of antiseptic soap, laundry detergent and some sort of floral deodorant mixing with the smells of the long consumed pizza and the lemonade that Amy had had with it.

It didn’t seem like the most romantic of bouquets, but it soothed the fear curling in her belly, and Lily let out a long slow breath of exhaustion, shifting a bit closer to Amy and drifting off to sleep. She lay there peacefully, her worried expression smoothing away and her body relaxing despite the chill.

Lily didn’t see Amy’s eyes slowly peeking open, the younger girl staring at Lily’s relaxed face for a few moments before gently lifting the arm that she’d curled around her middle. Amy reached out and grasped the large comforter that she’d been wrapped in, moving to drag it over Lily as well, covering the girl in something warm before settling back into the pillow.

Amy took a few moments to consider the other girl, blushing as she slipped her arm back under the blanket and reached out, curling it over the patterned fabric of Lily’s tank top, resting her fingers against the girl’s opposite side. The young girl nervously took a long deep breath before snuggling back into the pillow on Lily’s shoulder and letting the blissful grasp of sleep wrap around her once more.

Chapter End Notes

[[... This chapter ended differently, then I was expecting. I kind of feel bad for Lily. She’s sort of conflicted here. It’s odd. Anyway, I don’t see this taking 200k words to resolve, but it’s undoubtedly not resolved yet, so sorry for inserting more drama in your story xD.]

Also. Dresses! Huzzah. I literally have no idea what the dresses actually look like, but uh. Yeah. Taylor’s got a black cocktail dress that ties around the back of the neck, leaving the shoulders, arms and most of the back bare, with a knee-length skirt and a fascinating design in the bodice.

Lily’s is floor length in shades of purple that bring out the subtle colours in her hair and is vaguely kimono styled. So that’s answers the question of what Taylor’s gonna wear. So with that in mind, moving on. Taylor finally clears the air with Carol, and they both seemed to finally get the point that they’re both equally caring of Victoria and maybe it’s best to work together, which is good.

Next chapter is going to be a Joint Patrol with New Wave and The Wards. There’ll be three patrols overseen by members of New Wave and uh. At one point Taylor does a backflip to land on Kid Win’s board on a bet from Crystal and uh.

At another point she physically drags Emma to someplace private to finally tell her off,
shocking Emma who’s received literally no overt positive or negative reactions from Taylor since like 3ish months into freshman year. So that’ll be a fun conversation I should think.

I’ll be around working on it, but considering our current pace and how big these things tend to be, expect 7.7 sometime Wednesday, or Thursday. In other news, 7.x is shaping up to be our longest arc yet with 11 chapters planned so far. If you’re getting a bit tired of the lack of actual fighting, rest assured that things are coming to a head soon. Another thing to point out is that 8.x won’t be as sedate as 7.x is. It's gonna end on a bit of an actiony note that leads into the equally actiony arc 8.x so that's something to look forward to.

Anyway, as always, looking forward to your reviews and perspectives.]}
Rising up from the disorientation of shifting from meditation to a memory, Taylor forced the world to come into focus around her. The white space was new. Taylor’d done a few training sessions like these with Marr and the other spirits, but this time she was given a moment to acclimate.

The sound of her feet on the invisible ‘floor’ of the white space was oddly heavy, and she glanced down, taking in her body. Heavy plasteel boots with the poofy dark grey and white pants tucked into them. Lifting one boot, Taylor set it down, hearing the heavy soles clack against the featureless ground of the space.

She glanced up, noticing that an object had appeared in the room before her. She stared at it quietly, walking along toward it and coming to a stop before what was revealed to be a majestic standing mirror. She stood there in curious silence, staring at the face within. This was the first time that she’d inhabited a memory of someone that was so similar to herself. Bastila and Satele were both so different from her in build and look.

The woman before her wasn’t like that. The chest armour could have even been a modified New Wave outfit, though the black and white colour design wasn’t what Taylor would have picked. She traced the ornate breastplate and the complex pauldrons before looking to the face. It wasn’t her face, older, and the lines were wrong, but the complexion was there, the same skin colour she’d often seen in the mirror. The eyes were wrong, far too light, far too blue. The tiny white nubs in her forehead were strange as well. Despite the differences, Taylor hoped that she might age like the woman before her.

Taylor reached up and ran a hand over that familiar inky black hair that had been pulled back into a severe bun. She compared the hairstyle to the messy ponytail that she’d often worn. Her form was of a similar build as well, not overly curvaceous, or stocky. Just like herself, the woman in the mirror was Tall and svelte, with a muscular build. Taylor adjusted her stance, pushing her shoulders back and slipping into an almost casual ‘at-rest’ position with her arms crossed over her back, and she chuckled at the image.

She looked like a warrior, a soldier. There was something more about this outfit, this armour. As she moved to release her arms, to let them fall free to her side, as they moved, Taylor’s hand caught on something and caused it to clatter against her armour. She pulled her arms up, inspecting the odd
gauntlets that she wore, twisting her hands back and forth before reaching behind her and feeling something tucked smoothly into the small of her back. The same place that she kept her bo-staff on her costume.

She drew the object free and blinked curiously at the odd-looking lightsaber. She twirled it around and then thumbed the activation stud, watching as a short blue blade erupted from the weapon, releasing that by now familiar hum. Taylor carefully shifted the weapon around, confused by the shorter blade that it sported.

A ghost of thought drifted through her mind, and Taylor acquiesced, allowing her thumb to ghost over another stud below the one that activated the weapon, watching in awe as the weapon released a soft ‘k-chunk’ noise and then a long pole erupted from the bottom of the weapon, leaving her clutching a pike of comparable length to the one she was constructing back home.

Taylor glanced at her reflection, adjusting the weapon and marvelling at the design, shifting it around and smirking to herself. She made a few practice motions with the weapon before grinning as she collapsed it. Such a fascinating des-

The white space around her dissolved into shadow and then the world re-asserted itself, each sense coming in one at a time with an almost jarring force. Scent first, the smell of sweat and sand, and then touch, heat on her armour and her feet shifting on uneven, loose ground. Her eyes snapped open, and she glanced down to find herself standing on sand. Whipping her head around, Taylor saw a half dozen figures lurking nervously near the edges of the circular room that she was in.

The roars of encouragement and calls of advice came next, washing over and she turned to stare at the figure they were yelling at. The men all wore the same armour, similar to the ornate outfit that she wore, but more straightforward, and gold instead of white. They all wore the same flat helmet that hid their faces. Excitement and exhilaration washed up in her chest, and her lips curled into a grin that caused the man opposite her to take a step back, much to the consternation of his friends.

Taylor knew that she could lunge, make a move, but she waited, watching patiently until the Knight opposite her got his courage marshalled. The man reached out a hand and black blur arced from outside of the ring to smash into his hand. The blur resolved into a staff when it came to a stop, the end igniting in a short blue blade. Taylor felt her grin growing as she watched his body, understanding from the way he moved, the way he held his shoulders, that he was worried.

She remained still and waited, watching as the figure took one step, and then when she didn’t react, another. He stared at her and then he lunged, bringing the lance up. Taylor opened her hand, and her sabre shot out of the brace on her back, smacking into her gauntleted hand and igniting in one fell swoop.

She brought the blade up, watching the weapons crash into each other, letting off that familiar buzzing sound as they met. She cracked a smirk and then lashed out with an armoured boot, sending the Knight tumbling back. She glanced at the others, her expression challenging, almost daring.

They charged as one and something in Taylor sung in delight. She moved fluidly, her blade coming up and intercepting the sloppy blows, and something in the back of her mind made a mental note to discuss synergy in tactics with the men once this was done. The Force guided her to dodge the blows that she couldn’t intercept and to block the ones that she could.

She moved, striking unprotected parts of the body with her blade just briefly enough to leave scorch marks while knocking aside or smacking anyone not paying attention with her fists, her boots. She
reached back occasionally, deactivating the weapon and slotting it back in place as she used her fists to brawl, punching, kicking, elbowing. She was in their faces and brutal and calculating, occasionally slamming them into each other or using their attacks against their allies.

She didn’t bother with using the Force to attack or disarm. She merely focused on being faster, stronger. When she ducked around attacks, her feet and hands lashed out, augmented by the Force, sending figures flying. She wove around attacks her feet sure and stable because of her gifts. She jumped and used her elbows and knees to knock back opponents.

The Knights did their best to resist, but it was a matter of time until Taylor stood alone in the center of the training ring, breathing heavily. The slow amused clapping from above startled her, and Taylor turned, staring up in awe at the stately figure above her.

He was elegant in a way that filled Taylor with a fit of odd jealousy, as she contemplated possessing that sort of poise. He stood like an aristocrat, his back straight, and his pose perfect, but something about him hinted at passion, at amusement as he watched. Those glittering golden eyes focused down on her as he continued to clap. Taylor felt a nervous flutter in her chest, her cheeks darkening as the figure leapt over the railing and landing smoothly and gracefully before her, stepping forward.

“My Lord.” The words were soft, and Taylor bowed her head doing her best to ignore the shivers that travelled down her spine at the amused chuckle he let forth. She glanced up at the sounds of his feet moving through the sound, watching the man as he walked. Taylor took in the amused smirk on his face, the way it shifted the inky black beard on his face, and the elegant cut to his hair. She felt those eyes staring at her, and she felt her cheeks darkening.

“Greetings, Knight. Such a fascinating display. Passionate.” His voice was low and elegant, almost a purr. Taylor stepped back and glanced around at the figures sprawled around her, watching as the knights slowly dragged themselves to their feet and backed off respectfully. The man studied her slowly, and she shifted before speaking.

“Thank you, my Lord.” The words were laced with her own nervousness, and she watched as the man’s smirk grew.

“Perhaps,” He spoke slowly, glancing around at the worried looking men before turning back to her. “Since you find your own men lacking, Knight, you’d be willing to spar with me?” He stared at her, reaching out and opening a hand, a glittering silver weapon shimmering into existence in the open palm. She stared in wonder at the casual use of the Force before swallowing.

“O-Of course, my Lord, I would be honoured.” She stared up at the man as he let out a low, amused laugh, and palmed the weapon, touching the stud and causing it to ignite with the familiar sound. Taylor watched as the gold coloured blade issued forth, humming softly.

“Excellent, Knight. I should warn you not to hold back. It would upset me.” He spoke softly and then gestured for her to come. She brought her own hand up and lunged, summoning her sabre as she did. The weapon ignited as it hit her hand and she lashed out — Cross, Slash, Parry, Riposte. Every strike met a perfect guard, and she stared in awe at the emperor.

He moved with grace and a sense of minimal style. He gripped the weapon with a single hand, keeping the other behind his back, and yet, every attack she made was intercepted with almost laughable ease. He met each strike, each of her blows with an almost bored parry. She pressed on, though, and seeing his attention wane, she struck. A finger tapped the secondary stud, and the weapon’s pole erupted.
Taylor saw Valkorion’s eyes widen briefly as she stepped in closer, smacking the base of her staff against the side of his knee, pushing him off balance. The haft pushed past the knee and into the joint, and she pushed down. She braced the haft of the spear on the ground, pushed her foot against his and then savagely shoulder checked him, sending him sprawling back.

She spun the weapon around and held it out; glowing blade pointed at the older man’s face. She stared down at those amused glowing eyes as half a dozen bright blue blades suddenly erupted around her body, pinning her. She froze and stood still until the emperor started to laugh, and the blades nervously drew back.

“Excellent!” His voice boomed, and he held out a hand, and she moved with a nervous smile, taking his hand and dragging him to his feet. “Excellent, Senya. Your performance does your place in my personal guard justice, as always.” The emperor smirked a bit, and Taylor stood a bit straighter, returning the smile as she glanced toward the others, taking in their nervous poses. As if sensing everyone else’s discomfort finally, Valkorion grinned and gestured to the side, toward an exit from the training chamber.

“Walk with me, Senya.” Taylor nodded quietly, falling into step behind the emperor, walking along with him. She watched in confusion as the elegance that draped around him seemed to fall away, and he moved more surely, more casually, walking down the long corridor they’d entered.

“You do well in your training as always, Senya, but those knights are far beneath you. I fear you gain little by sparring with them.” His voice was casual, at ease, and he glanced toward her, an odd sort of warmth on his face. Taylor felt a strange kind of dissonance, warmth spreading in her chest, but it seemed to wrap around her without actually filling her with that warmth.

“It keeps my skills from getting too dull, my Lord, and perhaps it’s less about falling to their level, and more about raising them to mine?” She smirked a bit as she walked along at Valkorion’s side. They passed a window, and she glanced out, staring at the city that stretched out before them. The tall spires jutted up from the landscape, stretching away as far as the eye could see and glittering against the inky purple night sky. They turned at a juncture, and Valkorion led them down another corridor and out onto a small covered walkway that was open to the elements and Taylor felt the wind tugging at her bun.

“I have told you, Senya. You may call me Valkorion.” His words were low and laced with amusement and Taylor felt that feeling of embarrassment and affection washing up against her but not quite penetrating. She trailed after the emperor, and they came to a stop at the railing of the ledge and stood there, staring out at the city as it glittered.

“And I have told you, my Lord, that to do so in public would be most unwise.” Taylor felt her lips quirking into an amused smile as she glanced up into the warm golden eyes above her, and her heart began to race. When the armoured arm came up and cupped her cheek, the beating increased, the feelings of affection and amusement barely registering against her own sense of discomfort and confusion. Something wasn’t right here, something was-

“But we’re alone, Senya.” His words were subtle, and he leaned in, his face growing wide in her vision and something tenuous snapped and Taylor suddenly found herself standing several feet behind Senya and Valkorion, watching as the man tilted up the stoic knight’s jaw. She stared in confusion as he seemed to pause. She could have sworn that his glowing eyes settled on her once more, but before she could be sure Valkorion had leaned in and kissed the woman whose memories Taylor had been following.
Taylor stared at the pair, watching the kiss linger for a moment or two before the emperor drew back and they spoke, the words drifting into indistinct murmuring as Taylor’s connection to the memories wavered and faded. She stared around as the world surrounding her dissolved, leaving her standing in a pristine white void once more. Taylor glanced down at herself, taking in the clothes she’d been wearing to meditate with some relief. She tilted her head, idly wondering what had happened.

“You severed the connection from your side.” The words were uttered in Marr’s melodic mechanized voice. “Typically, with memories like this, you play into them, you follow the script and see what happened, where they go. But some things can jostle you, make you realize that this isn’t exactly right. I suppose locking lips with the Sith Emperor would be one of those things.” Marr’s voice was amused, and Taylor felt a momentary surge of revulsion at the idea.

“Still,” Marr continued smoothly. “You did see what we wanted you to see. There are precious few memories committed to the Noetikon on the subject of a staff like which you use. None by Jedi or Sith, really. We can only get so far using our memories and splicing them in with what techniques are included in our databanks. Lucky for you, Senya Tirall did donate her memories to the archive, and her weapon was close to yours.”

Taylor reached back and drew the weapon from where it rested against the small of her back, despite her casual clothes lacking any place for it to hang there. She stood a bit taller, holding the weapon up and inspecting what still looked to be a simple lightsaber.

She’d seen Senya using this in that battle. Taylor shook her head quietly before glancing up at Marr. She’d seen the memory, and the imprint lingered, which meant that she had precious little time to make use of Senya’s skills to train before they faded. There’d be more memories to see, of course, but waste not, want not.

Taylor glanced at Marr, reaching into her mind for the instincts, the impressions, and she grinned when she detected the minute surge of shock in Marr when she lunged. The weapon came up, and Marr drew his own blade, deflecting her shorter one, but she rolled with it. Fists lashed out, striking aside Marr’s guard and bashing into his side, knocking back his legs.

The element of surprise only held out so long, and soon enough Marr had turned things back on her, lashing out with his own two-handed style, his longer blade and greater strength proving to be more than a match for her speed and underhanded tactics. It wasn’t long before a backhand from the Sith Lord sent her rolling away. But something bold and eager in her, Senya’s fascination with the fight, shifted eagerly and she was back on her feet, lunging at the Sith Lord.

Eventually, the instincts and the knowledge left her, and Marr had dismissed her from her meditations ejecting her to the ‘Jedi Temple’ once more. She sat there in the basement and slowly caught her breath, staring at the bottom of the floor above with curiosity. She lay there, counting backwards from thirty and blinking at the silence.

She lifted to her feet and slowly ascended the steps. Things had been… awkward, since she and Victoria had discovered that Amy hadn’t come home the night after they had all gone dress shopping. Victoria and Amy had gotten into quite a fight the day after once they’d returned from
school, and things had been tense since.

Taylor carefully opened the door at the top of the stairs and peeked out, moving curiously toward the kitchen and letting out a sigh at the lack of anyone present. She carefully walked around the small kitchen, pulling out a glass bowl and filling it with cereal and milk. Truthfully, she could admit that Victoria was being a bit harsh on Lily and Amy, and part of her also suspected that despite Amy’s refusal to confirm or deny anything, nothing had probably happened between the pair.

Neither Amy or Lily seemed to Taylor like the types to attempt anything like that, though she wasn’t sure if it was due to their mutual awkwardness, or the fact that they both seemed rather… not quite at the stage where that would be an option for either of them. Taylor had tried to speak with either sister, but they had politely asked her to let them handle it on their own. Victoria had explained a promise that they’d both made to try and keep Taylor out of their sisterly drama. The irony hadn’t been lost on Taylor.

Taking her cereal, Taylor carefully ducked back out of the kitchen. She knew that Victoria and Amy were almost certainly both at home, considering that Victoria had refused to let her sister out of her sight since Monday, but since they were being quiet, she wasn’t going to get in the middle of that. She eventually found herself standing out in the garage, staring down at the tiny crystal forge that Dragon had sent her for her birthday.

She idly contemplated taking a bit more time to meditate with the growing lightsaber crystal within, but her attention was drawn over to the staff that lay on the nearby workbench. She walked over and set her cereal down, hefting up the staff quietly before glancing off to the side.

‘Marr, what’d you think we’d need to do to modify this to work like Senya’s?’ She glanced over at the shimmer of red light that appeared and placed Marr’s powerful form before her. The Sith glanced at her before looking at the weapon.

‘You have most of the tools on hand that you would need to do the modifications, but you’d need several parts for the mechanical components. Nothing truly onerous, but some pieces are custom, and you might need to contact the metalworker you got the rest of the parts from. Considering that you’re currently avoiding your girlfriend and her sister in the evenings, it might be a good way to occupy yourself until this blows over.’ Taylor stared at Marr sourly, but she glanced back down at the weapon and hummed faintly in thought.

She could do this.

Chapter End Notes

[[Senya Tirall uses a modified Lightsaber pike that collapses down to the size of a slightly longer lightsaber hilt with a shorter blade and expands back out. Taylor’s rather interested in the design, and she’s going to refit her sabre to be similar.

This is the first time we get to deal with the knowledge that in order for Taylor to absorb the instincts and learned skills of the Memories on the Noetikon, to train with them and try to make them hers, she has to acclimate to the hosts, the people behind them. Walk a mile in their shoes, so to speak.
Essentially if she lives out the memories of someone for enough time, she gains an imprint of their skills that she can use to train with, to try and make some of that knowledge stick once the impressions fade.

As soon as I get the okay on 7.7 I'll shoot that out, and uh. 7.8 should follow pretty quick since I am currently working on it. And there's a b-side to 7.8. Hopefully we'll get three updates next week. =] Looking forward to your feedback as always.]=]
Chapter Summary

[[So, 7.7 This one was a bit of a pain in the ass to write, but uh. 16k words later, here we are. Only big note you need to know before you start reading is that I went back and changed parts of 4.7 to bring Taylor’s stuff back in line with all of her characterizations in regards to Emma from before and after that point. Basically, I changed it so that Taylor ignored Emma completely, and Emma got mad, and then Sabah made her leave, the plot is mostly the same but Taylor merely stonily ignores Emma, you’ll see why when you get the relevant part below.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 18th, 2011

Downtown, Brockton Bay

Lily stood in the locker room, staring at her reflection in the mirror, checking her visor and her armour, making sure that everything was secure before hefting up her quiver and attaching it to her back. She lifted the strap of her arbalest and swung it over her back as well, securing everything snugly before pushing out of the small locker room and pacing down the hall toward the meeting room.

She slipped in carefully, staring at the gathered costumed teenagers. Most of New Wave was clustered up around the far end of the table, with Kid Win, Clockblocker and Weld serving as a sort of buffer between them and the rest of the Wards. Lily glanced down the table, hearing Clockblocker playfully calling New Wave the Holyhead Harpies, much to poor Eric’s chagrin.

She studied the chuckling faces, shifting in place as she considered slipping up and joining the rest, smiling at the friendly nod she got from Taylor and the nervous wave from Amy, though the narrowed eyes from Victoria’s direction saw her stepping forward and dropping into a chair a touch further away from the group then she might typically prefer. She glanced to her left, taking in Vista’s excited features and eager greeting, giving her a nod.

She casually ignored the young girl's rapid descent into excited small talk, slumping down in her chair and staring at the table. She glanced down when her phone dinged, and she drew it out of the hidden pouch on her uniform, turning it on and reading the message from Amy.

{Sorry.} The word was simple, and Lily rubbed at her neck, flicking her gaze toward Amy, who was speaking brusquely with Victoria. Lily sat at her end of the table and subtly peered down at the
arguing pair, reminded quite clearly of a similar argument that happened at the beginning of the week.

Lily should have expected the morning after to be awkward. She’d awoken first to find that Amy had divested herself of the pillow and had been using her warm body as a suitable replacement and she’d been a bit too scared to move until the other girl had stirred. They’d lay there in the weak light of the early summer morning before a soft ding from Amy’s phone had startled them both.

Cursing, Amy had informed her that she had an hour till she needed to be at school and then she’d scurried around looking for the socks and sweater that she’d lost during the night. The girl’s muttered recriminations about not even getting a shower had even lead to Lily indulging in the insanity a bit and offering to let the girl borrow a towel and some shampoo and soap.

Which is how they’d ended up arriving at the school with about fifteen minutes to spare as Amy nervously fidgeted in some borrowed clothes a bit too large on her frame. Lily and Amy both sat staring out the windshield of Gertie’s old car at the imposing battered frame of Victoria’s truck, and the equally imposing blonde leaning against it and staring furiously at them both.

Amy had surged out of the car and Lily had briefly entertained the idea of just starting the car up, going back home, and getting a few hours of sleep before her own classes actually started. In the end, she’d ran a hand through her hair and stepped out into the early morning gloom sunlight. Victoria remained where she was and Lily glanced at Amy before following the girl over.

“Ames, what were you thinking? Do you realize how freaked out Taylor and I were this morning when we realized that you hadn’t come home last night?” The words were low and harsh and Lily glanced at Amy, watching the girl shrinking down a bit. She frowned a bit and glanced over at Vicky, flinching back at the angry look sent her way.

“As for you, I can’t believe that you’d take advantage of my sister—” Victoria’s voice began to rise as she stepped away from the truck, stretching up to her full height. Lily nervously took a step back as those brilliant azure eyes locked on her. She moved to raise her hands, trying to speak and say that Victoria had the wrong idea when Amy cut across.

“Vicky, stop it!” The minor growl caused Victoria to freeze just as quickly as it struck Lily, and both girls glanced toward Amy’s crimson cheeks.

“Don’t start in on her. You’re not my mom, Vicky. What I do with my spare time is my business, and if I have any issues with how Lily acts, then I’ll tell her about them. It’s none of your business.” The words had been faint and brusque and Lily had found her cheeks darkening as Amy cut Vicky off at the legs without pointing out that she’d in fact been wrong about what was going on.

“Well, maybe I’ll call mom, and just tell her about what—” The sharp look from Amy had stilled whatever chain of thought that was and Lily had watched as Victoria visibly deflated. She stared between the two girls for a few moments before speaking softly.

“Uh, Amy? I’ve gotta get going. I’ll text you later, okay?” She glanced over at Amy,
studies her nervous smile and flashing her something that she hoped was reassuring. When the younger girl turned back toward her sister, Lily glanced at Victoria’s angry expression before offering her a polite nod and striding off with a tired sigh.

Things hadn’t ended up getting much better after that. It’s been five days since the argument and the Victoria had been sending her dark looks whenever they interacted as part of the group. Amy had also mentioned a bit of irritation with her, and Lily suspected that Victoria had made it her personal mission to ensure that she and Amy not be left alone together.

Truthfully, Lily wasn’t as against this as she might have expected. Amy still confused her, and having some time to think about things was probably for the best, but she rather disliked the way that it made things awkward when they all hung out together as a group. Frowning down at her hands, Lily found herself glancing up when the doors opened, and several members of the Protectorate and New Wave followed the director in.

“Greetings, Wards and New Wave. Thank you for all doing your best to be on time and in costume.” Piggot came to a stop next to the large white board that they typically used in debriefings. The board itself had had several things attached to it include a blown-up map of downtown with areas lined out and marked in various colours. She crossed her arms over her chest and glanced around at them all waiting till the idle chatter died down entirely before she began to speak.

“As you all know, our typical fair for the Fourth of July hit a bit of a snag when the Mayor accepted the offer of an alternate entertainment source from Calvert Industries, but considering all the work that you all had been putting in for your preparations, we have made arrangements with the city council to shift the venue a bit.” Lily glanced around the room and seeing that no one else seemed surprised, shrugged and rolled with it.

“Today the city is hosting its street fair and farmer’s market, and when we offered to patrol, they invited us to participate. They’ve relegated us a large portion of central park to set up some booths, and while some of you will indeed be doing the planned foot patrols in and around the street fair and downtown, some of you will be doing something much more interesting. Typically in a situation like this we’d take volunteers, but considering the time restraints, your team leaders picked for you, who’ll be manning a booth, and who will be patrolling. We don’t expect much in the way of danger or excitement, so you should all have plenty of time to shake hands and take pictures.” The woman’s cool voice indicated that they would be expected to do so.

“With a few exceptions, you’ve all been assigned patrol groups overseen by a Member of New Wave’s adult roster or the Protectorate. Scheduled breaks and meals are included, and we’ll be concluding around seven PM to give you all time to explore the fair yourselves and have some fun.” The woman’s stern expression as she talked about having fun left Lily feeling a bit odd, but she didn’t react too openly.

“I needn’t remind you that as with the Fourth of July event we usually participated in, this is mostly about perception. This is a way for you to interact with the citizens of the city to show them that despite your gifts, you’re all still human in some way. To make them less reluctant to keep you around.” She stared at them all for a few moments, offering a tight smile at the few nods that she received in return.

“Excellent, now then. Let’s get you all sorted. Our first group, Patrol One, will be Kid Win, Vigil, and Laserdream overseen by Manpower. Your patrol will cover quadrants 2 through 5 here on the eastern end of the map, and you’ll cross over with Patrols Two and Four at the northern and southern ends of your area. Your communication frequency will be…” Lily sighed quietly staring at her hands, tuning out the conversation until the room around her grew a bit quiet.
She felt the oppressive silence and glanced up from her hands seeing a few eyes focused on her and she coughed quietly, glancing over at Piggot’s narrowed gaze and shifted up a bit in her seat, offering the woman a nervous smile. The director stared at her coolly for a few moments before speaking softly.

“You with us now, Flechette?” Lily flushed softly and nodded politely. She was tempted to glance at the others, but she ignored the minute scoffs and muttered comments from around her, focusing on the woman carefully. Piggot stared into her eyes for a few moments before speaking.

“As I was saying, we’ve been allotted four stands in Grand Park. We’ve taken a few of our typical attractions from storage, and we’ll be setting them up. Flechette, Glory Girl, Panacea, and Clockblocker will be working around the stalls for most of the afternoon. Details will be dealt with later. You’ve all been scheduled breaks, and you’ll be expected to take them.” She stared at each of them until they nodded and then she turned back to the board, gesturing to the map on display once more.

“Now, we’ve also got a stand here that will be selling PRT and New Wave Merchandise, and that will be operated by Miss Militia and Lady Photon. They’re the on-hand supervisors for all of you in Central Park, so if something comes up, they’ll be able to assist. They’ll mostly be dealing with questions from the public and assisting with our merchandise sales. PRT troopers will also be patrolling in these areas, here, here and here.” She gestured at three long blue lines on the map before turning back to them.

“If you encounter any danger, you’re to inform console first and await back up. I don’t want any repeats of the re-opening of the boardwalk. We’ve had a lot of scrutiny from the Youth Guard lately, and it’s better that we all operate with an eye for each other’s safety.” She stared at them all for a few moments before nodding.

“Alright. The vans are waiting outside, feel free to head over. Good luck. Have fun.” The woman stared at them all for a few moments before turning and striding out of the room with her troopers.

Lily glanced at the rest, watching as everyone shifted awkwardly before shuffling to their feet.

Lily staggered up and followed the rest outside, coming to a stop at the exterior doors and staring at the line of vans waiting for them. She glanced around, watching as the adults started to corral their teams and leading them to specific trucks, so she moved over to Lady Photon and Miss Militia, offering them both a tense smile as the others came up.

“Alright. We’ve got two vans for us, so we’ll be splitting up. It’ll make it easier for us to explain what you guys will be doing.” The woman gestured to the two vans as she stepped over to confer with Miss Militia for a few moments. Lily glanced over when Amy sidled up to her, offering her a quick, nervous smile, and she returned the expression. Pausing, Lily listening to the sound of someone inhaling sharply from nearby and felt something in her clenching. She glanced over at Vic, taking in her dark look before flicking Amy an apologetic look.

Ignoring the confusion on Amy’s face, she stepped over to one of the vans, pulling open one of the doors sharply and turning to Victoria with an expectant look on her face. She watched the flicker of surprise on the girl’s features, then gestured with a hand and waited till Victoria had climbed in before hopping in herself and slamming the door.

“Enough of this! It’s been a long fucking week, and I’m sick and tired of this shit.” She muttered harshly at the other girl, turning in place to glare over at her, staring into the flinty blue eyes of the other hero. She watched as Victoria shifted back before speaking harshly.

“You should have thought of that before you-” Lily leaned forward as Victoria spoke, quickly
cutting the other girl off.

“I didn’t fucking sleep with your sister, Dallon. We fell asleep watching movies and didn’t wake up until nearly two in the morning. I figured it’d be better to let her sleep and get her to school on time instead of dragging her halfway across the city in the middle of the night.” Lily stared at Vic, watching the flush of suspicion and confusion washing over her features, then she pressed on coldly.

“And I doubt that that’s a concern, as, despite your best efforts at matchmaking, the only fucking reason that she was at my god-damned dorm was that she didn’t want to watch you schmoozing with the girl that she’d had a crush on up until recently.” She watched Victoria flinch back and felt a flicker of regret wash through her.

“I- Sorry. I shouldn’t have- It’s been a rough week.” Lily muttered quietly, running a hand through her dark hair and turning to stare out the window silently. She listened to Victoria’s breathing and heard when the other girl shifted nervously in place.

“I, uh. Sorry. Amy never said…” Vic’s voice was soft, and Lily sank quietly back into her seat.

“Yeah, that confused me too,” Lily muttered quietly before shrugging and glancing out the window at Amy and Clock speaking with Miss Militia. “What did she say about it?” Lily glanced at Victoria, studying her curiously, watching as Vic just nervously rubbed her neck.

“Uh, nothing mostly? The few times I tried to bring it up, she glared at me till I left the room and refused to comment on it beyond saying that it wasn’t any of my business. It sorta just made me more irritated.” Victoria’s voice was sheepish, and Lily let out a soft groan, staring down at her hands.

“She was probably just trying to make a point,” Lily commented, glancing over at Victoria and chuckling at her confused expression.

“You are aware that despite the fact that she acts like she’s 25, your girlfriend is, in fact, the same age as Amy, right?” She spoke softly and watched as Vic froze and slowly slumped down into her seat.

“Thus making me a bit of a hypocrite. Fair point.” Vic rubbed at her face quietly and glanced in her direction before sighing and holding out a hand.

“I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you, but It’s… It’s been a shitty week for me too, and being pissed off was a bit easier than dealing with my own shit.” Lily stared at the offered hand for a few moments before sighing and taking it quietly, giving Vic a quick shake. She studied Vic for a few moments before leaning over to glance back out the window, watching as Lady Photon started heading their way.

“It’s just. It’s a bit easier to worry about other people, then to deal with my own problems. Amy’s been pretty sheltered, despite everything and I was worried that with the rebound she might have made a poor choice.” Vic’s voice was soft, and Lily frowned at the feeling that coiled in her stomach.

“Not that, you know, her dating you would be bad, just. I wouldn’t want her rushing into things. I uh. Well, I have some regrets about how-” Lily held up a hand, carefully cutting off Victoria before the girl got into the nitty-gritty details about her ‘regrets’ that no doubt involved her recalcitrant teammate.

“I get it; she’s your sister. Just… Have some faith in her. Despite what you might think, no one forces Amy to do something that she doesn’t want to do.” Lily glanced over, taking in Victoria’s startled smile before turning to peer out the window.
“Besides, we’re just friends.” She spoke softly, letting her head rest on the glass, muttering gently under her breath.

“It’s not my name that she mutters in her sleep.” Lily kept her gaze out the window, not wanting to see if Victoria had actually heard that muttered comment. In the end, it didn’t really matter, since before either girl could continue, the front door opened and Lady Photon slid into the truck, and the conversation fell quiet.

The older woman glanced back at them, curiously over the seat, and Lily offered her a nervous smile that seemed to cause the woman to swallow whatever she was about to say. She stared at them for a few moments before shaking her head and glancing over when an older Trooper slipped into the driver’s seat of the truck and started it up. The truck rumbled out with the convoy and Lily glanced over, taking in Victoria’s tense form as she stared out the window. Deciding that a subject change was in order, she spoke.

“So uh, they mentioned something about stalls that we’ll be manning? Like games or something?” She blinked at Sarah’s amused glance and shifted nervously.

“Not quite. It’s more of a street fair and less of a carnival. No rides or midway, and the stalls you’ll be manning will be more about interacting with people on a more even footing. From your file, it mentioned that your skills with your darts extend to most throwing weapons?” Lily blinked quietly and nodded, causing Sarah to smirk back at her.

“Apparently last year, Shadow Stalker ran an archery booth. We got most of it out of storage and set up, and we got our hands on some practice blades for throwing along with some of your old darts and a crossbow and a compound bow.” The woman paused, and Lily blinked, her smile growing at the idea.

“We figured that you could offer lessons to people interested in either. A good way to drum up some donations for the Commerce Council and public works programs and it’ll let you interact with regular people.” Lily nodded before peering over at Victoria curiously.

“As for you, Victoria, your cousins suggested several booths from a kissing booth to a booth where people could try to arm-wrestle you.” Sarah’s voice was low and teasing, and Lily found herself smirking as Vicky surged up with a look of outrage on her face.

“But,” Sarah spoke calmly, stilling Victoria’s complaints. “We decided that neither of those really suited your new image, so your mother had a suggestion.” Amy blinked curiously at the oddly conflicted look on Vic’s face, glancing toward Sarah curiously.

“We got together with a few of the local elementary schools, and they’ve donated a few dozen simple instruments for you to use to play with some of the younger kids. The expectation is less about teaching them anything and more as a way of keeping them occupied while their parents are busy.” Lily peered over at Vic watching the way her expression shifted to something hard to quantify while she glanced down at her lap, a tiny smile ghosting over her face.

“But, now then, onto your schedules. You’ll be working for about six hours today, and you’ll get a break every two. We’ll have the booths set up and ready to go by ten, We’re going to stagger the breaks, which means that Flechette, you’ll get breaks at noon for lunch, and then again at two. Victoria, you’ll be free after she gets back, at quarter to one and a quarter to two.” Lily sat back in her seat and listened carefully to the instructions, smiling quietly as she glanced out the window, this sounded a bit more fun than a typical patrol.
Lily glanced over at the young boy that held one of Shadow Stalker’s old training crossbows in his arms, staring forlornly at the large target that held three different bolts. The shots weren’t bad, considering that they had all hit the mark, though they were all over it and mostly in the outer two rings. She moved over, studying the thirteen-year-old boy for a few moments, taking in his stance and the way that his small arms shook a bit. She smiled quietly and crouched down next to the younger boy.

“You need to brace yourself better, the recoil on a weapon like this is savage. Let’s reload, remember what I showed you?” She smiled as the boy glanced at her, placing the weapon’s stirrup in the grass, braced his foot on it and gripped the wire, dragging it back. The PRT had loosened the draw on the weapon a bit to make it less dangerous, and after struggling for a moment, the kid managed to get the drawstring in place.

Lily drew a bolt from the case by the table and slotted it into the weapon, gently taking it from the boy.

“Okay, so you need to stand less square to the target. One foot a bit back, the other a bit forward, like this.” She showed the kid, bracing her weight on her back foot and holding the weapon. This position also reduced her visible profile of the shooter, which was probably for the best.

“You keep your shoulder that you brace the weapon on forward, and then you take a deep breath just before firing, brace yourself and squeeze, doing your best to push back into the recoil.” She glanced at the boy, watching as he nodded eagerly. She glanced over at his friends watching from close at hand and then handed the weapon back with a smirk.

“Give it a shot.” She smirked at the boy, watching as he carefully took her advice to heart, shifting into the pose, checking the weapon several times and lining himself up. She watched with a faint grin as the boy exhaled slowly, tensed and then fired, his form jerking back much less than before and the crossbow bolt sailed away, slamming through the barrier of the first and second ring. She laughed when the kid let out a whoop and his friends cheered.

She accepted the weapon back from the kid and his eager thanks before watching him charge into his group of friends. They eagerly conferred with each other for a few minutes before heading off. Lily studied the weapon, ensuring that it was still fine before setting it down on the counter and then walking around the counter to approach the targets, pulling the fired bolts free and bringing them back over to the table to place them with the rest.

She was in a quiet corner of the fair, mainly because they didn’t want kids firing weapons anywhere that might have more people, which necessitated her being on the edge of the park with the wooded area behind it. That, paired with the fact that Shadow Stalker had staffed this particular booth in the past had meant that she probably wasn’t as busy as the rest, only having dealt with maybe a dozen people over the last two hours. She idly checked her watch, noting the time and heading back toward the PRT Trooper that’d been working with her.

The older man flashed her a smirk and then checked his watch as well.
“Lunchtime, Flechette?” His voice was curious, and Lily nodded. The man grabbed a ‘Gone for thirty minutes’ sign from the crate and set it on the counter before taking a seat by it. “Enjoy your break then. I’d suggest staying around the main market area here. There’s plenty of food carts nearby, and the troopers are all on hand if there’s any trouble.” Lily nodded to the man and then turned, wandering through the fair.

She quickly found a food cart that had set up nearby, grabbing a quick sandwich to nibble on and a bottle of something cold to drink as she walked, thanking the man when he waved off her money. She’d ended up wandering the grounds, taking in the various stalls as she ate slowly. It seemed like the main market here was an odd blending of Farmer’s Market and craft fair, and Lily casually inspected the various bits of jewelry and the food on display.

She slowly wandered over toward the paddock that she’d passed on her way in, curious to see what Amy had managed to do with her ‘stall.’ The sound of squealing children and excited chatter saw her pushing through the last few stalls and coming up to the edge of an interesting log-style fence. She stood outside the fence, staring in.

Almost two dozen miniature versions of the creatures that Amy had been designing over the last week were ambling around interacting with children. A pair of tiny felines and bears, four different ferret-like creatures with a coat of soft moss, and something new, a single medium-sized pterodactyl-type creature. They ambled around slowly and reacted gently to the children screaming and chasing them. Lily felt her lips curling into a smile, and she let her gaze drift over to the figure in the middle of it all. Amy stood with an older trooper, talking softly as she glanced around at the various creations, watching them work.

Lily stepped closer, using the bottom plant of the paddock fence to brace her feet, resting her crossed arms on the upper one and nibbling on her sandwich as she watched the children play, having to constantly keep her eyes from settling on Amy, and studying that sad little smile on her lips. She’d been watching one kid playing with the tiny bison-like creature that Amy had only finished designing during their homework session on Thursday when a light cough startled her into nearly falling off.

She glanced down at the amused looking face of Amy and rolled her eyes. She took in the sweat coating the young girl’s forehead and cheeks, studying the way she’d had her hair pulled back into a damp ponytail. When Amy levered herself up onto the fence to talk to her, Lily offered her water bottle over, watching the girl crack it open and take a long sip.

“Working hard?” Lily asked curiously, studying the tired-looking heroine. Amy glanced at her as she finished the swallow she’d had in her mouth and chuckled.

“It’s a neat idea, the fair, but I’d have probably had a few ideas if they’d run it past me before I’d set up here. The main issue is that plants don’t really have the same sort of energy storage that we do. They don’t typically need to move around much, and that means that I constantly have to touch them to refresh their energy stores, so they don’t just keel over and traumatize the kids, and it’s a bit hard.” Lily frowned, glancing over at the PRT Trooper who Amy had been speaking with.

“Have you told your friend there?” She asked, holding out her half-eaten sandwich. Amy seemed to stare at her in confusion for a moment before snagging the food and taking a hearty bite, chewing quietly before answering.

“Yeah. Ralph’s agreed with me, and he’s spoken with my aunt. They’re making sure that I grab a double length break, eat a big meal and then I should be able to power through from two until we’re done.” The girl glanced at her as she picked at the sandwich, Lily watching in amusement as she nervously fidgeted while eating.
“So uh. You and Vicky had a chat, I’m guessing?” The words were nervous, and Lily nodded, snagging the bottle back from Amy and taking a sip. She glanced over, watching Amy’s concerned expression and let out a sigh, handing the water back.

“I just told her off. Told her that we didn’t do anything.” She studied Lily’s expression, feeling a flicker of relief when Amy didn’t seem upset. The girl studied her for a few moments before shrugging lazily and taking the bottle and taking another long sip.

“I figured you’d have said something eventually. I probably should have told her off myself, I just. She gets so…” Amy frowned and rested her chin on her arms, and Lily found herself smirking at the petulant look. Lily smiled nervously when Amy shook herself from her thoughts after a moment of grumbling, staring back up at her. “You two though, are you alright?” Amy’s voice was laced with concern and Lily nodded simply.

“I think so? She didn’t say much, but she stopped glaring at me like I’d deflowered her little sister.” Lily grinned when Amy coughed and sputtered, hacking up the water she’d been drinking.

“You’ve been busy here?” Lily glanced her way as she finished off the sandwich and Lily shrugged.

“I guess it’s been affected by the fact that Shadow Stalker ran the archery booth last year? Between that and the collection of weapons on display, I think that folks were pretty intimidated.” Lily hummed as she glanced down toward the grass. “Mostly it’s just been boys that saw a cute girl in a purple bodysuit and came to investigate.” Lily hummed softly, blinking at the sound of plastic crunching. She glanced over at Amy, who stared at her with an odd intensity for a few moments before draining the bottle and wrapping it up in the sandwich wrapper.

“I-uh. Well, my break is in, like, a little under an hour? I could bring you some food since I ate your lunch and I’ll keep you company till I have to go back?” The hopeful look on Amy’s face made Lily’s heart beat a bit quicker, and she nodded smoothly.

“Right. Well, maybe after we coul-” The younger girl’s comment suddenly cut off at the shriek of a child from behind, and they both turned to watch a little girl screaming at her mother as the woman tried to lead her away from one of the critters. Lily glanced back at Amy, who rolled her eyes and hopped down.

“People clapping and stomping drew Lily’s focus as she wound through the crowd, eventually coming on a small circle of older people surrounding a small pavilion. She gently pushed through the crowd, her short height, meaning that few people cared about letting her get to the front. She came to
a stop at the front of the group, blinking in shock at the sight before her.

Victoria’s stall had been a large circular area covered in mats and old rugs with a large white tent pavilion arranged over it. She’d been a bit busier since there were nearly almost two dozen kids between the ages of eight and twelve sitting before Victoria. The older girl was holding a tambourine in hand and was tapping it to set time for the kids who’d arranged themselves into two rows and were doing an odd sort of pattycake song.

The kids weren’t perfect, but they were good, and Lily tilted her head watching as they all did the hand gestures in sync, clapping their hands off each other and doing the convoluted pattern, each of them grinning broadly. As Lily watched, the boy's voices would lift up singing in concert.

“I'll think of you,” The girls drifted in, joining in on the words that the boys sang when they repeated it.

“I'll think of you,” The girls trailed off, and the boys continued, smirking at the others as they sang.

“When I’m down,” And again the boys repeated with the girls joining in before the song drifted on, Lily watching in fascination. The kids continued the song, alternating off and on with singing to make the oddly haunting song. Lily watched in fascination when they stopped singing and devolved into an even more complicated game of patty cake that involved switching partners before finishing the song.

When the kids came to a stop, she joined the rest of the onlookers in clapping eagerly much to the chagrin of Victoria who blushed prettily and set about tidying up as the kids scattered around the pavilion, some of them heading for their parents nearby. When a half dozen trailed after Victoria, Lily found herself curious and trailed after them, listening as the young girls began to speak as they helped Victoria clean up the chairs and cushions.

“Hey, Glory Girl,” The words were soft and drawn out, indicating curiosity, and Lily watched as Victoria glanced down at the nine-year-old girl, ruffling her hair playfully. Victoria paused her efforts to move chairs back to the circle they’d been in when Lily had passed the pavilion earlier this morning on the way to her own attraction and stared down at the girl.

“Gigi, right?” She smirked at the girl who nodded, her braids flapping around her head. Victoria grinned impishly before crossing her arms, staring down at the girl as she shifted from foot to foot. Lily watched as Victoria took in the girl’s nervous expression and lowered herself down to a crouch, putting herself at eye level with the girl, smiling. “What’s up?”

“My brother, he goes to your school, and he said,” The girl paused, blushing and glancing around nervously for a few moments. She seemed to consider what she said before leaning closer and whispering in a voice that still easily carried to Lily and the others around, holding her hand up to her mouth as she spoke. “He said that you were dating a girl.” Lily watched in amusement as Victoria’s eyes widened and then softened.

Lily watched as Victoria considered the young girl and her friends that had all stopped their work to stare in open curiosity. She opened her mouth, paused and then offered the kids a smile and gestured them all closer as she moved back and took a seat in the chair that she’d just put down, looking a bit ridiculous in the smaller chair. When the rest of the kids had gathered around her, Victoria rested her hands on her knees and spoke gently.

“Your brother is right, Gigi. You know Vigil?” Lily dragged her gaze from Victoria to the small girl, watching her blue eyes widening in open curiosity as she nodded her head and quickly spoke.
“She’s the new person on your team, right? She’s got that staff, and she throws people around with her mind.” The girl was chattering excitedly, and Lily glanced over at Victoria, watching her amused grin. She considered the expression, wondering if Victoria was also imagining Taylor’s horrified reaction to the adoration in the girl’s voice.

“Yeah, that’s her. She can do other stuff too, you know. She’s a healer, and she runs really fast and jumps really far.” Lily glanced back at the young girl watching as her mouth opened, and her eyes widened in excitement. Lily found herself chuckling, as her gaze flicked back to Victoria as she hummed and continued softly.

“Well, she’s my girlfriend.” Lily leaned against the support column for the tent, watching as the girl seemed to pause, frowning as she considered this for a few moments. Lily leaned closer when the girl turned her gaze back on Victoria with open curiosity in her eyes.

“Why date a girl, though? I mean, boys are icky, but they can be cute when they’re not being jerks.” Lily chuckled as Victoria let out a soft laugh, reaching over and ruffling the girl’s hair once more.

“I’ve dated boys too, and you’re right, they can be cute. But to some girls, other girls can be cute too, and Vigil’s pretty cute. And she likes me too.” Victoria shrugged simply as if it was a fact of life. Lily smiled when the tiny girl seemed to stare up at her, taking the words in before letting out a shrug as if to say ‘Well I mean, you do you, I guess.’

The other kids started chiming in with questions, some about Taylor and Victoria, others about being a superhero and Lily listened as the Victoria answered all of them. She’d been checking her phone to see how much time she had left on her break when someone let out a haughty sniff next to her.

“Absolutely shameful. Shouldn’t be exposing children to such things, even if it’s been forced down our throats.” Lily blinked and glanced up, staring over at the older woman as she glared with beady eyes at Victoria who’d been telling the fascinated girls about the date that she’d taken Taylor on, answering the silly questions that kids typically had about relationships like this.

Lily shifted quietly, leaning over and moving to speak when another cool voice cut across the woman’s muttered complaints. The woman started and turned back, leaving Lily to stare curiously at the short redhead girl who stood watching the interaction with open fascination and curiosity.

“She’s not trying to influence them, beyond explaining things to people that are curious.” The words were cool, and the girl’s deep emerald eyes turned on the woman casually. She pressed her lips into a thin line as she considered the woman. The older lady adjusted her outfit quietly and then straightened her back and spoke.

“Even exposing children to ideas like that could make them think that choosing to be-” The pale girl chuckled and rolled her eyes, turning back to the sight of Victoria, stiffening a bit. Lily glanced over watching as Victoria had paused her conversation and was staring at all three of them. Lily briefly feared that her words to Victoria hadn’t gotten through to the girl, the thunderous expression on her face looking rather unsettling, but she quickly realized that the angry look wasn’t directed at her or the bigoted old lady, it was directed at the redhead who’d spoken.

“Choosing to be themselves?” The words came out softly, and Lily glanced over, taking in the faint hints of regret lacing that tone. She studied the redhead curiously as she kept her gaze on Victoria, but continued to speak to the older woman.

“Despite what you might think, we’re all born the way we are, and the only choice that we get is between accepting that, or desperately trying be something that we’re not.” The words were quiet, and the older lady seemed to glare at her before letting out a sigh and turning to stride away. Lily
backed off a bit when Victoria slid to her feet, and she glanced over at the sight of the small gaggle of children nervously trailing after Victoria as she approached.

“Barnes.” The word that Victoria muttered as she stepped out from under the pavilion was cool, and Lily froze suddenly as she recognized the name. She turned to stare in confusion at the curvy redhead. From the stories, she’d heard she’d been expecting Taylor’s Emma to be six and a half feet tall and built like the Other Mother from Coraline. The girl seemed so very normal. Dressed in simple muted colours, her long hair hanging from her head without much fanfare. If you were to disregard the coldly calculating look on the girl’s face, Lily would have said that she seemed approachable.

“Dallon.” Emma’s voice was soft and careful, but Lily could detect that hint of distaste in it, and she glanced around nervously. She took a step back, reaching nervously for her communicator. She paused as her hand reached toward her collar, listening as the pair started to speak.

“What’re you doing here? Don’t you have someone else to harass?” Victoria’s voice was cold, and she stared angrily at Emma, leaving Lily wondering what Emma had behind her that let her stand there so casually facing off against Glory Girl in full costume, especially considering what she’d done.

“It’s a pleasant enough afternoon. I figured that I should get out of the house, enjoy a sunny day amongst the people. All the proceeds from the fair are going to charity, you know. That’s a good cause, something that I could get behind.” Emma smoothly crossed her arms, shifting from foot to foot and causing the skirt she wore to swirl around her legs. Lily watched as Emma sized Victoria up and down for a brief moment before glancing past Victoria as if searching for something.

“No Vigil around, I see. Didn’t feel in the volunteering spirit?” The girl’s words were low and casual, but Lily frowned at the implication hidden in them, and she watched as Victoria’s fists clenched and she stepped closer. She took in the tiny flicker of a smile that ghosted over Emma’s face.

“She’s around, patrolling with the rest of New Wave and the Wards. Talking to people, shaking hands.” Victoria spoke calmly, despite the tension visible in her form. Lily paused her movement, and then lowered her hand, watching with confusion when the two girls merely traded thinly veiled barbs.

“Indeed?” Emma’s voice was low and laced with mock surprise. “Well, since you’re so busy, perhaps I’ll go find her. Have a chat for old time’s sake. See what her new friends think of her. I mean, with all that cleaning that your Mother did, they can’t exactly do their own res-” Lily saw the cool smirk on Emma’s face as Victoria suddenly stepped forward, raising her arm, and she tried to move, to get between Victoria and Emma, raising her hand to her collar as she stepped closer.

The sound of a meaty thump had her pausing once more, staring in awe as Taylor crashed into the ground on her feet behind Vic, one hand lashed out and gripping Victoria’s arm as it swung. The effort strained Taylor visibly, causing the girl to drag across the ground and crash into Victoria’s back, but the punch that she’d been lining up suddenly halted.

Lily glanced from Taylor toward the sky, staring at the shape of Kid Win rocketing away toward the west. Taylor speaking coolly drew her focus back to the ground. Lily watched as Taylor seemed to overpower Victoria, spinning her around and shoving the blonde hero toward her. Lily reached out and caught Victoria as the girl staggered in confusion in her direction, watching in awe as Taylor surged forward and glared at Emma.

“No more, Emma.”
“Alright, Tomorrow then? The kids are all going out dancing without us, but Karaoke sounds fun. I’ll swing past after you get rid of Amy and Victoria, and we can head out with your friends.” Crystal’s voice drifted toward Taylor, and she glanced over where the tall blonde girl was casually chatting with an amused looking Sabah outside of the older girl’s shop. They’d made a brief pause on their patrol when they reached the shop and had found Sabah sweeping the sidewalk. Taylor desperately wished that she could be over there with them discussing the prospects of blowing off the prom and going out to do… something, but instead she was-

“Alright, Hold still. C’mon Vigil, big smile.” Taylor shot a brief glare at Kid Win who was having entirely too much fun holding the phone in his hands, but she smoothed out her expression and did her best to offer a smile that at least seemed genuine. She waited till the camera flashed before gently disentangling herself from the two excited fourteen-year-old girls who immediately charged for Win and got their phone back, eagerly talking to each other at a pace that Taylor had a hard time following.

It’d been like this most of the morning. Vigil hadn’t done much PR work, so that meant that whenever people saw her walking in costume, they came up and asked questions, thanked her for the work that her father had done, took pictures. It was honestly getting a bit too much. Worse still was the sheer malicious amusement that the others seemed to get out of it, even Weld’s face was cracked into a smile, as was Manpower’s. Taylor glared at them all as the teenagers waltzed off, the shorter one demanding the apparent owner of the phone send her copies for Instagram.

“So,” Crystal’s voice was low and teasing, and Taylor glanced over to see her wandering over, Sabah’s form vanishing back toward the shop. “All done with your adoring public then?” Taylor narrowed her eyes and turned back toward Manpower, sending the man a look that begged to get back to it. The giant merely chuckled and then gestured them all on.

In truth, the others had been getting some attention too. Boys seemed to zero in on Crystal with her impressive form and shiny hair, and Win got a lot of attention from the younger kids since they found the board that he was coasting along on to be fascinating. Weld had a few people checking him out, but his appearance was a bit offputting, much the same reason that Manpower didn’t get much attention. People were always a bit unsettled when they realized that he was truly that big in person.

“So. Taylor.” Crystal’s comment drifted her way, and Taylor let out a soft groan. She’d hoped that the small break might have distracted the older girl, but when she glanced over and saw that smug little smirk she sighed and rolled her eyes.

“No.” She commented faintly, watching as Crystal’s face fell.

“But, c’mon. Weld doesn’t even think you can do it, and Kid Win’s acting nice, but he has his doubts. We need to show these goons who’s boss. Dad even said that it’s fine, and I’ll be here to catch you if anything goes wrong.” Taylor glanced at Victoria’s petulant expression and rubbed her face.
“Crystal, just because I could, in theory, jump onto Win’s board while he’s in motion doesn’t mean that it’s a good idea.” She stared at the older girl with an irritated look, watching as she continued to offer up that pouty expression. She rubbed her face, glancing over at Manpower who merely arched a brow.

“Fine!” She growled, ignoring the excited cheer that Crystal issued in response, glancing at Win. She took in his skeptical look and rolled her eyes. “I can do it. Do you want to? You’ll just need to make sure that you fly directly over us. I can compensate a few feet in either direction, but if it’s more then that we’ll probably both end up with broken arms.” She smirked at him as he studied her before adopting a cocky smirk.

Taylor came to a stop, watching as the others did the same around her. Kid Win deployed his board, spinning it as he dropped it and then hopping on when it came to a stop over the concrete, humming powerfully. The boy stepped up, his boots glowing as they connected with the board, no doubt securing him in place. The tinker took a moment, adjusting his outfit before shifting in place and suddenly rocketing away and down the street, going about thirty feet out before turning the board into a climb and circling back around.

Taylor watched him for a few moments before shifting into a calm stance. She soothed her emotions, digging deep into the Force and letting the serenity wash over her. Taylor ignored the faint trails of amusement washing down her link from Jolee and Bastila, and crouched low, waiting until the force told her to move. She felt it whispering as Win started rocketing toward her and she pushed off, using the Force to augment her movements and launching herself into the air.

She shifted in the air, her body doing a perfect aerial flip before she dropped, landing with a thud atop the tinker’s board, laughing when his hands latched onto her sides, and he started jerkily trying to compensate for the sudden weight. Taylor remained in the Force, reaching down and moving in time with Win’s movements, shifting her body around to smooth off the jagged flight and to keep them from crashing into any streetlights. It took a moment, but once Win had control, Taylor relaxed her grasp on the Force a bit, still following his movements though.

Opening her eyes, she grinned as she watched the street below blurring past and she let out a laugh as Win climbed up and over the shorter buildings, clearly preparing to circle back to the others. She leaned back to get his attention, spotting a circle of color.

“Win!” She called, waiting till he shouted something toward her ear before pointing out toward the park and shouting back.

“Wanna buzz my girlfriend?” She smirked when his hands tightened, and the board levelled off, the wind making any actual talking hard. She narrowed her eyes as the board picked up speed, grinning when the boy did something that caused the board surge in speed. She let out a whoop of delight at the speed, hunkering down and moving in time with his movements as they rocketed down over the fairground.

“Vigil, Win, you’re out of position, what’re you doing?” The sound of their comms crackling to life cause Win to ease up off the speed, slowing the forward momentum. Taylor listened as Win shifted and then his voice cut out over the line. The words ghosted through her mind as she stared in confusion at a small knot of people around the pavilion that Taylor had heard Victoria was working in.

“Just showing off for the crowd a bit, console, we’ll be looping back in a sec-” She narrowed her eyes, her attention ghosting over a familiar shimmer of red and she felt her blood turning to ice. She watched as the group around them nervously stepped back, her gaze settling on Lily in her costume.
near the edge. Emma seemed to say something and Taylor watched as the tension in her girlfriend’s body ratcheted up a bit. She frowned.

“Kid Win. Get us in close. Now. As soon as I jump down, get back to Manpower.” She spoke quickly and coldly, and she felt Win tensing as his voice cut off on the line. He seemed to get that something was going on, because he shifted, leaning forward and sending them into a sharp descent. Taylor shifted on the board, waiting and watching as something seemed to snap in Victoria and Taylor leapt, her body spinning through the air.

The Force was screaming at her as she lashed out with her hand, snagging Victoria’s wrist and using every last scrap of telekinesis that she could will up to plant her feet, and brace her body to stop that strike that would have sent Emma flying through the stall across the way. Still, her body groaned in pain as she viciously jerked Victoria back. She moved with the effort, pulling Victoria away and shoving her in Lily’s direction.

“No more, Emma,” Taylor spoke coldly, watching as Emma’s expression shifted from shock to confusion to something else. She didn’t wait for Emma to come up with a quippy one-liner, she lunged forward and savagely grabbed the girl’s arm, dragging her to the side and striding away coldly. She wasn’t surprised when Emma didn’t put up a fight, merely trailing after her in confusion.

“Taylor!” Vic’s voice trailed after her and she ignored the older girl, shifting and scooping an unresisting Emma up into her arms and leaping up onto the roof of a stall, using it as a springboard to carry her to one of the trees at the edge of the park, after another two leaps she was out of the park and across the rooftops. She pressed a hand to her ear and spoke softly.

“Console, this is Vigil, I need to take my lunch early. An emergency has come up. I’ll be back in about half an hour.” She didn’t wait for a response, removing her earpiece and then leaping from rooftop to rooftop coldly. She ignored Emma staring at the side of her face as she carried her to an entirely different park.

Taylor ignored the sharp gasp from Emma when the park came into sight. It’d been a favourite of theirs in the past, exactly halfway between their houses, and it’d been a common meeting place. Taylor had spent several months here sitting alone and hiding the fact that she and Emma weren’t friends from her father. She’d spent months reminiscing on this bench and repairing her own broken heart. The bench that had once been hers and Emma’s had been a momentary port in the storm her life had become, at least until someone had defaced it with a great many insults about her.

Taylor zeroed on the bench, or where it had once been. Someone had replaced it in the two years that she’d been gone, a simple wooden bench sitting in its place. Taylor stared at it quietly as she alighted on the ground nearby. She walked to the bench and dropped Emma into it as gently as she could, staring down at the confused looking redhead.

“W-Why?” The words were soft, and Taylor paused, frowning when the redhead on the bench stared up at her with this look of abject confusion and horror on her face. Taylor shifted back on her heels, the white-hot fury that she’d felt shrinking back a few notches. She stared silently at the girl for a few moments before speaking softly.
“Why what?” She studied Emma as the girl shifted forward, hands settling on her knees, taking a breath before speaking.

“Why now. You’ve ignored me for two whole fucking years, you’ve done everything in your power to pretend that I don’t exist, and then you do this. It’s because of her, isn’t it? She’s what finally breaks that vow of silence? Why?” Taylor blinked and felt her expression hardening, a familiar stoniness washing over her. She stared back at Emma, watching as the girl flinched back under the expression.

“What did you want me to do Emma? What did you expect me to say? I was doing what you wanted. You made that abundantly clear. Every time I tried to talk to you, to see you, you told me that I wasn’t worth your time. You treated me like garbage. You told the world that I was garbage. You destroyed every last connection between us. You destroyed my entire life, Emma, and then left me to your friends. You hated me; you thought that I was a monster, why would I ever want to acknowledge that?” Taylor’s voice was cold and tired, and she stared at the girl as she glanced off to the side.

“I- I never hated you.” The words were uttered softly, and Taylor flinched back quietly. She stared in confusion at Emma. Taylor watched as the redhead turned back, running her hands over her legs and tensing as she waited.

“You- You didn’t…what?” Taylor felt the anger in her flickering, and the soothing feelings from the others washed over her. She stood there, clenching her fists quietly and then let out a single long low breath. “Then why, Emma? Why did you…” Taylor trailed off, trying to put her thoughts in order, trying to pick out one monstrous act amongst them all to hold up and ask why. She scrabbled at the images for a few moments, shuddering until Emma finally cut back across.

“I was afraid of you. I was terrified. You-You’d rejected me. You’d rejected me and cut me out of your life. Sophia was worried what you’d do, what you’d say, and… I trusted her. She was there for me after I’d had the worst summer of my life, I’d nearly died, doing something stupid. I’d nearly gotten other people killed doing something stupid, and worse than all of that, Taylor, I’d-” Taylor snarled softly as she lunged forward.

“And that makes it right, Emma? Tit for tat? I didn’t fall into your arms, and that meant that you got to destroy my life? That you got to spread those lies about me when I wasn’t even there to defend myself?” Taylor balled her hands into fists as she stood a scant foot from the other girl, staring down at the girl’s face.

“I didn’t…at first I didn’t think they were lies, and the rumours started smaller. It was Sophia’s idea to embellish. To push. I didn’t realize until after that I’d been wrong.” Emma’s voice was small, terrified and Taylor could see, could understand finally and she felt sick.

“You could have stopped it, Emma. You could have told them you were wrong.” Taylor’s voice was low and laced with lingering pain. She stared at Emma as the girl shrank into her bench.

“And done what? It was too late Taylor. I’d started a war; I’d fired the first shots and destroyed our friendship already. Speaking up after that would have done nothing. Sophia would have destroyed me, my rep would be worthless, and I’d already lost you as a friend.” Emma glared at her hands and frowned.

“You could have stopped it too, Taylor. You’re the one that pushed Sophia. You refused to give her what she wanted, and she escalated. If you’d just given in and shown her your belly, she’d have left you alone to wallow, but you kept on pushing her.” Emma’s voice was bitter and tired.
“And what comes after that, Emma? Should I have loosed your best friend onto the rest of the students? People like Greg, maybe, or Charlotte? What would she have done to them if she hadn’t been able to take out her urges on me.” Taylor’s voice was sub-arctic as she watched Emma’s form wince back, her entire body screaming of guilt. Taylor stared at the girl, her body filled with disgust. She slowly backed away, glaring off toward the left, watching cars driving past on the street. “Why the rest of this Emma. You’d already discarded me. I’d stopped trying to replace you, and you’d moved on. Sophia and Madison kept me occupied, but you didn’t get involved in that. But the moment I leave, the moment I’m beyond their reach, suddenly you’re everywhere again.” Taylor spoke softly, her voice no doubt laced with exhaustion at this point. “Why couldn’t you just let me be free and heal?”

“I needed to see.” The words were subtle, and Taylor turned back quietly, staring at the girl as she shifted a bit, straightened her back. “Suddenly, you were a hero, Taylor. You were living your Mom’s dream, and you were making friends. And there were rumours. About you and them, the girls. I had to see. I had to know if it was true; I had to know if it was just me.” Emma’s voice was soft, and she twiddled her thumbs. Taylor stared at her in confusion, and it took Emma a few moments to continue.

“I had to know why you rejected me if it was something I did wrong. I guess that I never realized that I just wasn’t your type. Shame that I wasn’t blonde I guess?” The words were bitter and angry, and Taylor stared at Emma quietly, her expression becoming harder as she listened.

“Y-You’ve been stalking my fucking girlfriend and all of my fucking friends because you’re jealous?” Taylor’s voice was laced with disbelief and anger. She stared at Emma in a sense abject loss as the girl surged to her feet.

“You gave her a chance, but when I tried, you just-” Taylor surged forward and grabbed Emma’s shirt, hauling her up off her feet and glaring into her eyes.

“You fucking kissed me as I was sobbing about the loss of my mother on my first fucking birthday since she’d passed, Emma. You dropped a heaping pile of shit on me as I was dealing with all that pain and hurt, and I needed fucking time. I didn’t reject you, Emma.” She stared at the girl’s face as it started to pale, those lips opening.

“Remember, Emma. Remember that day I came back, and I came to your house with those flowers. I was going to… And you were there with Sophia. And you…” Taylor paused, unable to get the words out. She just stood there coldly, holding Emma for a moment. “You remember what you did.” Taylor pushed Emma away, releasing her. She stared at the shorter girl as she stood there, pale-faced.

“N-No. I. There’s-” Emma’s face remained pale, her eyes almost wild as she stood there. Taylor stared at the girl and let out a sigh.

“You want to know why I gave her a chance, Emma?” She spoke tiredly as she crossed her arms. “I told her every dark secret I had, I gave her every reason to run, to turn on me, and she didn’t. That’s why.” Taylor stared at Emma, watching as the girl’s eyes hardened.

“I did what anyone would have done in my shoes, Taylor.” The girl’s voice was cold, and Taylor growled.

“Victoria didn’t-” Taylor started, and flinched back when Emma sharply cut back.

“But every other person did, Taylor. Every last person did the exact same thing that I did when confronted with what I was confronted with.” Taylor stared at Emma, something clicking in her mind. She felt a fury building in her, and she lashed out, her hand coming out and smashing into the
side of Emma’s face, the slap staggering the girl back into the bench. Taylor stood there furiously as
Emma turned to look back up at her, that trickle of blood falling from her lip.

Taylor opened her mouth to speak, but the look of satisfaction on Emma’s face stilled her hand. She
stared at the girl, the force filling in all the blanks. Taylor watched as Emma seemed to stall, sitting
there quietly and waiting. She wanted Taylor to scream, to hit her. She wanted Taylor to…

This was all about absolving Emma of her guilt. Everything that the girl had done had been about
absolving herself of the guilt that she’d felt for what she’d done. Proving to herself that she wasn’t a
bad person. Taylor stood there, her fists clenched as she took in Emma quietly for a few moments
before turning quietly.

She ignored the girl crying out her name. She started at a walk and then when the steps came after
her she started to run, dipping into the force and clearing the park in a quarter of the time it’d take
Emma to follow. She crossed the street in a blur, ignoring the speeding cars and leaping up into the
sky, her feet bracing on a window sill and launching her to a roof. She turned back to take one last
look at the redhead staring up at her forlornly. She stared down at her for a moment before turning
and leaping away, leaving Emma to drop to her knees in her wake, leaping from roof to roof,
heading deeper into the city.

The sound of the knife crashing into the cutting board over and over barely did anything to soothe
Taylor’s frayed nerves. She glared at the countertop as she worked, dicing onions, slicing carrots,
chopping potatoes. The knife in her hand blurred as she worked, and when she came to the end of
the available supply of cuttable food, she let out a soft growl and tossed the knife into the sink with a
loud clatter. The sound of a gasp from nearby caused her to freeze.

She’d thought that she’d had the house to herself. After they’d all finished their patrols at four,
Taylor and Victoria had talked briefly about their days, Taylor doing her best to keep her explanation
of her discussion with Emma vague, not saying much beyond telling Victoria that she’d handled it.
Taylor had ended up begging off when the rest of the group mentioned their intent to wander the
stalls a bit, claiming that she’d had a headache and needed some time to herself. Victoria’s lack of an
argument or offer to come with her had been disconcerting but to be honest, Taylor had hoped for
some time to herself to try and get her thoughts in order. But each time she tried to center herself, that
same darkness crept into her mind.

She stood there, hands on the counter, glaring down at the cutting board. Considering the afternoon
that they had, she doubted that her group would be here, which left Lisa. She waited, hoping that the
girl would move on, but instead, she felt her shoulder slumping when the sound of Lisa’s briefcase
clattering down on the table was heard, and she quietly walked toward her. Taylor stood still, glaring
at the board until a hand gently gripped her arm and turned her around. She stared down at Lisa,
blinking at the sudden flicker of concern on the typically tart woman’s face.

“Taylor are you OK—” Lisa’s words were quiet, and she reached up. Taylor felt the girl’s cool
fingers on her cheeks, and when she pulled them back, the tip was lined with moisture. “You’re
crying.” The girl stared at her for a moment before heading to the sink. When she came back with a
soft towel, Taylor just stood there, letting Lisa wipe the tears away. She stood silently until the
younger girl drew back and held the towel in her hands, staring quietly at her.

“What’s up, Taylor? You’re uh- You’re not fighting with Victoria, right, cause I’m not sure how much help I’ll be with all of that.” Lisa’s expression shifted between concern and nervousness and back and Taylor found herself chuckling as she lifted a hand to wipe at her nose.

“N-No, or at least, not yet. Considering the stunt I pulled earlier, that’s not necessarily out of the realm of possibility. I uh. I finally confronted my old friend Emma.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and she’d bow her head, ignoring Lisa’s hiss of recognition.

“I uh, I read that file. It’s not exactly… pleasant stuff, Taylor. How did you end up, you know…” Lisa trailed off, and Taylor nervously studied her before slipping over and taking a seat on the nearest chair. She stared at Lisa, watching as the younger girl moved around the kitchen, putting together two cups of tea. She stared at her for a few moments before resting her elbows on the table and starting to speak.

She took her time telling the story as she drank the warm tea, starting at the beginning, filling in the blanks that Lisa’s consumption of her public file would have left. Telling her about her youth and everything that had happened since. Once she’d caught Lisa up, Taylor finally explained everything that she’d heard today. Starting with her patrol, and going on into finding Victoria about to break her ex-best friend’s face, to the long bitter conversation that she’d had with the redhead.

“...and then said that she knew that everyone else would have done the same thing. Because she’d seen them all do it when presented with the information that she had been.” Taylor frowned at her half-empty cup, squeezing it quietly.

“And I could tell. I could understand Lisa. I saw why she’d done it all. I saw the guilt that still burned at her, and the self-loathing that she feels. I saw her constantly pushing me like that because she wanted me to get angry, she ached for me to lash out, to hurt her.” Taylor glared at her cup quietly, her shoulders shaking just a bit.

“Thinker powers, am I right?” The words were soft, and Taylor glanced up at the rather tired look on Lisa’s face. She sat there for a few moments before slumping back into her seat. She took a few moments to truly study Lisa, taking in the girl’s overly bright suit and the almost casual way she was sitting despite the clear exhaustion that Taylor could sense from her.

“This is what it’s like for you all the time then?” Taylor spoke softly, studying Lisa’s face, noting the dark bags under her eyes.

“My power loves secrets, Taylor. There’s a reason that I’ll probably retire to live alone with a half dozen cats. You never really want to know everything about people. They’re all petty, and bitter, and selfish if you go down deep enough. But what you found out is the worst.” Lisa’s voice was tender, and Taylor felt her shoulders tensing.

“That some people can hurt you, betray you, or destroy you, and through it all they can still love you.” Lisa’s voice was soft, and Taylor studied the girl’s face as her eyes seemed to unfocus for a moment. She took a slow sip of her tea, feeling the frown lingering on her face as she took in the Thinker’s sad expression. Taylor studied Lisa for a moment, considering just what sort of history the other girl might have with this particular issue. She shifted forward and spoke to draw Lisa’s attention.

“This club sucks. Let’s start a new club.” She studied Lisa’s face, chuckling when the girl started and stared at her in confusion. “How about uh… Crochet. We’ll do that instead of the ‘knows entirely too much about how shitty the human condition is’ club.” Taylor studied Lisa, a soft smile ghosting
over her face as the girl perked up a bit and offered a tiny smile in return.

“We could do t-shirts. With some sort of pun-filled name. Something like...” Lisa commented after a moment, fiddling with her hands and offering Taylor a tiny smile.

“Crochet it ain’t so?” Taylor tried quietly, smirking over at Lisa when the girl froze and then let out an amused snort before biting her lip. Taylor lifted her mug and calmly drained it before glancing at Lisa. “Since neither of us knows anything about knitting though, let’s save that for next week. So, since the children are no longer fighting, and we can all sit down together, Lisa, how about we get changed and then work on dinner together? I could use some help.” She studied the nervous look on Lisa’s face before the other girl nodded.

Taylor slid to her feet and watched as Lisa slid off ahead of her and followed her upstairs. Taylor knew that she shouldn’t have started on dinner in her uniform, but up to this point, she hadn’t been able to work up the motivation to actually change. Taylor headed into her room and paused, standing by the dresser. Despite being sorely tempted to toss on the biggest comfiest pyjamas that she owned, Taylor grabbed a pair of shorts and a t-shirt.

She did her best to not consider the reasons that she was putting on shorts, merely deciding that if Victoria did come home angry, having some manner of distracting her might be for the best. She tugged on her t-shirt, standing and staring at herself in the mirror. The clothes felt odd on her, things from before her trigger, almost like they were more Victoria’s than hers at this point. She adjusted the shirt, watching as it hung down over half of the shorts and then she quickly lifted one leg and then the other before snorting and deciding that this would do.

She headed out the door, and down the stairs, freezing when she reached the kitchen at the sight that awaited her.

“What’d you think of my planned outfit for the next casual Friday?” Taylor stared in amusement at the sight of Lisa in a pair of comfortable looking red pyjama pants and a very over-sized jersey with Amy’s crest and name on it. She stood there, taking in the image for a few moments before laughing.

“How?” She tried curiously, but she couldn’t get the question out. Lisa bursting into laughter, saw her following.

“It ended up in my laundry; I’m not sure how. But I thought that this would be an amusing thing to do with it.” Taylor snorted softly at Lisa’s comment, glancing at the girl before dragging her over to the counter.

“Now I kind of want to see Amy’s reaction when she gets home to see you strutting around in that,” Taylor spoke as she set Lisa up with a cheese grater and a small brick of cheddar cheese before settling in working with the stove. She started by tossing some of the leftover roast beef from the night before into a pan and setting it on a burner. Reaching out a hand, Taylor quickly flipped on the element that she’d put the pan on, also setting the oven to warm as well. She smirked over at Lisa when the girl gave off an amused scoff.

“Excuse me, Hebert. I do not strut. I shamble around half-dead. And, I mean, I’m not scared of Amy. I’ll just claim to be her biggest fan. And watch her stalk off confused.” Taylor rolled her eyes and then shifted, placing the vegetables in the pan with the sizzling meat and then stalking over to the fridge. She rifled around with the leftovers before pulling out the leftover gravy they’d made last night to serve with the steaks, carrying it back to the stove.

“Well, Fan or not, I’m pretty sure that if she catches you in that, Amy’ll make sure that the only way that you’re shambling around is half-naked.” Taylor’s voice was teasing as she stirred the meat,
blinking at Lisa’s scoff. She stared at the other girl, curiously. When Lisa glanced over and saw her look, she snorted and spoke softly.

“Taylor, if anyone’s going to be walking around this house half-naked, it’s going to be you.” Taylor blinked quietly, glancing over at Lisa’s teasing expression. She stared at the girl as her expression fell, and she started to chuckle.

“...What?” She muttered quietly, blinking as Lisa covered her mouth.

“You uh… Wow. Haven’t you seen the way that your girlfriend has been looking at you?” Taylor blinked softly and frowned. She’d been a bit concerned about the distant conflicted looks that Victoria had been sending her. Lisa’s amusement seemed to fade quickly enough as she let out a soft sigh.

“I uh. I’ve noticed that she’s been acting a bit odd, but I haven’t brought it up yet. W-What’s going on?” Taylor stared at Lisa, studying her face as the girl opened her mouth, paused and then closed it. She took a second to think before muttering softly.

“Uh, as much as my powers want to spill this particular secret, it might be best if you talk with Victoria about it. It’s... It’s not bad, just. Personal.” Taylor stared at Lisa for a few moments before sighing quietly and turning back to her pan, pouring the gravy over the mixture that she was working with.

“So,” Taylor spoke lazily as she stirred the meat and gravy mixture around, glancing at Lisa as she continued to grate cheese. “What’s the first thing that you want to learn to crochet? Socks? You seem like a big fuzzy socks kind of person. Or a scarf, maybe.” Taylor hummed softly, smirking at Lisa’s amused raise of the eyebrow before she turned her attention back to the cheese.

“Laptop Cozy. Or uh. Blankets. Then I can make all the wool blankets and bury myself in them.” Taylor glanced at Lisa, studying the girl’s amused expression. She set the spoon she’d been working on the meat with down and headed back to the fridge to grab the leftover mashed potatoes. She set those in the microwave to heat a bit as she returned to her pan.

“Hats. I see you being good at hats. With the, like, pom poms on the top? And mittens. Something tells me you’d be great at Mittens.” Taylor hummed, glancing down at Lisa, and noting that she was done with the cheese. The girl stared at her with a look of fascinated bemusement but didn’t comment, so Taylor nodded toward the cabinet to her left.

“There’s a casserole dish in there, made of pyrex. Grab it out.” She watched as Lisa rifled around in it and pulled the dish free with a clatter of metal on wood. Taylor leaned over, peering into the cupboard to make sure that nothing was broken before glancing back at Lisa. “Okay. So, shepherd's pie. Easy. We start with this mix here.” Taylor poured the mixture into the dish, filling it halfway with the meat, vegetables and gravy.

“Next, you grab the potatoes there.” Taylor pointed and watched Lisa fish out the bowl, and she moved to grab a rubber spatula from the utensil drawer, offering it over to Lisa. “You use this, pour the potatoes out onto the meat, and then use the spatula there to smooth them down.” Taylor shifted back and watched as Lisa stared at her before moving over and doing as instructed, pouring the mashed potatoes out and spreading them over the meat mixture.

“Right,” Taylor grabbed the cheese and moved to spread that over the potatoes, offering Lisa a smirk as she collected the dishes. “Now we just put it in the oven and let it cook until the potatoes brown on the top, and the cheese is cooked,” Taylor smirked at Lisa as the girl took the heavy dish in hand and slid it into the warm oven, pulling out her phone and setting a timer.
“So. Hats?” Lisa’s voice was laced with amusement, and Taylor rolled her eyes, heading for the fridge. She opened it up and drew out two cans of soda, offering one to Lisa and the cracking open the other. She slid over and leaned against the edge of the counter, giving Lisa a wry smirk.

“I mean. You seem like you’d pretty good at them. The like, ones with the hanging tassels too.” Taylor held her hands beside to illustrate what she meant, smirking at Lisa’s eye roll.

Taylor stood quietly at the stove, carefully sectioning up the finished shepherd's pie. Glancing over, she blinked when the door opened. Lisa scooped up her plate, shot her a smirk and then headed toward the stairs, muttering something about headphones. Taylor watched her go quietly, tilting her head as she listened to the sounds at the front door. Lisa’s passage with that jersey hadn’t warranted a comment, which surprised Taylor and she nervously waited by the stove, listening to the sound of someone shuffling around.

Victoria came around the corner and froze in the doorway to the kitchen, staring at her quietly. Taylor studied the older girl. Victoria had apparently changed at the PRT base with the others since she was clad in her civilian clothes. Fitted jeans, and a heavy leather jacket that Taylor was pretty sure Vic had stolen from her dad’s closet. She dropped her duffel bag inside the door to the kitchen, and they stood quietly, staring at each other for a few moments before Taylor took a step in Victoria’s direction.

“I’m sorr-”

“I’m sorr-” They both started at once, pausing and staring at each other quietly. Taylor took a few steps forward and opened her arms, letting out an oof when Victoria crashed into her. She felt the shorter girl’s arms wrapping around her middle and squeezing, and she let out a soft grunt. She held Victoria as she muttered softly.

“I’m sorry.” The girl said again and glanced up. “I didn’t mean to attack her. I just. She was… She was being so smug, and cocky, and she said that she was going to hunt you down, and she was almost daring me to-” Taylor reached up, gently cupping Victoria’s cheek, drawing the girl up to meet her eyes. She stared into the older girl’s eyes, offering her a gentle smile.

“Vic. Breathe.” She studied the girl’s nervous expression and leaned forward, resting her head against Victoria’s. “I’m not mad at you. Truthfully, I’m sorry as well. I shouldn’t have been so brusque with you. I just… I was so tired of it. And I hated that she was making your life difficult.” Taylor studied Victoria chuckling when the girl snorted softly. They remained in place together like that for a few moments, resting their heads together before Taylor released the blonde girl and gestured to the stove.

“Lisa and I made dinner. Wanna curl up with something silly on TV?” She saw Victoria glancing at her before the girl nodded, carefully taking off her jacket and hanging on a chair. Taylor returned to the stove, carefully removing the gooey mess from the pan, setting it in two bowls. After adding a fork to each bowl, Taylor handed one to Victoria before grabbing her drink and heading to the living
By the time that Victoria had joined her, Taylor had tuned the TV into an Earth Aleph import, a relaunch of an old game show. Victoria dropped down next to her and curled into her side, staring at the screen.

“Is that Steve Harvey?” Victoria’s voice drew her attention and Taylor blinked, staring at the screen and chuckling softly as the large man laughed at some comment. She shrugged in amusement as focused on her food. The two ate in silence, chuckling at the ridiculous show and mostly just soaking in each other’s presence as they unwound a bit. They ate in quiet, and part of Taylor had expected that her attention would drift back to Emma, instead, she’d found something much more fascinating to occupy her thoughts. She’d shifted in place, draping her legs over Vic’s lap as she got comfy, and watched the retired comedian stagger around the stage, laughing at the response.

Occasionally though, she’d glance back at Victoria, watching the girl do her best to surreptitiously steal glances of her legs. Taylor felt a soft blush on her cheeks as she considered the implications of that, but she didn’t move them, glancing at her empty bowl. She briefly considered ignoring Lisa’s advice and letting Victoria take her time, but something about the way that Victoria stared at her when she thought she wasn’t looking made her move. Once the show had changed, she made her move, shifting up and glancing at Vic, waiting until the older girl turned to meet her gaze.

Taylor took Victoria’s bowl and her own, setting them on the table, and then she reached over, grabbing the remote and flicking the stations until she found something playing music, and she set the remote aside. She glanced up at Victoria, taking in that familiar expression on her face, the wide-eyed mixture of anticipation and discomfort. She studied Vic for a few moments before shifting over and sliding up.

“Alright, we need to talk, Vic,” Taylor moved over and turned, pulling herself over Victoria’s lap and perching there, staring down into the other girl’s suddenly much wider eyes. She perched there for a few moments, taking in the apprehension on Victoria’s face and let out a sigh.

“Ever since my birthday, Vic, you’ve been staring at me like you’re afraid that I’m going to bite you.” She stared at the other girl’s face, blinking when Victoria dropped her head, her forehead coming to rest against her collarbone. She blinked and lowered her own, chuckling when Victoria muttered something that she’d probably not wanted Taylor to hear. “D-Did you just say; ‘I’m more worried about how much I’d like it if you did?’” She spoke softly, blinking when Victoria froze. She stared at the girl until she realized that the sudden surge of heat against her chest was almost certainly coming from a blush. Taylor reached out, gently grasping Victoria’s head and pushing it back so that she could see those blue eyes again.

“What’s going on Vic?” Taylor gently held the older girl’s face, keeping the gaze on her, not wanting to let Victoria hide just yet. She studied Victoria’s nervous expression, watching as she wet her lips and finally spoke.

“I-... Sometimes you make it a bit hard for me to control myself.” The words were quiet, nervous, and Taylor tilted her head, watching the emotions flitting over Victoria’s face. When she tilted her head to the side, the other girl let out a soft sigh and continued slowly. “I don’t want to push you, Taylor. You’re still... new to this sort of thing, not to mention the other issues going on. And, uh, after I gave you the flute and everything that happened, I was uh.” She flushed quietly, and Taylor blinked quietly.

She idly considered the girl's words, studying Victoria's rather dark cheeks, gently tilting her chin up to meet those eyes, and seeing the flickering desire within the-
‘Oh.’

“Oh.” Taylor flushed softly, and blushed quietly as well, staring back into Victoria’s eyes. “You’re saying—” She paused blinking when Victoria nodded softly, her cheeks darkening even more. “Like… about me?” She muttered a flicker of confusion welling up in her chest. She shifted back just a bit under Victoria’s scrutiny, suddenly feeling rather bashful.

“Yeah, about you,” The words were soft, quiet and Victoria stared up at her nervously. “Is that okay?” She asked quietly, and Taylor blinked and frowned a touch as she thought about it. Was it okay? She considered how she felt, letting her mind drift out. Beneath the nervousness and disbelief, there were other feelings lurking; fascination, a tiny hint of pride, and a touch of curiosity. Taylor shifted up and glanced at Vic, nodding slowly.

“Y-yeah, I think that I kind of like that idea actually. That you’re uh, thinking of me like that.” Taylor’s blush continued strong, but she studied Vic for a few moments. She glanced at her curiously for a few moments before leaning close.

“I-I can’t promise anything but… can I?” She murmured, slipping closer, moving past Victoria’s lips and cheek toward her neck. She paused, listening as Victoria inhaled sharply, holding in place nervously until the older girl nodded jerkily. She leaned in carefully, glancing nervously up at Vic before slowly pressing her lips to the soft skin of Victoria’s throat, gently kissing the girl’s neck. She heard Victoria inhale sharply, sending a trill of fascination though her.

She let her lips linger for a few moments before offering a soft nibble, blushing at the strangled gasp that emerged from the older girl’s lips, shifting as Victoria’s hands clasped to her hips and held her in place. She felt the girl under her straining a bit, and she shifted back, peering at Victoria. Taylor sat there staring at the other girl’s half-lidded eyes and the way her mouth hung open just a touch. Victoria seemed to take a moment to catch on, her eyes focusing after a second and locking onto Taylors.

“T-Taylor, wh-what? Is everything okay?” Taylor stared at Victoria quietly, studying her face. She reached out, caressing the girl’s cheek and dragging her thumb over her lips, very curious about the way that the girl shuddered at the contact.

“Can I?” Taylor muttered as she leaned closer, chuckling when Victoria stared at her in confusion. She didn’t answer, though. Instead, she leaned down and tapped her forehead against Vic’s. It took a few moments before Victoria’s mind managed to catch up, her cheeks darkening. Taylor stared into the girl’s vulnerable eyes for a few moments before her girlfriend offered a nervous short nod.

Taylor touched the Force, reaching out and gently opening the connection. She was tempted to dial it up as fast as she had before, but this time, she didn’t want to lose herself to the sensations. She felt the warmth washing into her, and she gasped softly as the heat coiled in her middle and filled her. She felt her eyes drifting shut as she blushed softly.

She leaned back down, moving to press her lips to Victoria’s neck once more, biting softly on the sensitive flesh and shivering at the sensations that washed through as Victoria arched up into her form. She drew back with a soft hiss and stared at Victoria for a moment before getting off her lap and standing.

“W-What, did I? I’m-” Victoria’s nervous, fearful babbling was adorable, but Taylor reached out, grabbing the girl’s hand and dragging her up off the couch.

“You’re fine; I would just rather not traumatize your sister of Lisa should they wander past.” Victoria seemed to perk up suddenly, blushing bright red as it occurred to her that they’d essentially been
necking on the couch. The girl let out a nervous little sigh as she adjusted her shirt.

“I-I guess we should probably stop then,” She tried softly, and Taylor stared up at her curiously before chuckling.

“I mean, I was suggesting that we relocate, but if you wanted to stop...” Taylor shifted lazily and turned, wandering from the room. It took Victoria nearly ten seconds to follow, and Taylor felt the surge of heat washing through their bond before she moved, and she dashed up the stairs.

BLOCK

Taylor lay on her back, basking in the feeling of Victoria’s sweat soaked body pressed firmly to her side. She stared down at the girl’s damp hair, reaching out and gently moving some of it from the older girl’s face. Taylor lay there, contemplatively taking in the serene look on Victoria’s face. She could tell that the other girl hadn’t succumbed to sleep, but they’d both retreated into their own thoughts after things had come to an end. The connection between them remained open even now and Taylor could feel Victoria’s lingering happiness, and the warm pleasant feeling spreading between them.

Taylor let her own mind drift back, drifting through the hazy warm memories of the evening. Everything was a bit disjointed, the memories a tangled mess of heat, and tangled limbs and muttered words. In truth, they hadn’t gone much past heavy petting, despite the connection between them, but they’d certainly gotten a lot closer then they’d been before.

Victoria’s face was currently resting against her bare torso letting Taylor inspect the numerous tiny dark marks that she’d left around Vic’s shoulder and neck. Taylor considered how the other girl’s jean-clad legs felt tangled with her own, deciding that she liked it.

Taylor blinked when Victoria shifted closer, idly wondering what she was doing. It took a moment for Taylor to realize that Vic was listening to her heartbeat. She shifted a bit, letting the girl get as close as she wished, wrapping her arms around the smaller girl and running her fingers through the damp blonde hair.

“Feeling less stressed out?” Taylor’s voice was soft and she blinked when Victoria chuckled, the warm breath feeling odd against her bare skin. She smiled when the girl nodded quietly.

“Yeah,” Victoria slowly drew back and stared up at her, and Taylor offered the other girl a curious smile. It took Victoria a few moments to continue and Taylor spent that time curiously studying the lines the furrowed across her girlfriend’s brow. “How’re you feeling?” Victoria’s voice was soft and laced with an odd sort of nervousness that made Taylor’s heart flutter. Taylor reached out, gently grasping the girl’s jawline and leaning in to feather a kiss over her lips.

“I’m fine, Vic. That was...” Taylor paused, considering how she felt. It’d been a lot of things. Pleasant, exciting, fascinating. She tilted her head quietly to the side considering for a few moments before shrugging her shoulders. “That was something.” She tried finally. Victoria stared at her before shaking her head.

Taylor blinked when Victoria slid back away and out of the bed. It was odd, Taylor noted to herself as her cheeks turned red as she watched Victoria's bare back as she moved to fix her jeans and zip them back up. She’d seen Victoria like this for the last hour or two, but once she was out of bed, it
felt different. She watched as Victoria snagged one of her dress shirts from where it hung off the
dresser and slid it on, moving to button it up. Taylor studied the other girl curiously as she felt a
momentary flicker of suspicion at the way she stared at the door.

“Where’re you going?” She commented, feeling the suspicion suddenly flicker again as Victoria
stared over at her. She shifted in place before coughing lightly.

“I need to use the bathroom.” Taylor stared at her quietly and sat up, watching as Victoria’s eyes
suddenly widened and her cheeks turned red. Seems that even the bed wasn’t protection enough. She
shifted over, grabbing her t-shirt from where it’d ended up on the floor, sliding it back on and
adjusting her shorts. Sitting back up, she stared at the much less red form of her girlfriend for a few
moments before speaking.

“Please don’t bother your sister, Vic. I don’t think I have to tell you how she might react after the
week you just put her through if you were to walk into her room wearing one of my shirts, with sex
hair like that.” Victoria seemed to freeze as she glanced down at herself and squirmed quietly.
Eventually, the girl huffed and nodded before slipping back over into bed. Taylor grinned when
Victoria leaned over and flopped atop her, chuckling as she moved to try and smooth the wild hair
down.

"Do I really have sex hair?" Victoria's voice was laced with amusement, and Taylor hummed in the
affirmative, shifting over when Victoria crawled over her and flopped down next to her. Taylor
watched as Victoria lay there, shifting up on an elbow to peer down at the other girl's back, waiting
for her to continue speaking, knowing that something was on her mind by how her emotions shifted
uneasily across the link.

“I just. I worry. She’s still a kid, and I know that Lily likes her, and-” Taylor glanced down at Vic as
she spoke, staring at her for a few moments before flopping back with a snort. She turned her head as
Victoria shifted, continuing to whine into her pillow.

“And your sister is one of the scariest people that I’ve ever met, and can certainly take care of one
girl. Besides if anyone is going to be initiating things in that particular relationship, you can almost
certainly bet it won’t be Lily.” Taylor chuckled, snorting when Victoria shoved her and muttered
petulantly into her pillow.

Taylor let her grumble for a bit as she got comfortable on her back, reaching over to where she'd left
her book last night. She knew that Victoria would be curled into her side before either of them
managed to get any sleep, and she had been neglecting her leisure reading.

Chapter End Notes

[[SO. That’s a thing. =] Uh, That'll probably be as spicy as things ever get around here, so uh. That's something. Anyway, lesse what we gotta unpack here. Uh. There’s the fair stuff, that was fun. Lily’s been having issues with Vic cause of the sleepover, but that’s mostly, mostly smoothed out. Victoria’s very clearly not at all caring about keeping her and Taylor secret at this point, so that’s interesting.

Lily/Amy continues to be neat to write together, and we finally get to see Taylor confront Emma and get a bit of a glimpse into Emma’s motivations. Lisa and Taylor's bonding is good as well, and I think Lisa out of anyone would be the most apt to understand what Taylor’s Prescience can tell her about people.
And Victoria and Taylor finally deal with that particular elephant in the room. Writing this section was actually kind of hard. It was like 2k words, but it took just as long as half of Lily’s 8k section. Iunno.

Anyway, for what we get to look forward to in the next chapter. We’ll finally see Taylor interact with the Crystal Forge, And she’ll be practicing with her new pike even though it’s not fully complete. We’ll be doing the prom stuff, and getting an Amy perspective finally. Also, there’ll be a bit of Drama toward the end.

Also a Victoria B-side, so that’ll be nice, I’m sure. As always, looking forward to your reviews, lemme know what you think, and I’ll be active in the thread.]]
7.8

Chapter Summary

[[7.7 still remains in Content Review, lmao, but uh. 7.8 is finished now, so here we go. Starting with this chapter, I’ll be putting new chapters here for you guys to pick apart and point out errors on, and then once the next chapter goes up, I’ll copy the cleaned up chapters over to AO3 for the bingers/rereaders. This is the last ‘mild’ chapter for a bit, so enjoy the WAFF while it lasts.

ALSO: Announcement time. We’ve got an official Beta. [USER=285845]Noelemahc[/USER] . =] He’s a cool dude and did most of the proofreading for this chapter ahead of time. Good people. Also, Nathilustra, the nice lady that did our cover art, is now working on a second bit of character art showing our Victoria in and out of costume. That’ll be a few weeks away. Something to look forward to.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 19th, 2011

Taylor’s House, Brockton Bay

Taylor knelt on the ground before the machine that Dragon had constructed and sent to her for her birthday. Both of her hands were laid on the top of the device and Taylor could feel every minute shifting of the mechanics within, and even now she was surprised that despite the heat within the forming chamber, the exterior was merely warm to the touch. She remained in place, trying and failing to keep from thinking about the fascinating morning that she’d gone through.

She’d woken up in Victoria’s arms feeling oddly changed; everything had felt different even if they’d awoken in the same position that they always had. It might have had something to do with the distinct paucity of cloth between them, but Taylor hadn’t really been focused on that. She’d laid there quietly, watching Victoria’s peaceful face resting against her chest, taking in the almost serene expression on the older girl’s face. Victoria looked at peace in a way that, even in sleep, Taylor had never seen.

Taylor had held the other girl, silently studying that expression until the sunlight had ghosted up and over her shoulder and finally stirred Victoria from slumber when it hit her face. Victoria shifting and trying to claim a few more moments of sleep by hiding her face in Taylor’s neck had seen the younger girl grinning and tightening her arms around the elder one. They’d remained like this until the growing tension in Victoria’s body had prompted the girl to pull back.
Taylor remembered meeting Victoria’s nervous vulnerable gaze in the morning light and studying her in return. Something had welled up in her chest, and she’d felt her lips curling into a warm smile as she reached out, slowly pushing the other girl’s hair behind her ear. It was an odd feeling seeing that sort of naked need in Victoria’s gaze. She’d laid there as Victoria searched her eyes for something, the older girl’s eyes seeming to pierce into her. They remained like this for a few moments until Victoria’s eyes softened and she’d curled back into Taylor’s arms.

They’d remained curled up together in bed like this until Amy’s grumpy stomping around across the hall had drawn them from the warmth and comfort of their bed. Victoria had showered as Taylor cooked breakfast for a muzzy Amy, and then Taylor had showered as the other two ate. She’d have preferred to spend Victoria’s only day off this week with her, but when she came down for breakfast, Victoria and Amy had already been getting ready to head to Sabah’s.

They were apparently making a day of things, and the girls were getting their dresses tweaked there, and then doing make-up together and gossiping. Taylor had been receiving texts from Victoria periodically that included most of the juicy details, but it was still a bit odd being on the outside of the loop. Taylor knew that Lily was probably in the same boat, but at least they’d be able to keep each other company.

Truthfully, it was still… disconcerting to be relegated to the side like this as if they were the gentlemen in this scenario. Outdated gender stereotypes notwithstanding. Briefly, Taylor entertained the idea of inviting Eric over to gossip with, since he’d almost certainly been left out of the festivities, but she doubted that the poor boy would be all that helpful with doing her and Lily’s make-up, though something told Taylor that he would try his best. Grinning at the image that this produced, Taylor shook her head, trying to bring her focus back to what she needed to get done before company arrived.

She’d checked the readouts, and she knew that the chamber was ready, sitting at a sweltering twenty-two hundred degrees. She took a few moments, banishing the thoughts of Victoria and Amy, ensuring that her focus was absolute on what was growing within the heated high-pressure chamber in the device. One hand shifted and adjusted the dial on the left, starting the machine and causing it to feed graphite filaments into the chamber. The other moved, flipping the switch that filled the combustion chamber with nitrogen gas. Taylor kept her attention on the graphite as it melted and she used the Force to guide the material down and into place on the growing gemstone.

She had to be careful, precise here. She lacked the means to facet a force-attuned gemstone, so that required that she grow it into the shape it needed to be to serve as a focusing crystal in her lightsaber. So she was precise, gently placing every last bit of material before using the Force to harden it down and seal the shape. The crystal was nearly two-thirds done, but guiding it like this was taxing, and it increased the time spent significantly. At this rate, it was going to take her another four or five days before she had a functioning crystal.

Taylor continued at the work until the mental strain began to wear on her. This wasn’t a physically strenuous use of the Force, but the concentration, the focus required, and the attention to detail eventually made her brain ache if she pushed too hard. She started by shutting down the graphite extruder, gathering up the last of the carbon that was deposited in the chamber, shaping it into place before sealing the gem and solidifying it. Once the last of the material was gone, Taylor reached her hand out, shutting down the forge, allowing the gemstone within to cool.

Taylor studied the gem in the Force, watching to see if it’d crack or splinter from the rapid cooling, but it merely stopped glowing and sat there, humming softly in the Force. With a soft sigh of relief, Taylor slipped back onto her heels, standing and doing her best to ignore the numerous minute pops and cracks from her legs as she did her best to get the feeling to return to them after crouching on
them for nearly two hours.

Taylor took a few steps around the garage, waiting until the pins and needles in her feet had ended before approaching the bench and grinning down at the device that she’d finished just before heading out for patrol the night before. She carefully hefted up the lightsaber hilt and twisted it around her hand, considering it quietly. It felt heavier than she’d have expected from seeing them in her memory, but something about holding it in her hand felt right.

She adjusted her grip a few times, considering the unique design of the lightsaber. Most lightsaber hilts measured in at around ten inches, maybe a bit longer and this one easily cleared twelve, but it was still significantly smaller than the nearly two-foot-long base size of her collapsed bo-staff. Taylor idly twirled the hilt in her hand, considering it. She’d yet to add the power cell in, so when her thumb dragged over the activation stud it merely depressed. She considered the weapon before tracing the secondary studs.

The first caused the hilt to extend by about three inches, making it closer to a baton than a weapon, and then the next fully emerged the pole portion of the weapon. Taylor considered it for a few moments, idly twirling the weapon. It felt odd holding the weapon by the ‘hilt’ part of the lightsaber, but that’s how Senya had done it when using the pike one-handed. Taylor shifted her pose, moving her hand down the pole about halfway and gripped the top with her other hand, feeling much more comfortable holding it like this.

She closed her eyes and focused, doing her best to dredge up the faded memories of what she’d done as Senya in that battle arena. She moved her hand back to the hilt and collapsed the pole, and then she took a few breaths, shifting down into the Force and breathing slowly. Focusing as best she could, Taylor tried to follow the memories, focusing.

‘Block, then… parry aside, and then, elbow to the sternum, knee to the inner thigh, dodge the attack from behind, jump over the attack from in front. Weapon over back to block the attack from behind, extend the pole, bring it down on the foe in front.’ Taylor smoothly replayed the battle in her mind, quickly moving through each motion, though the sound of shoes scraping on stone and a nervous gasp caused her to freeze.

She slowly opened her eyes, glancing over her shoulder, having been almost positive that there was no one else present. She stared at the shocked form of Lily standing in the entrance to the garage holding a large duffle bag. Taylor lofted an eyebrow and glanced down, checking her watch. Barely past one, Lily was rather early. She glanced over toward the Asian girl, taking in her sheepish expression.

“Got bored, then?” Taylor smirked quietly as she spoke and watched Lily’s shoulders relax at her lack of irritation. “How uh, how did you get into my house?” She tilted her head curiously and blinked when Lily gestured over her shoulder.

“Lisa let me in. She seemed to be in a bit of a hurry as she headed out. Wasn’t even in her suit like most days.” Taylor blinked at that. She was pretty sure that Lisa had slipped off this morning to head into work, it’s odd that she’d come back and change. Taylor shrugged quietly, perhaps Piggot gave Lisa the afternoon off. Shrugging, she glanced down at her weapon, tilting her head before turning back to Lily.

“You used to use a sword, right? I remember Vista saying something about it to you at the meeting yesterday. Though you uh, mostly just ignored her and stared blankly at the board while she was talking.” Taylor found herself smirking when Lily paused and blushed before shrugging and stepping closer.
“Yeah, I used to, but it was pretty dangerous with my power. I could have killed a bunch of people.”

The odd look she sent her way saw Taylor smirking. She pressed the button, causing the pole portion of her weapon to collapse. She watched as Lily’s eyes widened at the rapid collapse and moved to hold up the hilt of the saber.

“This is going to be my new weapon; Dragon made it for me. It might actually be almost as dangerous as a regular sword to you once it’s done. It’s missing a part, but basically, once it’s complete, it’ll generate a blade of contained plasma that can cut through most conventional materials.” She shrugged quietly and moved to carefully unscrew the top portion of the weapon, setting it aside and grabbing the practice ‘blade’ that she’d made that screwed into the place where the emitter had been before.

“Since we’ve got about five hours before we have to be ready,” Taylor smirked and walked over to Lily and gestured toward the backyard. “You could have a quick spar with me? I’ve not had anyone to practice with for a bit, so my skills are getting rusty.” Taylor studied Lily’s expression. She found herself smirking when the girl’s expression became oddly eager. She decided to blame it to the girl’s appreciation for the art, as opposed to any other reason that Lily might want to smack her around.

She led the older girl out the back door of the garage and into the backyard, heading over to the small chest that they’d kept the practice weapons in. She paused, frowning when she opened it up, staring at the batons that Ralph and her father had used to train with her before... everything. She let out a quiet sigh as she traced her father’s baton for a few moments before drawing it out and offering it over to Lily.

She watched as Lily took the baton and expertly snapped it out, extending it to its full length. Taylor adjusted the hilt of her saber, getting used to the weight of the length of metal that stuck from the end. It was heavier than a real saber would be, but even with that, this would be good practice. She studied Lily as the girl familiarized herself with the baton, carefully inspecting it and nodding to herself at the weight. Taylor felt the weight of Marr’s presence as he settled in behind her eyes to watch, and she hefted her own weapon, gently touching on the Force.

“Go whenever you’re rea-” Taylor cut off as Lily lunged, the weapon arcing up. She shifted back, kicking off the ground and clearing nearly a foot and barely dodging the cross strike. She saw Lily staring at her in slight awe at the speed of her reaction, and she smirked, launching herself forward.

Lily’s weapon came up, and Taylor felt herself grinning as the battle unfolded. It was an odd contrast between her and the older girl. Lily’s powers made her accurate, far more accurate than she should be, and more than that, they made her more spatially aware. Taylor, on the other hand, was faster, and her reflexes better. Taylor kept her speed to a point where Lily could match her, to get the most out of the training, but it was still an odd battle.

Lily lashed out once for every four of Taylor’s strikes that she blocked, but they were all odd attacks, strange angles and varied speeds. Taylor had to keep re-adjusting her guard and blocks because of how Lily’s attacks continued curving in toward her. She found herself grinning as the speed of the clangs and clatters continued apace. As the attacks continued, Taylor found herself grinning wildly at Marr’s own amusement, though the laughter that issued from the Sith Lord wasn’t at Lily’s expense when the battle turned.

Taylor lunged in, intent on capitalizing on the disparity in their speed, but she didn’t expect Lily to roll into the attack after blocking. The shorter girl turned around the locked ‘blades’ and then hooked her free hand over Taylor’s elbow and under her arm and then shifted forward. Taylor let out in undignified squawk as she was shoved back and off her feet, her back slamming into the grass, while the older girl crouched down over her with a grin.
“Your speed might be significantly better than mine, Taylor, but I’m generally stronger and more firmly braced than you because of my power.” The words were low and teasing, and Taylor let out a groan quietly. She blinked when the older girl seemed to pause and stare at her, and when Lily reached toward her chest, Taylor blushed brightly.

“Uh- Lily, I-” She froze when the girl gently pushed aside the top of the ridiculous t-shirt that she wore and poked something on her neck, the girl’s amused grin stilling the nervous fluttering in her heart.

“Did you uh, get in a fight with an octopus or something?” The words were low and amused, and Taylor blinked before her entire face turned a brilliant crimson. She saw Lily’s face crack into a grin as she leaned back. “Oh. Now I see why Victoria was so willing to let Amy go out for Chinese food with me last night.” The girl smirked, and Taylor covered her face, rolling away along the grass. When Lily began to chuckle, Taylor lay there, face down on the grass until the girl stopped, but the blush remained on her cheeks as she got her feet under her, reaching out a hand toward the fallen weapon and watching it snap back into place. She glanced over at Lily, lofting an eyebrow.

The girl raised her own eyebrow in challenge, extending the baton once more and assuming a ready stance. Taylor smirked at her before dragging her thumb over the stud that fully extended the pole and then using the Force to rapidly close the fifteen feet between them with a leap, the weapon twirling up and around before crashing down toward Lily. When the girl merely planted herself and raised the weapon, quickly blocking the attack, Taylor smirked and used the Force to kick backwards, easily separating once more.

Standing a scant few feet from an amused looking Lily, Taylor raised the weapon into a ready stance as the girl lowered her weapon to hang parallel to her leg and then charged toward her. Taylor readied her weapon to intercept feeling an odd flicker of amusement in her chest as she saw the other girl coming for her.

Freshly showered and dried, Taylor felt a tiny bead of water tracing a slow, circuitous path down her spine and into the thin tank top that she wore, from where it’d originated at the base of her neck. She reached up a hand, ignoring Lily’s grunt of irritation and adjusted the towel that she’d wrapped around her hair and made sure it was sitting neatly before smoothly slipping back into a comfortable pose so that the older girl could continue her work.

Taylor did her best to sit still, staring curiously at Lily as the older girl let her tongue peek out of the corner of her mouth as she worked. She’d applied two different sticks to the numerous ‘love bites’ on her neck and was currently brushing something over the marks. Perched on the edge of her bed, Taylor stared at the image of them in the mirror, watching in fascination as the older girl’s brush carefully concealed the numerous dark marks. She found herself mildly impressed.

Lily had done her own makeup with casual ease, smoothly switching between the various creams and powders at her disposal, and had left her dark eyes accented with a deep violet colour that made them stand out against her face and would probably look particularly devastating with the dress that hung off the mirror nearby. Blushing softly, Taylor remembered how she’d offered to help with that process, and merely ended up stabbing Lily before admitting that she wasn’t one for make-up.

Taylor’s mother hadn’t been one for overly showy uses of make-up though she’d occasionally
applied some of the stuff when she wanted to dress up. Taylor remembered sitting with her as she’d spent nearly an hour muttering curses while trying to get her skin to cooperate, applying this cream and that powder, teasing her eyes with wands and applying gloss all to see that look of shock and wonder on her father’s face. Taylor’d often asked when she’d be allowed to play with all the fancy colours and creams, and her mother had usually made a joke along the lines that she could wear makeup once she’d finished reading the entire Lord of the Rings trilogy.

"Alright then," The words drew Taylor from her musing, and she glanced up, staring in amusement over at the mirror and her suddenly clear and spotless neck. She watched in fascination as Lily took out a bottle and sprayed it over the covered area and then stepped back. “We’ll need to let that set, but while we wait, let’s see what we got for you.” The girl moved over to a nearby paper bag and brought it over. Opening it up, she carefully drew out more products and hummed faintly.

“So, going off what we found amongst your mother’s things, and considering your similar skin tones, these shades should look decent? Considering your dress, we can do something more subtle, which will suit you.” The girl took out a few different things in plastic cases and held them up next to her face, humming faintly before settling on one and putting the rest away. She gestured Taylor over to the vanity and Taylor slipped over and took a seat.

Lily dragged over the chair from Taylor’s desk and flicked a switch set into the vanity, lighting up the lights on it and set to work, moving to spread something over Taylor’s face before applying several lines of foundation and spreading it around with an odd sponge. Taylor kept her face as still as she could, watching as Lily’s forehead creased in concentration. Lily hummed when she finished spreading the foundation around and used her fingers to apply a different cream to the areas around Taylor’s eyes and mouth, switching to a brush and something transparent afterwards, speaking softly as she brushed.

“So. I know why I didn’t want to wear a suit, but you wear dress clothes all the time. And this makeup thing clearly isn’t your forte. So why make such a big fuss about it?” Taylor blinked as Lily placed the brush aside and drew out a stick of some sort and set to work slowly brushing it along Taylor’s cheeks and eyebrows, smoothing it around with her fingers and humming in thought.

“I uh,” Taylor blinked when Lily drew out a brush and a small case, dabbing the brush in it and brushing it along her cheekbones and jawline. She chuckled at the tickling sensation before continuing. “I don’t want Victoria to forget that she’s dating a girl. And the others too I guess. I might look fairly good in a well-cut suit, but I didn’t like how Crystal was acting like we’re the ‘guys’ in this scenario.” Taylor lowered her voice and blinked when Lily let out an amused snort, setting her brush aside and grabbing a pencil and leaning close.

“Taylor, judging by how far those lovebites went down, I’m pretty sure that your girlfriend is very aware of the fact that you are, in fact, female. Certainly seems to appreciate it.” Taylor blinked and flushed bright red as Lily dragged the tip of the pencil over her eyebrows and hummed quietly. “Still, I’m sure that you’ll make quite the impression with that dress.”

Taylor wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so she sat back as the girl continued to work, applying more creams and powders to her eyebrows, and then mascara, followed by lipstick. Taylor waited until the girl was done with her lips before speaking softly.

“Yeah. So. My mother could do some of this, but it took her like an hour, and she cursed the entire way.” She watched as Lily blinked and glanced at her, flashing her a wry smirk.

“My uh, my adoptive Mother, Gertie? She taught me some of it, and I learned a lot more during the culture classes we took together.” Taylor blinked at that and Lily chuckled, telling her to close her eyes. More of the spray was applied over her face as Lily continued.
“Gertie was pretty firm that I should know about my culture. So we used to go to the local Japanese Cultural Center near our house. We learned to do lots of things, Origami, reading and speaking Japanese, and most relevant, they taught us about the traditional makeup techniques. There was this one point where they had us practice on ourselves or volunteers.” Lily’s grin was obvious in her voice, and once Taylor’s face no longer felt damp, she opened her eyes, studying the older girl.

Lily was sitting opposite her still, but her eyes had become a bit unfocused as she dipped into the memory, and it was an odd mixture of melancholy and amusement. Taylor listened as the girl laughed softly as she waved a hand to continue.

“I didn’t want to do the white make-up on myself, so Gertie let me apply it to her. I spent two weeks doing her make-up over and over until it was perfect, and we’d go into the cultural center, and we’re both wearing kimonos, and Gertie is there, this hunched over Jewish lady in a floral kimono and bone white face with the dark eyes and everything and people were shocked. I remember someone telling her that she actually looked like my grandmother, and she just hooked an arm around me and tells them that I’m her daughter.” Lily chuckled softly and shifted back, her face looking oddly pained. Taylor reached out and snagged the girl’s hand tugging her to stand and dragging her over to the standing mirror.

“Well, I think she’d be pretty impressed with what you managed to do with us tonight. We’ve got pretty dates, and we look fantastic.” Taylor glanced over at Lily, watching as the girl’s expression softened for a few moments before she let out a soft huff. Taylor glanced down at her watch and hummed faintly. “We should probably change. We’ve got an hour before things kick off and we do still need to drive over to Sabah’s.” Taylor reached up and snagged Lily’s dress and then an evil thought ghosted through her mind and she held it out.

“I’ll change here; you can change in my old room. Since we’ve got the house to ourselves.” She saw as Lily’s mind processed what she said, and she opened her mouth, but Taylor didn’t let her argue, smirking as she pushed the other girl out into the hall. She watched as Lily loomed there, staring at her in consternation for a few moments before turning and vanishing into Amy’s room. Taylor smirked and turned back to her own dress.

She started by smoothly stripping out of her clothing and standing before the mirror in her undergarments. She huffed as she inspected herself for a few moments, considering her build with a frown before slipping into hosiery, and then wrapping herself in the fitted black dress. She turned in place and frowned at the way it looked with her bra peeking out the back. Taylor let out a nervous sigh, reaching back and removing it. She carefully resecured the top of the dress and ran her hands over it, staring at herself in the mirror.

With her build and the dress, she didn’t necessarily need the support, but Taylor felt her blush growing worse as she considered how obvious it was that she wasn’t wearing a bra. She studied her reflection for a few moments before pulling off the towel that was wrapped around her head. Her dark hair spilled forth and fell down around her shoulders and back, the damp locks causing her to shiver a bit. She slowly ran her hands through her hair, studying the curly locks and smirking to herself with how everything came together.

Slipping on her flats, she walked out of the room, nervously glancing down at her knees as they peeked out of the hem of the dress that she wore. She stepped out into the hall, glancing over and staring at Amy’s door. When Lily nervously emerged, her cheeks coloured a light pink and holding her clothes in her arm, Taylor smirked quietly.

She did her best to keep from snickering at the dark look that the older girl was shooting her as they headed down the stairs.
Taylor glanced over at Lily, watching the girl with an amused smirk as she carefully checked her make-up in the mirror as they waited for the red light to turn. She considered the small plastic box sitting on the console between them and the odd little origami flower within. It was a fascinating idea, and part of Taylor wished that she’d thought of getting a corsage of any sort for Victoria, though she hadn’t come empty-handed. Taylor glanced down at the purse she held, an heirloom of her mother’s that matched her dress, and idly dragged her fingers over the two lumps within.

One was long and slim and the other substantial and cylinndrical. She probably should have left her weapon at home, but she felt safer with the foot long bit of metal shoved into the bag soothed her nervousness quite a bit. Taylor glanced up as the car moved, staring at the green light above them, nervously fiddling with her purse as the car crept along the streets toward downtown and Sabah’s shop. Taylor twisted over her wrist, carefully checking her watch. Nearly forty minutes still.

“You freaking out?” It took Taylor a moment to realize that it was, in fact, her that had said these words. She glanced over at Lily, watching the relief flickering over her face before she turned back to the road with a soft sigh. The older girl mulled the question over for a few moments before nodding slowly.

“Yeah. I uh, I’m a bit nervous about how they’ll react. I’m…” She paused and frowned and Taylor let out a soft groan, falling back into her seat.

“Terrified that everything will randomly explode like it’s been doing all month? And it’ll ruin the night, and somehow be our fault even though we didn’t even do anything?” She glanced over at Lily, a smirk gracing her lips as the other girl snorted and rolled her eyes.

“It’s an important night for Amy is all. She’s a good friend; I want her to have a good time. I know that I’m probably not her like, preferred partner, but…” Taylor stared at Lily for a few moments, chuckling quietly and reaching out, giving the girl a bemused flick that cut off her rambling. Lily paused and rubbed at her arm, shooting Taylor a dirty look. Taylor studied her for a few moments and then glanced out the window. This particular conversation was a bit awkward, especially considering what Lily had been alluding to. She drew out her phone, texting Sabah as she spoke with Lily.

“You asked her to go with you, and she said yes. That means that she wants to go with you. She’d been going along with Victoria and Crystal’s insanity to get ready for this, and I imagine that she’s going to look rather devastating when we arrive. My advice is to forget about all that other stuff for tonight and just… have fun, Lily.” Taylor hummed faintly as she shifted forward, adjusting her purse as they rounded the corner on Sabah’s street, Victoria’s familiar truck coming into view. “She’s a cute girl that wants to dance with you, try not to stress about anything else.”

Lily made a mild noise of agreement as she pulled the car in behind Victoria’s truck and shut it off. Taylor smirked as she removed her seatbelt, watching Crystal’s head of platinum blonde hair peeking out of the shop and glancing in their direction. She’d glance over at Lily, grinning as she opened the door and speaking quickly before slipping out.

“Besides, you’ve already shared a bed with her and been naked in her bedroom.” Taylor laughed at Lily’s groan before closing the door and striding around the car. She paused when Crystal let out a long low whistle, pausing and smirking before doing a casual spin. The older girl gave her an
amused smirk. Lily slammed her door in Taylor’s wake, and Taylor glanced back toward the girl, ignoring the dirty look.

“And just what’re you doing here so early, hrn?” Taylors’ voice was curious, and she watched as Crystal perked up and shrugged.

“I wanted to help out, and it’s been fun hanging out with Sabah.” The words were low and teasing, and Taylor blinked, her eyes narrowing as she considered Crystal carefully for a few moments. The girl stared back at her with an amused smile before glancing over as Lily came to a stop at her left. Crystal eyed them both up and down for a moment before nodding and looking impressed.

“My, don’t we look fancy. The girls are gonna be in for a shock.” Crystal grinned before opening the door to the shop and leading them in. Taylor followed, holding the door for Lily to precede her. They all carefully navigated around the large creatures that were scattered around the ground floor, Taylor pausing to run her hand over the soft violet and black faux-fur of the Nexu with an amused smile. She trailed after the others and ascended the stairs. The gasp of surprise that drifted through the door was a shock and Taylor paused in the doorway staring.

Amy was clad in what was very much a ‘prom dress’ with a sheer periwinkle outer layer and a shimmering cerulean base layer. The straps on the gown left her freckled shoulders and neck bare, and the dress fell to the point where only Amy’s ankles and the high heels that she wore were on display. Taylor watched as Lily nervously slipped over and held out the plastic box to Amy. Amy, who was already an inch taller than Lily maintained that advantage in her heels, and it was cute watching as Lily removed the blue origami corsage from the box and attached it to Amy’s wrist. As they dropped to nervous whispering to each other, Taylor slipped into the apartment, grinning at the sharp inhale from Sabah. She glanced over at the older girl, flashing her a playful wink that would see her cheeks darkening just a touch. Taylor spun around curiously and froze when she settled her eyes on Victoria.

The girl’s dress was outstanding. Made of whites and greys, it hugged her form, falling down to just past the knee and leaving silver high heeled shoes on display. The girl’s long blonde hair had been done up in a fascinating hairstyle, though all Taylor could see were the nearly dozen marks that lined Victoria’s throat and shoulders that the other girl had done nothing to conceal. She felt her cheeks darkening as she glanced up and finally met the other girl’s eyes.

Taylor was nearly staggered by the dark blue eyes staring at her with open fascination. She shifted in place for a few moments before lazily walking over and smirking at the girl actually ending up an inch or two taller than her. Taylor crossed her arms over her bust, smiling impishly at her girlfriend. She reached out dragging a finger over one of the dark marks on the older girl’s throat and smirking when Victoria’s smile grew just a touch and reached out, tracing her fingers over the makeup coating much of Taylor’s throat and collarbone.

“You hid them.” Her words were soft and laced, with a tiny hint of disappointment. Taylor rolled her eyes quietly and chuckled.

“No only is your mom going to be there, but there’s going to be pictures Vic, I had imagined that you might eventually want to show them to your family. And as much as I’d love to hear the reason that you’d concoct to explain all those very noticeable bruises-” Taylor paused when Victoria lazily dragged her fingers over her neck and shivered quietly as the girl smirked and responded simply.

“I’d probably just say that I was staking my claim.” Taylor snorted and rolled her eyes, dropping her forehead to rest against Victoria’s collarbone. She remained there before slowly drawing back and glancing over at the others, blinking when she noticed all the eyes locked on them. She squirmed
nervously as Victoria’s arm hooked around her shoulder, holding her close.

“So,” Crystal’s voice was low and teasing as she crossed her arms, leaning back against the edge of the counter, staring over them curiously. “Clearly, she understands that you’re a girl.” The words were casual, and Taylor rolled her eyes. She glanced up and watched the way that Victoria’s eyes narrowed and settled on Lily and Amy as they whispered amongst themselves, Amy’s eyes locked on the intricate origami flower on her wrist. Taylor frowned and sighed, nudging Vic.

“Oh. I have something for you.” She opened up her purse, pushing aside the incomplete weapon and dragging out the long thin jewelry case. She blinked at the sudden look of nervousness on Victoria’s face. She studied the girl curiously for a few moments, tilting her head.

“Taylor we’ve only been going out for like a month, I-” Taylor blinked and rolled her eyes, shoving the case at Vic.

“I made it myself, you goof. I just used an old case.” Vic blinked and slowly opened the case, staring in confusion at the object within. Taylor watched as Victoria slowly grasped the delicate stainless steel chain and drew it out of the box. Taylor took the box as Victoria carefully inspected the ‘pendant’ of the necklace.

A tiny domino sized piece of concrete hung from the chain by a bit of coiled wire that wrapped around the top quarter of it and went through the material itself. The bottom half of the pendant had Taylor’s crest etched on one side, and Victoria’s on the other. Taylor watched as Victoria stared at in confusion, feeling the porous heavy material carefully inspecting it before offering it to Taylor.

“Which side?” She blinked and then chuckled at Victoria’s pointed look, slipping up behind the older girl and wrapping the necklace around her neck with her own crest facing outwards. She adjusted the chain and gently secured it behind Victoria’s neck, smirking at the hint of confusion on the older girl’s features.

“It’s from the wall that I cracked the first time that I ‘fell for you’” Taylor grinned as Victoria’s confusion increased before realization hit, and she facepalmed quietly. Taylor grinned impishly at the pun as she slipped back and moved around to smirk up at Victoria, crossing her arms.

“We’ve got like twenty minutes until we need to be there, we should start getting ready.” Amy’s voice cut across them and Taylor perked up, glancing over at the other girl, watching as she adjusted her carefully coiffed hair. Lily stood close to her side, and Taylor moved over to join the others.

“Yeah! And we’ve got plans, so don’t linger.” Crystal’s teasing voice carried again, and Taylor curiously studied the older girl as she loomed near the sink while the rest of them moved around helping Amy and Victoria gather up the various supplies that they’d brought over. Taylor paused, frowning quietly as Victoria, Amy, Sabah and Lily descended the stairs, each of their arms laden down with bags or cases. Taylor considered Crystal silently for a few moments.

“You two are going out with Assault and Battery, right?” Taylor’s voice was curious, and she watched as Crystal perked up and stared at her in confusion. Taylor crossed her arms over her chest, shifting from foot to foot. The girl stared back at her for a few moments before nodding slowly.

“You are going out with Assault and Battery, right?” Taylor’s voice was curious, and she watched as Crystal perked up and stared at her in confusion. Taylor crossed her arms over her chest, shifting from foot to foot. The girl stared back at her for a few moments before nodding slowly.

“I-” Taylor sighed and paused, frowning. “I probably shouldn’t say anything, but Sabah is my friend. You can be a bit of a flirt, Crystal, and just… be careful, yeah?” She glanced over at the door, staring at the empty space for a few moments. She glanced back at Crystal, taking in her confused look for a few moments before sighing and running a hand through her hair. “You’re cute, Crystal, and Sabah seems… lonely. Don’t string her along. She’s a good person, so uh.” Taylor trailed off, watching as Crystal’s expression softened after a few moments. She nervously waved her hands. “You get what
I’m saying,” Taylor muttered quietly before turning and heading for the stairs.

She ground to a stop at the top of the stairs as Crystal’s hand wrapped around her upper arm. She let out a quiet sigh as she waited for the girl to speak over her shoulder.

"I’ll uh. I’ll be careful.” The words were spoken with an odd sort of solemnity that didn’t really suit Crystal, and Taylor didn’t glance back, nodding quietly and gently slipping down the stairs. She emerged ahead of Crystal, flashing Victoria and Sabah quick smiles at their curious looks before heading over to join them. She glanced around curiously, finding no sign of Lily and Amy.

“They said you were taking too long and they headed off.” Taylor stared at Victoria’s face, taking in the odd sort of nervous furrowing of the brow and sighing as she reached out, poking the tip of the girl’s nose.

“I doubt they did it just to sneak off and make out, Vic. They’re going to a dance where your mother is, in fact, lurking around. I think you can put aside the protective older sister routine.” Taylor studied Victoria as she prepared to respond, puffing up her chest, though the sound of fists rapping on the door silenced whatever her response was going to be.

Taylor glanced over and stared at the rather excited looking man flailing through the glass. She glanced over at Sabah who let out an aggrieved sigh and walked over, opening the door. The man charged in and scooped Sabah up in a hug, spinning the squeaking girl around before casually setting her down and grinning.

“Alright, ladies, who’s ready to go sing some fucking terrible covers of songs and get wast-” He paused, freezing as he caught sight of her and Victoria standing around in fancy dresses. Taylor watched in amusement as a younger woman followed him in shaking her head.

“Ethan, Laserdream isn’t even old enough to be drinking.” She glanced over at them and raised an eyebrow and Taylor blinked and nudged a slackjawed Victoria.

“We were uh, just leaving. Got a prom to get to.” She snorted as she pushed Vic a bit harder and watched as the older girl finally snapped out of her confusion and headed for the door. Taylor snickered, trailing after her as they exited the shop, listening to Victoria dig her keys out of her purse.

“Huh. Didn’t think Glory Girl would have the guts to show off-” The sound of a slap as the door closed in her wake saw Taylor snickering through her blush as she scurried around the truck and climbed up and into it, buckling herself in carefully and glancing over. She squeaked when Victoria shifted across the bench seat and leaned close, pulling her into a slow kiss. Taylor flushed at the feeling of Victoria’s hand resting on her neck, slowly drifting up and down the makeup-covered skin as the kiss lingered.

“Sorry. I’ve been resisting the urge to do that since you walked into the apartment like this.” Victoria’s hoarse whisper drifting over her lips when she finally came back for air had Taylor’s lips curling into a smile. Taylor curiously leaned back, staring into the other girl’s blue eyes.

“You don’t clean up half bad yourself, Dallon, but we should probably avoid ruining our make-up or hair.” She smirked at the disappointed look on Victoria’s face as she scooted over and slid the keys into the ignition, setting the truck to rumbling to life. Taylor leaned over, taking Victoria’s hand and squeezing before releasing her to focus on driving.
Amy stared in wonder at the complicated bit of paper art on her wrist. She was a bit confused about how the girl had managed to get the colours just right, though she suspected that Sabah might have had something to do with it. Gently tracing the odd petals, Amy tried to figure out how Lily had folded the paper to get this shape. Humming quietly in thought, it took Amy a few moments to actually place the shape. It was a water lily. That was kind of adorable. She considered the flower as she briefly wished that Lily had shared Victoria’s almost obsessive appreciation for music since the silence between them was rapidly growing awkward.

“I uh. You look amazing.” The words were subtle, and Amy glanced over as she said them, watching Lily’s shoulders tensing just a bit as a nervous smile flickered over her face. The girl glanced her way when they came to a stop sign, and the car coasted to a stop. Amy studied the strange mix of emotions flickering over the other girl’s face as their eyes lingered on each other until a honk from the cars behind them turned Lily’s focus back to the road.

“You look very nice as well. That’s an interesting colour for you. How was your afternoon?” The words were laced with open curiosity, and Amy settled back into the comfortable seat, shifting her heels on the mat in the footwell, considering the afternoon quietly.

“We helped Sabah tidy up and then she helped fix our dresses before Crystal showed up. We had lunch together, and then we all spent most of the afternoon under Crystal and Victoria’s tender mercies. They spent nearly an hour doing our make-up before they set to work on each other. After that, we all sort of just listened to music and talked about stuff. Caught up on what’s been going on each other’s lives.” Amy didn’t mention the way that everyone had awkwardly danced around the subject of Victoria’s newest ‘rashes’ and the proud way that she’d refused to cover them up. Or how they’d teased her quite a bit about her apparent acquisition of an admirer. “What about you?” Amy tried, glancing over at Lily.

“I ended up going over pretty early, and I caught Taylor practicing with her new weapon.” Lily’s voice was soft as she turned the wheel, heading down a side street to avoid the worst of the early evening weekend traffic. “We ended up sparring a bit.” Lily glanced at her and Amy’s concern must have shown because she offered a gentle smile.

“I’m not sure if I’ve mentioned it, but when I first started out, I used to use a sword. My powers made it prohibitively dangerous, but it was kind of cool. Taylor’s an interesting spar. Atypical style and her attacks are oddly elegant.” The girl hummed quietly in thought as she adjusted her grip on the wheel, coming to a stop at a stop sign, watching a group of schoolchildren crossing the street. “We did that for an hour before she made us sandwiches for lunch and then we basically did the same thing as you. She made sure our dresses were good, and then we showered and got changed, and I did our makeup.” Amy nodded quietly and glanced up as she watched as Arcadia began to grow in the distance. Amy nervously fidgeted with her hands as she watched the school growing, trying to corral her swirling thoughts into some kind of order. Glancing over when Lily came to a stop, Amy leaned forward and read the signs that had been placed up, directing the students to the parking that had been arranged for them. Lily smoothly turned the car, driving it through the already full regular student parking lot and past it toward where the track field had been set up for overflow parking.

Lily casually navigated down the painted lines before parking her car and then turning it off. Amy stared over at her as they sat in silence for nearly ten minutes, studying each other and trying to think of what to say. They sat like that in the fading light of the evening until the heavy rattle of Victoria’s truck joining them on the lot and parking on their side startled them both. When Lily let out a soft
sigh and pulled her keys out and tucked them into her purse and reached for the door, Amy reached over, gently grasping her arm.

“I. uh. Lily.” She tried softly, watching as the girl paused and glanced curiously over at her. Amy swallowed softly before putting on the best smile that she could and speaking quickly before her courage failed her once more. “Thanks for asking me. I’m… I’m glad that you’re the one that I came here with.” She studied Lily’s face as the girl froze for a moment before flushing a bit, gently running a hand through her hair.

“You’re pretty impressive yourself, Dallon. I’m glad that I got to attend prom with you as well, even if it’s not ‘my’ prom.” Amy did her best to ignore the butterflies in her chest that the comment caused and released the other girl, pushing open her door and climbing out. She glanced over, watching Victoria and Taylor looming near the tail-gate of the old truck and watching them curiously.

Amy waited for Lily to join her at the back of the car before slipping her arm out and snagging Lily’s. She flashed the girl a smirk when she glanced over, but Lily played along and served as her escort. Amy smiled when Vicky and Taylor moved to follow their lead, and they all paced up across the grass toward the school. This time the silence was companionable, and they’d all take a moment to fish out their IDs and the tickets as they approached the teachers standing outside the doors.

Amy and Victoria had to show their student ID’s and hand over their tickets before Taylor and Lily could step forward and offer up some photo ID to be signed in as guests. Only then, were they all admitted into the school. Walking down the halls, Amy studied the amused smiles on the other girls’ faces, doing her best to ignore the whispers as they made their way to the Dance Hall. Amy and Lily paused inside the doors as Victoria and Taylor were dragged over to the arch for the traditional photographs. Amy loomed there at Lily’s side and found herself grinning when Victoria in her heels was suddenly taller than Taylor and thus had to stand in the back of the shot with her arms around Taylor.

Amy watched happily as the two girls smirked at the camera and held still as several flashes went off before vanishing into the press of people. Amy glanced over at Lily and then grinned as she realized that since she and Lily were both in heels, she’d won this particular battle. She led Lily over and then stepped around behind her, glancing at the camera. They assumed the classic pose and Amy gently wrapped her arms around Lily, pulling the shorter girl close and peering over her shoulder at the camera.

She glanced over and saw Lily’s expression curling into a smile, and she let her own lips follow their lead, staring at the camera as the image flashed several times. She glanced at Lily for a moment before moving over and speaking with the Student council member dealing with the camera and jotting down hers and Victoria’s emails for the harried-looking junior so that they could get their copies of the images and then turned back to Lily, offering out a hand.

Amy and Lily smoothly drifted through the crowd, though they came up short when Amy saw a familiar pair of figures in formal wear standing off to one side, gazing out over the press of students. Remaining frozen in place, Amy stared over at her mother and father, blinking when she caught her dad’s eyes. He flashed her a smirk and then nudged her mom who’d been staring off over the crowd toward where Taylor and Victoria had vanished. Amy watched as her mother perked up and glanced over, giving her a warm smile and a nod before turning back to watching the crowd.

“Everything alright, Amy?” Amy glanced over at Lily, taking in her confused expression and chuckled softly, gesturing toward the refreshment table.

“My mom and dad are chaperoning.” She gestured toward them and chuckled when Lily followed her gaze and then nervously perked up, straightening her posture a bit. She poured out a glass of
punch, handing it to Lily before getting herself a glass, a smirk on her lips as she sipped at it. “I don’t think that they’re going to come over here, Lily. Taylor said that they promised to keep their distance.” Amy watched Lily’s shoulders as they lost a bit of their tension, and she smiled as the girl finally took a drink from the glass.

They’d finished their punch and nibbled at the snacks a bit when a heavy thumping song came on, and Lily suddenly perked up and reached out toward her. Amy squeaked softly as she was grasped and dragged toward the dancing students, flushing a bit as she was pulled out through the crowd and into an open pocket closer to the speakers. When Lily’s hands settled on her waist and dragged her closer, Amy felt her cheeks burning, and she spoke quickly.

“It occurs to me that I’ve never actually been to a dance with a date before. I, uh. I’m unsure how to dance really, and certainly not to this kind of music.” Amy’s voice was subtle and awkward, and she watched as Lily chuckled and gently used her hands on Amy’s hips to give her a brief shake.

“It’s not hard really, just move to the beat. Watch me.” Amy blinked quietly and stepped back a step and took a few moments to watch Lily shifting eagerly in time with the heady beat of the music. There was no elegance or finesse to the technique, but she was moving and seemed to be having fun. Amy glanced around and took in the fact that everyone was too focused on their own partners to care what Lily was doing and let out a sigh. She moved closer and did her best to mime what Lily was doing, blushing at the girl's amused chuckles.

When Lily’s hands settled on her waist again to guide her, she readily followed along, losing herself in the heavy beat and the and the glittering dark eyes peering down at her from beneath all that violet eyeshadow.

Amber’s cheeks hurt just a touch from the broad smile that’d been lingering on her face, and her shoulders were beginning to ache from the constant motion, and her voice had even begun to go a bit hoarse from the shouting that the music required them to do to be heard by each other. Despite all of that though, Amy had very little interest in stopping, very much enjoying the ability to watch Lily’s fascinating dancing and the way that she had this happy smile lingering on her face as they moved around the dance floor as the crowd ebbed and flowed.

So, when the song changed once more to something with a much milder tempo, Amy reached out and snagged Lily’s hips when the girl started to back off. Watching the look of surprise ghosting over the older girl’s features, Amy smirked as she pulled Lily closer, smiling when Lily’s arms slid up and around her shoulders after a moment of hesitation. Amy settled her own hands on the small of Lily’s back and smiled quietly as she swayed with the music.

Amy studied Lily’s face as the girl stared at her with an odd intensity, and she felt her cheeks heating just a bit as the girl’s dark eyes flicked over her face. Amy slowly opened her mouth, scrabbling for something to say, closing it with a snap when Lily stepped closer and closed her eyes, leaning closer. Amy’s minor panic waned, and her heartbeat stilled when Lily’s forehead came to a rest against her collarbone, and she smiled quietly, tightening her hold around the other girl, continuing to sway with the music.

She watched Lily’s dark hair as the messy bun bobbed in the corner of her vision. She glanced over toward where her parents had been lurking and smiled when she saw the warm look in her father’s
eye, blushing just a bit when he nodded at her. She glanced toward her mother and blinked at the oddly serious look in her eye as she glanced in a different direction. She watched as her mom nudged her father, and then they both glanced over the press of bodies with matching severe looks. When Amy followed their gaze, she felt her back tensing, her eyes drifting over a pale-faced Dean pushing his way through the crowd toward where Taylor and Victoria’s blonde and black hair peeked up above the heads of everyone else.

Lily seemed to react to her stiffness and slowly pulled back to look at her. Amy fought off the hint of disappointment she felt at the lack of contact and glanced at Lily, nodding carefully across the floor toward where her parents were pushing through the students toward Dean. They’d luckily been on the same side of the crowd as him, and they’d undoubtedly reach him before he reached Taylor and Vicky.

When Dean came to a stop, his eyes narrowing and his cheeks suffusing with colour, Amy glanced over at a visibly worried Lily. She moved to try and make her own way toward them when she felt Lily’s arm grasping her own.

“Wait, look.” Amy blinked and glanced over, watching as her dad slipped past the last few students between him and Dean while the boy was still half a dozen feet from the dancing girls. Amy smiled when her dad firmly grasped Dean’s arm, pulling him back and away. Dean must have said something though, because Taylor and Vic started and glanced over, watching Dean be dragged back through the crowd and away from Taylor and Victoria.

Dean jerked to a halt and tried to rip his arm from her dad’s grip, but Amy watched, impressed when her father’s hand didn’t come free. Dean said something that was swallowed by the crowd and her dad responded coldly before jerking him back into motion and escorting him toward the edge of the crowd. Amy watched quietly as they reached the doors, and Dean finally yanked his arm free and stormed out of the dance hall, vanishing through the doors.

Amy watched her mother as she joined her father, and they both stepped out of the hall, and the doors slammed shut behind them. She glanced around, letting out a soft sigh upon seeing that most people seemed utterly unaware of the commotion, though a few people in the crowd were glancing between the door that Dean had vanished through and where Taylor and Victoria were standing and staring toward it.

“What a mess,” she shook her head, glancing back to where Victoria and Taylor stood quietly and stared at each other for a few moments before coming to some sort of agreement and slipping through the crowd in the opposite direction, heading toward a different exit from the dance hall, vanishing through one of the doors. She shook her head, glancing back at Lily. She blinked at the oddly sad look that lingered around Lily’s face before speaking. “I suppose that we should have expected something to happen with Victoria flaunting her hickeys like that. I’m not sure what Taylor was thinking.” The song had changed, and Amy moved back over toward Lily, watching as the girl took a few moments to get back into the swing of things.

“Something tells me that that probably wasn’t Taylor’s idea.” Lily’s words startled her, and Amy glanced up from where she was clumsily trying to follow the other girl’s motions. She blinked at the intense look in Lily’s eyes as she swayed opposite her, blinking when the girl continued in that soft firm voice. “Victoria very much won that particular contest. I think Taylor had nearly two dozen before I covered them up with make-up. And she seemed oddly reluctant to heal them away when I suggested it.” Lily stared at her, the eyes seeming to dig into her a bit as she waited for… something. Amy stared back quietly for a few moments before letting out a sigh.

“Yeah. Victoria said something similar when I suggested healing them. Well, she mostly implied that
if she didn’t want them, she wouldn’t have allowed.” Amy paused, chuckling with amusement as she considered the statement. “Encouraged, I suppose, Taylor to give them to her. In any case,” she shook her head. She blinked at the dark eyes that studied her, the face laced with the faintest hint of confusion. Amy blinked quietly at the look, staring back at Lily before moving closer.

“We should be dancing.” Amy’s voice was laced with a teasing tone, as she lingered a few feet from Lily. They’d both stopped dancing as they spoke and Amy glanced at Lily for a few moments as a fast-paced electronic song bounced around them. She studied the older girl’s expression for a few moments before a tiny grin quirked at the corner of her lips, and she pulled out one of her uncle’s many terrible dance moves. She started with the bus driver, holding her hands up like she had a wheel and shaking her hips.

She watched Lily’s expression cracking just a bit, her lips twitching with a hidden smile that saw a true one blooming on her face. Amy playfully honked the horn on her imaginary steering wheel with a smirk as Lily finally let out a chuckle and grabbed her, dragging her close and trying to stop her terrible dancing.

“What about the shopping cart, Lily?” She grinned teasingly as she mimed, pushing a shopping cart around and smiling when the older girl finally laughed. She continued the teasing for a few moments before going back to the more casual simple dancing that they’d been doing before, smiling over at Lily. She did her best to ignore the confused, almost piercing looks that Lily would shoot her when she thought she wasn't watching.

Amy settled with an oof on the edge of the table, resting her feet on the bench below it. She stared over at Lily’s back as the girl disappeared back into the dance hall, and let out a long sigh. Amy reached down, removing one of her shoes and then the other, setting them beside her on the table. She carefully massaged her left foot, letting out a soft sigh of delight at the relief. Biting her lip, Amy blinked at the wave of nostalgia washed over her and she stared out over the school grounds, watching the moonlight dappling over the small copse of trees that she and Victoria had shaded under with their old group of friends, what’d seemed like a lifetime ago.

A blast of music heralded Lily’s return, and Amy glanced over, watching as the girl emerged, balancing a pair of glasses in one hand and a napkin containing a small pile of snacks in the other. When she got close, Amy dropped her bare feet to rest on the wooden bench and reached out, accepting the napkin laden with snacks and setting it on her lap. Amy watched as Lily set the drinks on the table before clambering up and taking a seat next to her, reaching out to snag a cheese cube from the pile on Amy’s lap and nibble on it quietly.

Lily’s sigh of relief matched her own when a breeze ghosted over them both and cooled their sweat dappled skin. Amy closed her eyes, enjoying the breeze and after a few moments, she’d let herself tilt to the side, coming to rest against Lily’s side, her cheek resting on the older girl’s warm skin. Lily’s body tensed, and Amy almost pulled away, fearing that she’d upset her, but eventually, the older girl relaxed into the contact.

“Do you think you’ll miss it? Going to school here?” Lily’s question was soft, and Amy frowned a bit, opening her eyes and staring at that familiar tree for a few moments longer. Her mind drifted back over the memories, the longing looks she’d sent Victoria and the constant, seething resentment she’d felt as she watched Victoria and Dean. The bitter jealousy when they were happy, and the
seething hatred when they weren’t. She considered the people that’d lingered around Victoria who’d been her ‘friends’ as well, and she shifted up, shaking her head.

“Not really. I’m kind of happy that it’s nearly done, to be honest.” She glanced over at Lily, taking in her curious look and smiling softly. “I never really had… friends of my own before. They were always Victoria’s friends, who I was only acquaintances with. But you guys, you are all my friends too, or my family.” Amy shook her head, chuckling as she glanced down at her hands.

“Yeah, having friends was what I’d missed most from before I became Flechette.” Lily’s voice was soft, and Amy glanced over at her, watching the sad look in her eye. She frowned, reaching over and gently snagging the older girl’s hand, lacing their fingers. She watched as Lily’s gaze drifted her way and studied her, the hand that Amy held in hers, tightening it’s grip just a touch. “I’m kind of glad that I ended up here. You guys have been… amazing. After New York, part of me wondered if I’d ever fit in anywhere again.” The words were soft and sad, and Amy frowned quietly, studying Lily’s face in profile, as the older girl’s gaze drifted around the moonlit grass.

Amy studied the girl for a few moments before something in her shifted, and she moved closer. She gently pushed up and leaned close, quickly feathering a kiss over Lily’s cheek and watching as the girl tensed up at the contact. Amy drew back, watching as Lily glanced her way, and she shifted quietly.

“I-I’m pretty glad that you ended up here too, Lily.” She flushed just a bit before glancing down at her hands, fiddling with them quietly. She took a few moments to think, glancing at Lily and letting out a small sigh, thankful that the older girl seemed to be letting her marshal her thoughts instead of cutting in. Eventually, though, she took a deep breath and spoke softly. “You’ve been a great friend, and I’m really glad that we ended up going to this together. We’ve had a lot of fun, and I-” Amy paused, flushing quietly as she tried to figure out what to say, words escaping her.

After a moment, she let out a soft sigh and shifted closer. She watched Lily’s eyes widening as she got closer, gently grasping the girl’s arm and leaning up toward her. She studied Lily’s face, watching the girl’s eyes as they drifted shut and she leaned closer. Amy tilted her head up and leaned in, pausing when Lily’s hand gently grasped her shoulder, keeping their lips from finally touching.

“W-wait.” Lily’s warm breath ghosted over her lips, and Amy blinked as she drew back in confusion. She could hear the disappointment and regret in Lily’s voice as she spoke, but the girl studied her for a moment before frowning. “Amy, I-” Amy stared up at the girl’s sad eyes as that hand on her shoulder, gently squeezed. Amy studied Lily, watching as she took a deep breath before speaking, her voice laced with subtle regret.

“I really like you, Amy, you’re amazing even if you can’t see it, but…” The girl frowned quietly and glanced away from her. “I don’t want to be a rebound or something that you regret. I- you’re just getting over Taylor, and I don’t want to be-” Lily paused, stumbling over her words, repeating herself. Amy studied the girl’s face quietly, reaching out a hand and gently grasping Lily’s cheek and drawing her around to face her. She took a few moments to stare into Lily’s eyes, watching the mixture of regret and fear there, and she finally got it.

“I understand, maybe we-” Lily paused at the soft cough that came from behind her, and she frowned, slowly releasing the other girl and turning to glance toward the cough. She blinked at the sight of four PRT Troopers standing not far from them. She stared at them in confusion, tilting her head.

“Miss Dallon? And Miss Horrocks.” The words were curious, and Amy nodded slowly, glancing over at an equally confused looking Lily. The man quickly gripped the walkie talkie on his shoulder, speaking rapidly into it. Amy didn’t catch everything, but the gist was that they’d found her. She
stared at the older trooper with open curiosity.

“There’s been an incident with your Aunt, Miss Dallon. We’ve been asked to collect you, and bring you to her.” Amy surged to her feet, her heart racing.

“What about Vicky? And my mom and dad are here too.” The man held up his hands placatingly.

“We’ve got teams out intercepting them as we speak, but we need to get you moving, it’s an emergency. You can bring your… girlfriend with you, if you wish, but we must go.” He glanced over at Lily and Amy watched Lily’s cheeks darkening at the assumption, but they didn’t have the time to argue. Amy grabbed her shoes and slipped them on, nodding quickly at the men. The group turned, leading them off the patio and toward the parking lot.

“Lily, what about your car?” She spoke, glancing at Lily as she hurried to keep up, but one of the men escorting them would speak up.

“If you give me your keys, Miss Horrocks, I’ll bring it along.” Lily blinked before handing the younger trooper her keys and then hurried up to Amy’s side. Amy stared at the approaching trucks, studying their black design with a frown. She moved a bit quicker, trying to catch up to the one that looked like the team leader.

“What happened? My Aunt wasn’t even supposed to be patrolling tonight.” The words were soft, and she studied the man as he frowned quietly.

“There was an incident as she was exiting the PRT Headquarters, I’ll explain once we’re on the road.” He grabbed the door of the truck and pulled it open, gesturing them in. Amy reached out, helping Lily up and into the truck before climbing in herself. She dropped into the bench seat, buckling herself in. When the door slammed shut behind them, Amy glanced over at Lily, blinking at the confused look on her face.

Amy turned and followed Lily’s gaze staring at the strange device embedded in the roof of the van’s interior. Small and disk-like on its base, a single emerald crystal emerged from it. The crystal was glowing softly, and it shimmered and whined before surging to a brilliant emerald colour, and a wave of energy rippled out from it. Amy lifted her arms to shield her face, but the wave slammed into her, and everything rapidly faded to inky blackness.

Chapter End Notes

[DUN DUN DUN. The PRT is making their move. =] The next few chapters will be… interesting. This chapter has a few bits of interesting stuff to unpack. Lily and Amy continue to be delightfully obtuse, and Taylor and Vic continue to be corny idiots, but you all figured that much out I’m sure.

Taylor’s got a new weapon, mainly because I personally think that Senya’s collapsing pike suits her a bit more, and she’ll be finishing that up before the beginning of the next arc. We get to see Taylor and Lily interacting here, and it’s interesting that despite her bitterness over anything, she doesn’t seem to blame Taylor at all. She’s a bit disappointed, but there’s no resentment there. Lily seems like a pretty big person.

Taylor warns Crystal to make sure that she’s careful about Sabah’s feelings, which was kind of adorable. The first Interlude between 7.x and 8.x will feature an outsiders
perspective on the Karaoke night, but we won’t be seeing those two again for the rest of
the arc. (Mainly cause the next three chapters all take place over the rest of the evening
of the 19th.)

There’s going to a ‘B-Side’ for this chapter that starts right where Victoria and Taylor
leave the dance in this chapter, and we’ll get some more stuff on what’s going on, and
you can expect that within the next few days.]}


7.8 B-Side

Chapter Summary

[[7.8 went over rather well, and the discussions that we’ve been having in the forum page are pretty neat. Got this finished last night, and Noel did most of the betaing last night despite the heat, so here you are before I head into work.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 19th, 2011
Arcadia High, Brockton Bay

Victoria suspected that she must look like a bit of a sap with the soft smile on her face as she stared down at where Taylor’s head rested against her chest. Deciding that there were worse things to look like, she tightened her arms around the younger girl, holding her closer and continuing to sway in time with the music. The lyrics of whatever the song was washed away with the scuffle of feet on the floor and the chatter of the crowd around them, but the tune was enough to keep them moving.

Victoria revelled in finally being taller than Taylor, grinning quietly into the top of Taylor’s head and leaned close, feathering a brief kiss to the girl’s temple. Taylor chuckled slowly, drawing back and flashing a smile up at her. Opening her mouth to say something, Taylor paused, her eyes narrowing as she shifted her gaze past Victoria. Frowning, the blonde released her girlfriend and turned her attention, looking over her shoulder and freezing at the sight.

Dean stood less than six feet away, his expression grim, eyes narrowed and face pale. He stared coldly at Taylor, but he was prevented from coming any closer by the hand on his arm. Victoria stared at her father as the man loomed behind Dean, saying something coldly, his grip firm on the fancy suit that Dean wore. The man shifted quietly and jerked Dean back despite the younger man’s struggles.

It took a moment but eventually, Dean’s eyes shifted from Taylor to her, and he seemed to recoil at the look on her face before allowing himself to be dragged through the crowd and toward the exit. Several people glanced her way, but on seeing her dark look, they all returned to what they’d been doing. Victoria watched as Dean finally jerked himself free of her father’s grip at the door and then scowled back at them both before vanishing into the hall. Victoria glanced over at her father as her mother joined him. They both glanced her way, and she offered them a nervous smile that seemed to shock her mother.

She had been surprised when both returned the expression before disappearing out of the dance hall. Taylor gently grasping her arm, shocked her a bit, but Victoria didn’t resist as she was turned back around. She studied Taylor’s worried features and then glanced around, seeing all the eyes on them, and she did her best to offer Taylor a smile, though the look of concern on the other girl’s face didn’t engender a lot of faith in her efforts. Victoria gently reached out, taking Taylor’s hand.
“Can we go for a walk?” She tried softly, smiling nervously when Taylor nodded and tugged her along. Thankfully, with all the eyes on the both of them, they didn’t have to push through the crowd since it parted at their approach and closed behind them. They’d nearly reached the exit when something caught her eye, and she paused, jerking Taylor to a halt ahead of her. When Taylor glanced back, she smiled softly and pointed across the hall.

Off to the side, Vicky watched as Amy mimed holding a large steering wheel, while Lily stared on, her face slowly shifting from disappointment to amusement. When Amy mimed honking a horn, she heard Taylor chuckle as Lily finally moved in and grabbed Amy’s arms, trying to stop the dance. Victoria shook her head, and turned back to Taylor, feeling a flicker of warmth in her chest at the affectionate smile on the other girl’s face as their eyes met.

Taylor tugged on her arm and Victoria allowed herself to be led out the door once more and into the cool evening. As the cold air ghosted over her warm skin, Victoria shifted closer to the momentarily shorter girl and grinned when Taylor’s arm slid around her and held her closer. Taylor glanced around, looking a bit lost and Victoria took over, stepping down off of the exterior portion of the cafeteria and onto the grass. She paused, stepping down out of her shoes and then ducked down to grab them.

Taylor stared at her curiously, and Victoria offered the younger girl an amused smile before snagging her arm once more and tugging her along. They walked along the grass, past the outbuildings and off toward the athletic fields. She wasn’t terribly worried about stepping on anything worse than a stick since the grounds were typically well kept, and she did have a pocket healer on hand in case her feet found anything unfortunate in their wanderings.

Eventually, they passed between the tennis courts and walked down past the baseball diamond, coming up on a well-trodden path past the soccer field that had been turned into the parking lot for this event. Moving around that field had left them standing at the edge of the football field. Victoria tugged Taylor along, walking through the dark and across the damp grass, smirking down at the white lines that remained clearly marked on the grass.

Taylor followed her up and into the wooden stands, and they climbed about halfway up the stands before shuffling about halfway down the row and took a seat. Victoria shifted closer to Taylor when a chilly breeze ghosted in out of the darkness and wrapped around them both. Her cheek found its way to Taylor’s shoulder, and that arm wrapped around her shoulder once more and held her close.

They sat like this for a few moments and then Taylor made a noise and Victoria glanced up at her curiously. She took in Taylor’s amused expression, and she coughed faintly to get the girl’s attention away from studying her quietly. She studied Taylor’s dark brown eyes, faintly lit by the moonlight, and the confusion on her own face must have shown because the girl’s lips curled comfortably into a soft smile as she spoke softly.

“Sorry, It’s just—” Taylor grinned quietly and rubbed at her cheek. “You’re sort of just like, the picture-perfect image of the stereotypical cheerleader, and I’ve snuck away from the prom with you to sit on the bleachers.” Taylor’s voice was low, laced with a faint sense of wry amusement and Victoria found herself chuckling at the image.

“Before I was a superhero, I was the captain of the Varsity Basketball team. I was the one that had the cheerleaders dragging me out here and flirting with me.” Taylor blinked at that and Victoria smirked impishly. Taylor’s expression curled almost inexorably into abject curiosity, and Victoria hummed quietly, speaking slowly. “What, did you think that you were the first girl that I kissed?” The comment was low and teasing, and she studied Taylor’s expression for any sign or hint of
jealousy. She blinked at the curious look that remained.

“I-I wasn’t really sure, to be honest,” Taylor spoke softly and then glanced down toward the expanse of grass between them and the school. “We, uh, we don’t exactly talk about the past at all.” Taylor’s voice was soft, and Victoria blinked quietly, frowning as she studied Taylor’s profile. She stared at the girl for a few moments before gently squeezing her arm. Taylor shifted at the motion and glanced back at her, those dark eyes shimmering in the moonlight still.

“What’d you wanna know?” The question slipped quickly from her lips, and she watched Taylor’s forehead creasing in curiosity. The girl stared back at her for a few moments before smiling softly.

“Did you really kiss another girl?” The question was low and curious, and Victoria was surprised at the surprising lack of jealousy in the tone. She tilted her head to the side, feeling oddly warm at that and she glanced down toward the grass and taking a deep breath.

“I- Yes, but… Well, it wasn’t a cheerleader. I’d had a few offers even before I’d triggered, and well, several after, but…” Victoria shifted closer and smiled when Taylor’s arm found its way around her once more, and she curled into her side. “It was an old friend of mine. Her name was Alex. Before I triggered, Amy and I used to hang with a different group of people, and she was one of them. Friends from grade school, but we all sort of… drifted apart once we’d gotten here. Things… Things changed when I triggered…” Victoria glanced down at her hands, blinking quietly when she felt Taylor’s cheek coming to rest on her temple as the girl curled closer.

“Honestly, it actually started before that, the drifting apart. Things were different when we were younger, but once I’d gotten here… the expectations started. Everyone stared. Everyone watched, waited. I was the daughter of capes, more than that, I was the spitting image of my mother, and Crystal had already triggered, It was only a matter of time, right? I-uh. I even started to believe, started to push myself. I joined the sports teams, I well. I did some pretty stupid shit…” Victoria raised a hand quietly, waving it as she got off track.

“I,— Let’s start at the beginning. Right, so, Alex. We met in… sixth grade? Became fast friends. We were close, there were other friends, Amy was close to us, and a few others, but I guess she was my best friend. Things were great until I got here. I started making other friends, got into sports and she sort of followed Emma’s path, socially.” She chuckled at Taylor’s tensing and shook her head. “Not like that. She was an activist, you know? Volunteered, joined clubs, she was friendly with everyone, but she didn’t let that change her. She was the opposite of me, I was so desperate to be who everyone else saw me as, and she refused to let anyone see her as anything but what she was. She was honest and bold and uncompromising…” Victoria trailed off, losing herself in her thoughts.

“Did she…” Taylor trailed off quietly, pulling back to stare down at her and Victoria chuckled, shaking her head.

“Die? No, no. I guess that’s a bit maudlin of me, isn’t it? No, she moved away. The summer after I triggered. She ended up in Philly, I think. But we’d already stopped talking at that point. I uh.” Victoria took a deep breath. “I, uh- It happened toward the end of ninth grade. I’d been pushing myself hard; I’d been ignoring my old friends, and her, and Amy. I’d been spending time with Dean and his friends, and she just. She cornered me.” Victoria shifted and smiled when Taylor’s arm tightened around her.

“It was a few games before I triggered. I did something stupid and sprained my ankle and hit the ground hard. My entire left side was bruised, and I hurt, but everyone slapped me on the back, called me a hero cause I won us the game. I was riding on a cloud as I tried to ignore the hurt as I walked to
my locker, well…” Victoria paused, smirking. “Well, I was limping back to my locker, promising myself that I’d sit down once I was there. I was going down the hall, and this hand comes out of nowhere and just grabs me, shoves me into the student council room.” Victoria paused, humming as the memories flickered in her mind.

“Truthfully, It hurt, a lot, and I ended up spinning around angrily and coming up short when I see Alex there in the doorway, and she’s… She’s furious. She stood there and glared at me and just started… yelling. She told me off for being stupid, she listed my many character flaws and then devolved into cursing me in three different languages, and eventually I just. I cut her off, yelled at her for abandoning me and leaving me to Dean’s friends, and I asked why she suddenly cared now.” Victoria frowned a touch. “She got this look in her eyes, and just stalked up to me, muttering that she wasn’t the one that disappeared and then she just… laid one on me.” Victoria shook her head in amusement as she idly remembered the way they’d stood and glared at each other, panting, waiting for the other to say something.

“What happened after?” Taylor studied her quietly, and Victoria let out a quiet sigh, resting her cheek on Taylor’s bare shoulder peacefully.

“I sort of stared stupidly at her for a while, and she goes ‘That’s why I care, idiot.’ And she stormed off.” Vic frowned quietly. “I thought of chasing her, of saying… something? But I. I started thinking about what people would say. Everyone stared at me, and I was… I was scared of what people would think or say. I guess I stood there too long and then she was gone. I kept thinking that I’d do something, say something afterwards and we’d pass in the halls, and I’d stare at her, and she always looked so sad. She’d stare at me as if waiting for me to do something, and I just- I ended up… Ignoring it. Dean was around and distracting me, and then… I triggered. And then everything else sort of fell to the wayside. It took me nearly a year to realize that she was even gone, that she’d never even said goodbye.” Vic glanced up at Taylor and shrugged quietly.

“I… think that’s part of why I refuse to hide things. I don’t want to make that mistake again.” Taylor frowned at her and Victoria glanced away quietly. “I- You, you deserve to know how I feel about you. You deserve for everyone to know.” Vic tensed her shoulders, waiting for Taylor to say something. She blinked when the arm came away from her back. She glanced up at Taylor, worried as the girl lifted her hand and gently licked the pad of her thumb and moved to use it to scrub away the make-up on her neck slowly. When one of the dark red marks became visible, Victoria blushed prettily and buried herself back into Taylor’s side. She curled into the warmth there, staring quietly up at the stars with the younger girl.

“…” Victoria glanced over at Taylor as the girl spoke slowly. They were walking side by side through the grass once more, and Victoria quietly revelled in the sensation of the cold, damp blades under her feet. The warm air kept her from being too chilly despite the faint hints of dew, and it was oddly refreshing. Glancing in Taylor’s direction as they passed under an overhead light, Victoria felt her gaze drawn up to meet the taller girl’s dark eyes. Taylor was staring back at her with open curiosity on her face, and Victoria quirked a smile that drew a matching one in return.

“So?” She commented back, grinning when Taylor snorted and slipped closer, their hands brushing against each other, but she didn’t reach out just yet, merely continued ambling with Taylor at her side. She waited for Taylor to marshal her courage, studying the girl as she tried to put her thoughts
“Since we’re talking about that past and all, I must admit to a certain… amount of curiosity about…”
Taylor paused, trailing off with a nervous frown and Victoria took a deep breath before picking up the rather obvious end of the thought that she’d been voicing.

“...about Dean?” She spoke curiously and watched as Taylor glanced in her direction, her face lined in concern, clearly worried that she’d said something wrong. Victoria studied her quietly for a few moments and then reached out, snagging Taylor’s hand in her own and carefully interlacing their fingers. Taylor stared at her and Victoria smiled quietly.

“Yeah,” Taylor spoke softly and gently drew her closer by her hand and Victoria allowed herself to be tugged, playfully crashing into Taylor’s shoulder with a smirk before ‘bouncing’ off and humming. She tilted her head in thought before peering up at Taylor.

“What’d you want to know?” She spoke casually, watching as Taylor glanced at her with exasperation. She grinned, her eyes sparkling with amusement. She wasn’t against discussing this with Taylor, but the girl would need to work for it.

“How’d you guys get together?” Taylor finally spoke, and Victoria let her gaze drift from Taylor to the shadowed school grounds around them. It took her a few moments to realize that they weren’t headed back toward the school or the dance but that they seemed to be taking an oddly meandering path back towards the soccer field and their ride home.

“He asked me out.” Victoria shifted quietly and glanced over at Taylor’s curious look and smiled. “What? It’s true. I met him through Mom and the others. I would occasionally get dragged to cape events, and Gallant was there once in a while. His secret identity is paper thin, and it didn’t take me long to realize that Gallant the superhero was also Dean, the cute boy in my ‘popular crowd’ of friends.” Victoria hummed faintly in thought, thinking back.

“When we first met, he was like. You know you see those pictures online where young, young kids dress up in their parent’s clothes, and it’s adorable? Like they stagger around in oversized suits? Dean was like that before I triggered. He was this little scrawny kid with delusions of heroics. He acted like a knight of old, and that was kind of cute.” Victoria hummed faintly and shrugged.

“After everything with Alex, I was pretty stressed out, and I guess he picked up on it, on RadioFreeGallant, and we got to talking about stuff. And he asked me out. I said yes, and we went on the awkwardest first date in history. He kept over-complicating things and over-acting, and it was… cute, if a bit frustrating. He was so desperate to be a gentleman that he sort of lost the forest for the trees.” Victoria glanced at Taylor and gently squeezed her hand. “It took everything blowing up before he sort of caught on that I’d gone on the date with him because I wanted to spend time with him, and not whoever he was pretending to be. After that, things got better. We dated a bit after, and made things official after I triggered.” Victoria frowned quietly.

“Things got complicated after that? Difficult and hard to handle and Dean was sort of just, this constant in my life. Like… you’ll sometimes hear about people that married someone and then stayed with them after they won the lottery, or made it big because that was the only way they’d know that they were with someone that wanted them for them? Instead of the money or whatever? Dean was like that. I knew that he liked me for me before I had the aura, and that was something that I sort of desperately needed.” Victoria blew out a quiet breath and shrugged as they casually wandered past the greenhouses, nearly halfway around the school and on their way back toward the truck finally.
“And… uh. The breakup?” When Taylor spoke, Victoria flicked a glance at her, and the girl blinked and tensed a bit. “I mean, I know that you broke it off cause of Amy and what happened, but I mean, you’d fought before, and it was a bit… abrupt.” Taylor studied her carefully, and Victoria shrugged quietly as she glanced back toward the murky purple sky.

“I-... It’s complicated. I mean, sometimes? Sometimes I’d be convinced that we were deeply in love and that I was going to join the Protectorate with him, get married, have two and a half kids and a dog, and then we’d found our own chapter of New Wave somewhere else. The American Parahuman Dream.” Victoria frowned quietly and let out a sigh as she switched tracks, her voice dropping a bit as she continued.

"And then, other times, he frustrated me to no end. Dean… He sees the best in people. He looks at you, and he sees how great you could be, and he tries to lift you up, to inspire you. Which is amazing, but then he expects you to be that great, to live up to his aspirations for you. And he’s not shy about sharing his disappointment when you aren’t or don’t.” Victoria tightened her grip on Taylor quietly. “And sometimes dealing with that could get disheartening. I was used to no one seeing the real me, Taylor. I was used to people having expectations and ideas of what or who I was and I could take comfort in the fact that if I disappointed them, then it was their own impression of me that was disappointing, and that wasn’t on me. But, with Dean? When he looked at me and saw the real me and found me lacking that was… devastating.” Victoria blinked when Taylor released her hand and slid an arm around her, and she snorted, shaking her head, leaning into Taylor.

“It’s partly your fault, you know.” She commented, grinning when Taylor glanced at her nervously. “Not like that, though I’m sure that Dean imagines it like that. It’s just.” Victoria frowns. “You were the first person in… years, that just accepted me. Worse still, you saw me, and you acted like it was perfectly fine for me to be...imperfect.” Victoria shrugged quietly. “And then the shield thing happened, and suddenly, I was normal, and everyone looked at me like I was normal, and that was intoxicating. I didn’t have to live up to anyone’s expectations anymore.” Victoria frowned and shrugged.

“After all of that? When I found out what he’d known about? What’d he’d been keeping from me, and apparently ignoring I couldn’t just… let it go? He…” Victoria turned toward Taylor and tried to put her thoughts into words. “The idea that… He might have been lecturing me about my self-control, or giving me disappointed looks as he ignored the things that Amy was going through? Or that we’d… well, in the same house with her and he could sense the hatred and loathing she felt even as he held me, it. Well. That was sort of the final nail in that particular coffin.” Victoria frowned as she noticed the shapes of the cars appearing in the corner of her vision.

She glanced over at the parking lot, staring quietly at the cars as they walked toward them. Taylor kept a grip on her quietly as they moved and then she leaned over and carefully pressed a kiss to Victoria’s temple.

“You are normal, even if you happen to be pretty kick-ass in a fight.” Taylor’s words were soft, and she shrugged quietly as they padded between the rows of cars, heading toward Danny’s old truck. “And you accepted me for who I was, what kind of person would I be if I couldn’t do the same?” Taylor smirked at her and then glanced toward the truck,

“Anyway, let’s get out of here. I think that a nice night in with a big thick blanket and some sort of cheesy movie and popcorn would be a perfect way to end this-” Taylor’s sentence was cut off when something crashed into the both of them and lifted them off their feet. Victoria felt her feet leaving the ground as she and Taylor were tossed through the air, both of them crashing into the back of a car and rolling off of it in different directions.
Fear screamed through her veins, and her heart began to beat savagely in her chest. She scrambled to her feet in terror and glanced around, staring at the form of Taylor near the back of the car on her knees staring blankly at the grass. Her head whipped around and she staggered back as Dean appeared from between two vehicles. His hands were up, one of them coated in something metallic with a pulsing blue stone set in his palm.

“Vicky, breathe.” Dean’s words were soft, subtle as he stepped closer, staring into her eyes. “I’m sorry I had to hit you with that, but you’ve been mastered. I needed to break her hold on you. She’s been manipulating you for months, everyone. We’re finally ready to take her down, we’ll get you fixed soon, but first I’ve gotta deal with her.” Mastered? What? Victoria shook her head, trying to clear the pervasive panic, to still the raging beating in her chest. Victoria barely noticed as Dean studied her as she stood there, torn between fleeing in terror and babbling confused terror-filled questions.

She stared over at him as he approached, and when she didn’t react, she watched as he pulled something from one of the pockets on his suit coat. Victoria stared in confusion at the black strips of material, watching as he slipped over to where Taylor knelt on the grass and grabbed one of her arms, jerking it behind her. The cry of pain lanced into Victoria’s mind, some flicker of discomfort grasping at her from deep, deep in her mind. She stared over at him, watching as Taylor weakly struggled against something that only she could see.

The mewling cry of fear caused Vic’s heart to clench as Dean ignored it, forcing Taylor’s arm up against her back and grabbing the other, Taylor’s weak struggles doing little to stop him. When he bent her other arm around behind her back and elicited another cry of pain, something in Victoria snapped with a twang, and she felt her feet moving.

One step, and then two, and then she lunged, slamming her body into Dean’s larger frame, crashing into him and pushing him away from Taylor. He kept his feet under himself as he staggered back and he shot her a dark look. He tried to step around her, and she narrowed her eyes, desperately fighting off the fear that lingered around her and getting in his face. Several times he tried to get around her, and she shoved him back.

“Vicky, you need to move, she’s going to snap out of it and then she’ll just have you wrapped around her fucking finger again. She’s been using you; she’s been warping your fucking mind. She made you—” Victoria snarled and reached out, slamming her palm into the side of his face and a flicker of satisfaction came through the overwhelming panic as his head snapped to the side at the slap. She grasped that feeling of hurt and anger, and she moved again, another slap, and then another. She pushed him back, ignoring his words.

She saw stars when Dean finally retaliated, his attempt to shove her arms away slipping past her frantic attacks and slamming into her face. She felt her head snap back as the metallic gauntlet crashed into her lip and warmth spread over her chin as she staggered back. Victoria stared at him, watching his face pale as he started to stammer. She reached one hand up and touched her busted lip, the touch sending a lance of pain through her face as the fingers came away red with blood.

“Vicky, I- I didn’t mean—” The fear had evaporated in the face of the fury she felt, the rage that boiled in her. It was only when she felt the bloom of pain in her hand as her knuckles broke while crashing Dean’s nose that she realized that she hadn’t deployed her shield as she attacked. She watched as he screamed, his hands going for his nose, and then another punch lashed out, crashing those aching knuckles into his throat and cutting off his screams with a gurgle.
She moved with precision, stepping in close, grabbing his shoulders and slamming her knee into his groin, watching as even the gurgles suddenly stopped and then she viciously shoved him back into the nearby car, watching him crash into and then off it. She stared down at him where he’d ended up on his side, holding his privates. She stood there, tempted to say something witty, or angry. To slam her foot into his side, and watch him squirm.

Instead, she kicked him over, so he was lying face down and dropped down, bracing a knee in the middle of his back. When he started to struggle, she used her hand to force his face into the grass. She ignored his scream of pain and grabbed his arms, forcing them up and behind him and then grabbing the tie he’d been holding and zip tying his wrists before ripping off the glove and throwing it onto the grass.

She left him there whimpering in the grass as he bled and stalked over to where Taylor still knelt, staring unseeing at the grass. She ducked around in front of her, slowly staring into the blank, featureless eyes and shivering. She glanced around nervously. The last time this had happened, Taylor’d been out of it for almost an hour, and Dean had apparently been holding back then. She shivered a bit before moving to gently rest her forehead on Taylor's.

“Taylor… Taylor? Can you hear me?” She did her best to restrain a scream as she fought back the panic that she was feeling. “Taylor, I need you with me right now. Taylor, please.” even Victoria could hear the desperation in her voice, and she closed her eyes, fighting back the tears when the younger girl remained perfectly statuelike.

“Taylor, please, I can’t do this alone.” Victoria clenched her eyes shut as she took a deep shuddering breath, though she froze at the feeling of a gentle almost ghost-like whisper along the back of her mind. She held still and felt that lingering tendril of terror spreading into the back of her mind, and she held still, quietly doing her best to still her own fear and panic. She drew in a long breath, inhaling the scent of the perfume that Taylor wore and doing her best to draw up every warm feeling that Taylor engendered.

She felt the connection deepening as Taylor’s fear and terror washed into her, and she spoke slowly as she continued to do her best to fight off that darkness with the warmth and affection that she’d been feeling all evening.

“Y-Yes Taylor, just like that, come on, open it wider.” The words had an effect, and the connection spread open, and a deluge of terror crashed into Victoria, nearly washing away every last scrap of warmth and happiness in her, but then the tendril in her connected with another and then the fear was washed away. She opened her eyes, watching as Taylor’s wide, terrified eyes suddenly snapped into focus.

She blinked when the girl drew back and her expression suddenly hardened as she glanced up and down her face, and it took Victoria a few minutes to realize what she must look like. She watched the flicker of anger and fury appear on Taylor’s face as the sensations washed into her mind, and she chuckled, her own feelings of comfort and appreciation causing Taylor to pause in her search.

“What happened?” Taylor’s voice was low and rough, and she reached out, Victoria felt the girl’s hand on her cheek and closed her eyes as Taylor’s powers washed through her and she felt the pain instantly fading as her face and hand suddenly stopped aching. She savoured the sensations and the contact, speaking with her eyes shut.

“It was Dean; he hit us with a blast that seemed to be improved by tinker tech. He tried to secure you once you were out, but I sort of beat the crap out of him. Broke his nose, kicked him in the balls, left
him bleeding over there in his own bindings.” She gestured in the vague direction of Dean. When Taylor pulled her hand away and the warmth faded, Victoria frowned, but she did open her eyes and watch as Taylor staggered to her feet and headed for Dean.

Victoria clambered to her own and followed, but before they could reach Dean’s prone form, Taylor staggered to a halt, and Victoria nearly crashed into her. She followed Taylor’s view as a flash of green caught her eye. She watched as a half dozen bolts of emerald light washed across the grass across from them, arcing from a group of black-clad shapes toward a pair of similarly garbed figures. Victoria frowned, the concern turning into a flat out panic when one of the figures suddenly burst into familiar yellowish light and was suddenly holding a glowing Warhammer.

“Taylor, that’s my mom.” Victoria moved, glancing over when Taylor reached out, her purse flying from where it’d fallen. She’d expected Taylor to try to stop her, to warn her off. Victoria hadn’t expected Taylor to rip something small from her bag and then leap to the roof of a car and charge off toward the fighting. She stared after Taylor, watching in confusion until something suddenly exploding in the distance snapped her out of her thoughts.

Victoria focused, bringing her shield up and taking off. She glanced down at Dean’s bound and prone form, glaring for a moment before rocketing off in Taylor’s wake. She stared down as Taylor did something to the object she’d taken out of her purse and she suddenly held a short silver staff in one hand as they both charged toward her parents.

Chapter End Notes

[[Dun, Dun, Dun. So begins the drama. 7.9 picks up where this chapter leaves off, and we get to see Taylor and Vic dealing with this mess here, and then we’ll drop back into an Amy perspective. I imagine that the speculation will continue to abound in the forum about the particulars of what’s going on here, and I will point out that not everything is as it appears on the surface.

There’s a lot of plot threads creeping around that will become apparent in the next chapter, and until then, I will merely say that the PRT plots especially are a lot deeper then you’re all assuming. I’ll not say anything else for fear of spoiling stuff, but I will say that when it all comes untangled at the end of the arc, no one involved will be leaving the Wards or Protectorate. Beyond that, Mum’s the word.

In other news, we finally get a bit more conversation on Victoria’s past and stuff. Vic and Taylor continue to be adorable idiots, and we finally get some explanation on some of Victoria’s more noticeable quirks in this particular timeline. Anyway, looking forward to your feedback, as always, but I’ve gotta get ready for work.]]
Carol crossed her arms and quietly tapped her foot, staring off toward the darkened school grounds. It’s been nearly an hour, and they were still waiting for troopers to locate her wayward daughter and her girlfriend. Carol grit her teeth quietly as she wondered what exactly they were doing that left them out of communication, but she only entertained the brief surge of protective anger for a few moments before pushing it away as Mel had instructed, taking a few deep breaths and closing her eyes. The sound of a trio of clicks caused her to open her eyes, turning to study the Team Leader standing near Mark. She watched as the man pulled out a walkie talkie and spoke into it.

“Tango-Lima One, Mark.” The man checked his watch quietly, and then grasped the button once more and spoke again. “Seven, Three, Niner - Confirm.” He listened to the crackly voice repeating the numbers back and saying a different series, and then the voice crackled over the walkie. Carol listened, but she could only pick out a few words at a distance. Eventually, the man dropped the arm he was holding the walkie with and walked over toward her, Mark on his heels.

“Mrs. Dallon,” The older man spoke softly, and Carol felt her back tensing as she narrowed her eyes as the exasperated tone in his voice. She turned and met his gaze, crossing her arms over her front and waiting for him to continue. “My men have completed their sweep of the school and the surrounding land, and they’ve seen no signs of your daughter. We’re going to expand the search radius, but you really should get into the vans and head off. Once we locate your daughter, we’ll-” Carol didn’t wait for him to finish, stepping closer with a growl.

“No, I’m not going to just leave. You said that Sarah was attacked. If they’re coming after New Wave, they might already have Victoria, and this is the best place to chase them from. We’ll assist in your search. Which way should we go?” She glared angrily down at the shorter man, watching as he swallowed and took a nervous step back. She glanced at the rest of the troopers and blinked when the walkie crackled to life instead of issuing the clicks.

“Marshalls. I’ve found them.” Carol stopped, her expression hardening at the familiar voice crackling over the walkie-talkie. “Your men fucked up and missed them entirely. They were walking the long way around the school, and they’ve bypassed your patrols. They’re heading toward the parking lots as we speak. They’re about to get away, I’m going to get into position to intercept them.” Carol watched in dawning horror as the man lifted the mic and spoke.
“Stansfield! Stansfield, stop. Wait for backup, you can’t-” The man cut off as Mark lunged forward and grasped him by the front of his armour, growling as he dragged the older man close.

“Tell me that Dean Stansfield didn’t just come over that line and say that he’s about to ‘intercept’ my daughter.” The man’s words were laced with cold fury, and Carol watched as the trooper in his hands swallowed and then dropped the walkie talkie making a motion with his hand. The half dozen troopers behind him suddenly raised their rifles, and Carol stared in confusion at the weapons that they were holding at the ready in their hands.

They were similar to the standard issue PRT assault rifles, except where some PRT troopers occasionally made use of barrel-mounted tinker-tech lasers or underslung grenade launchers, every one of these weapons made use of the same odd attachment. Small devices were affixed to the left of the barrel of the weapon, each one a cylindrical green device, with a design that vaguely hinted at the aesthetic of a dragon, and each was capped in a dully glowing emerald crystal. The weapons all lined up on the trooper and Mark, and Carol lunged, shoving her husband to the side as hard as she could, watching as he and the soldier hit the grass and rolled. She glanced up, seeing the weapon attachments all starting to pulse with emerald light and then she shimmered, her form collapsing into a little point as the wave of emerald fire smashed into her.

The sluggishness that had started to spread over her halted as her body vanished into bouncing light, but it took several moments for it fade back enough that she was sufficiently aware of herself to feel bouncing on the uneven grass. Several more ‘brushes’ hinted that they hadn’t stopped firing at her. She remained in the dark, her terror about what was happening to Victoria keeping her growing unease at the darkness at bay. She waited till she felt an explosive wave of force hit her, and Carol focused as hard as she could to slam her glowing form into the ground to keep from being blown away by it.

Once the effect had passed, she emerged kneeling on the grass and glanced around. Mark’s form was standing nearby, gripping his arm. Blood seeped from a rent in it and made his dark suit look wet and shiny in the light coming from the school. Carol snarled and slid to her feet, glancing over at the tangled mess of groaning troopers a dozen feet away. Mark’s blast had knocked them all prone, but they were staggering to their feet and lifting their guns again. Carol focused and a glowing warhammer appeared in her hands.

The sound of the men opposite her adjusting their weapons caused her to glare, and she stared at the older team leader’s exposed face as he lifted his gun to point.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dallon. I’m giving you one chance to surrender yourself to custody. This is a potential Master/Stranger incident, we’re not here to harm you. We just want to confine you until the danger is passed. We are-” The team leader suddenly trailed off at the sound of a man screaming in pain emerging from the walkie-talkie by Carol’s feet, They all stared down at the device, listening when a wet gurgle cut the scream off and everyone froze and glanced off toward the parking lot. Carol smirked slowly as she hefted her weapon. The man seemed to catch on and lifted his gun, flicking something.

“Take them out. We have incoming, contact-” Mark didn’t wait for him to finish, conjuring a glowing orb and throwing it into the mass of men that all scattered professionally. The team leader rolled clear and hefted his rifle, taking aim. Carol watched the glowing blast coming and slammed her hard-light hammer into it and smirked as it vanished in a swirl of light and then she turned her gaze on the man’s pale face, taking a step closer. Feeling her lips curling into an almost Feral grin, Carol advanced on the man. She hadn’t had a good fight in a while, and this might certainly help her get her aggression out. Lifting her weapon, Carol held it one-handed, taking aim and then threw it
with all her might, watching as it smacked into one of the troopers and detonated, blowing him off his feet.

More blasts came, and she and Mark were forced to dodge to the side. Carol spun and focused her weapon re-appearing in her hands and she lifted up smoothly to block an incoming attack, watching as Mark ended up on one knee nearby. She mentally sighed at the stains that would result from this as her husband opened his hands conjuring two small yield concussive orbs and tossed them both out before dodging back once more...

Chapter End Notes

[[So, As we see, the plan ended up being a bit borked. I should take this point to say that despite his characterization in this, Dean isn’t necessarily a bad person. We should keep in mind that we see all of this from Victoria’s perspective and it’s fair to say that her impressions are coloured. That isn’t to say that she doesn’t have legitimate concerns, or that she shouldn’t have broken it off with Dean. I remember watching uh, this, here and thinking this was sort of perfect for Victoria and Dean’s relationship if a bit ‘grown up’ so to speak.

And while not necessarily healthy, that relationship might have survived without Taylor mucking things up. People tend to forget that Dean is a spoiled, sheltered kid, and he’s not a doctor or a psychologist, and he’s human? He fucks up, but unfortunately, he was put in the path of a major fuck up. My intention at the end of all of this is that he has to face the consequences of that, but that it hopefully helps him end up as more than Armsy 2.0. I could see him being forced to choose between the PRT and his civilian life when he turns 18.

Like, perhaps they basically say that as soon as he turns 18 and graduates out of the Wards, they’re transferring him, and since that’d cost him his legacy from his family he has to choose between being a hero or being rich, I guess. And then if he decides to go, I could see Legend putting him at the Asylum for a year or two. Confronting Dean with the sort of dangers that he exposed everyone to. Giving him the necessary perspective before allowing him to transfer back out somewhere else and hopefully having him be a better hero.

Also, I will say that uh. Dragon isn’t in on this. But the creations are hers. It’ll get explained in the next chapter, but uh. Yeah. Leet and Dragon have been inventing up a storm, and sometimes they send tech to Armsy for testing.]]
Chapter Summary

[[You guys have been pretty excited to start getting answers about what’s going on, let’s see what sort of shenanigans we’re dealing with, hrm. I’m tempted to chatter on a bit longer, but I suppose that can wait for the end, and we’ll let you guys get right into the meat of the action. Hopefully, it’s a fun trip.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

June 19th, 2011
Arcadia High, Brockton Bay

Gritting her teeth, Taylor bounced from the roof of one car to the next, her feet barely ghosting the thin metal as she skipped along toward the fight. She stared in mounting fury at the half dozen men arrayed around the grass, tracking Vic’s mother and father with their weapons and raining emerald fire down on the two capes. Taylor leapt from the final car and skidded to a halt a short distance from the fight and tapped more profoundly into the Force. One of her hands lashed out, and a wave of Force spread out from her, and she moved to wrap it around every trooper present, intent on smashing them all into each other to stop their attack.

When the power washed over them all without interacting with them, Taylor’s anger stuttered, and she stood there in confusion until Victoria rocketed past her. She watched as the girl grabbed two of the firing troopers with her hands and lifted them up and away from the combat, rocketing off toward the staff parking. The metallic clang of the troopers’ helmets slamming together was audible from Taylor’s position, making her wince. Taylor stared on in mounting panic as the troopers turned as one and lifted their weapons, orienting on Victoria’s retreating back.

Taylor felt a surge of concern washing back into her as the anger waned, and she realized that the link between her and her girlfriend was still open. Taylor closed her eyes and did her best to marshal her emotions, focusing on her own concern, pushing that up the link and watched as Victoria suddenly slammed to a halt, releasing both of her captives. Her hands nearly blurred as they snapped out, snagging the weapons and snapping them smoothly off the belts that secured them to each of the stunned men. As the men fell the foot and a half to the ground, Victoria rocketed off to the side, dodging the blasts of light were arcing toward her back, spinning in mid-air and zipping off to the east, weaving around the rain of emerald fire.

Frowning at the lack of attention on her and realizing that she had yet to be spotted at the edge of the light as she was, Taylor surged forward into the fray leaving her weapon stuck into the ground where she’d placed it. She realized her miscalculation as she came up next to a trooper, her speed significantly reduced due to the connection she was maintaining with Victoria robbing her of a portion of it. Instead of hitting the trooper hard and fast enough to put him down before he could react, Taylor found herself staring at the man as he started to turn toward her. She moved before he could cry out, scrabbling at the memories of Senya’s battles that lingered like a wispy ghost in the
back of her mind.

‘Palm strike to the gun to put it out of position, elbow to the gut, using what strength she could marshal to stagger the man. Hands grab the gun, lift it sharply and smash it into that helmet, to put the man on the back foot. Both hands lock on the gun, rip it out of the trooper’s hands, and then pull to full extension on the strap, and free one hand. Spinning side-kick into the chest to snap the strap and send the man tumbling.’ Taylor staggered as the man crashed into the grass before her and rolled away. She moved before he could get back to his feet, slamming her knee into his back and using the Force to accentuate her weight, keeping him struggling on the ground.

She lifted the gun, staring at it and Marr’s voice whispered through her mind, explaining what she was looking at. Safety, trigger, secondary trigger probably for the tinker-tech, clip, magazine ejector. She took a moment to consider the weapon before lifting it to her shoulder and raising it skyward. The sight of a swirl of violet light to her left made her pause before she could release a half dozen rounds to draw the focus away from Victoria.

“Taylor, don’t. Look!” Jolee stared back at her, his bearded lips curled into a frown as he pointed. Taylor flicked her gaze over toward the direction he indicated, finally understanding why these troopers were being left to her and Victoria. Near the school, Vic’s parents were battling off the rest of the troopers, their glowing attacks intercepting a number of emerald blasts as they moved quickly and precisely around the assault. As she stared, Jolee’s voice whispered into her mind. “They’re only using the energy weapons, probably some sort of stunner. If you start firing live ammunition, they might take it as an indication that things have gone bad and respond in kind.”

Taylor frowned and then shifted, moving to stare at the weapon. She aimed down at the man still struggling under her foot and fingered the button that had been affixed to the side of the weapon stock, watching as a blast of emerald light crashed into him, and his struggles stopped. She stared at the troopers ahead of her, flinching when they all spun as one at the sound and light and pointed their weapons at her. Taylor stared coldly at them and then reached up, carefully and precisely pulling back the bolt action. The lack of a round ejecting out of the weapon’s breach told her that this was supposed to be a non-lethal operation. That was promising. The nervous shifting of the men opposite her telling her that she was now the only one with a live weapon was equally reassuring.

“Miss Hebert. Just. Put the gun down. We can talk about this. No one here wants to hurt you, but we’ve gotta make sure that everyone else is safe.” The only trooper without a mask spoke carefully, adjusting his grip. “There’s four of us and one of you, there’s no way that you can down all of us at once.” The man lifted his weapon and Taylor let out an amused laugh that saw the men shifting nervously in place.

“I don’t need to take you all out, I was just distracting you all until Glory Girl got close enough to grab more of you.” The words were cool, and Taylor rolled her eyes when two of the men spun, freezing when they saw Victoria still nervously floating where she’d been when they’d turned on her. Taylor smiled at the hint of worry and concern that Victoria was radiating at the idea of her having all those weapons on her and then she lifted her own gun and fired a blast of light into the other man still aiming at her, watching as he collapsed.

She moved, ducking and weaving around the next blast that came and closing the distance between her and the leader. The other two tried to spin back toward her in time to do something, but Victoria had caught on and dropped one of her weapons, lining up the other and firing a blast into the back of one of the troopers, downing them as well. Taylor smoothly slid closer, taking in the older man’s stormy blue eyes as they widened. Before he could react, she lunged in, slamming her rifle into his own, knocking the weapon up and his arms along with it.
Bracing on one foot, Taylor spun quickly, slamming her heel into the team leader’s exposed sternum, kicking him back several feet before shifting her gun around and pointing at the remaining trooper as he tried to line up a shot on her. A deft flick of her finger pressed the stunner button, blasting him backwards and off his feet. Despite the temptation to revel in her victory, Taylor stalked over to the team leader as he struggled to get his feet back under him and she moved quickly, savagely kicking his gun away and then pointing her own weapon down at his face. She stood there stoically while he nervously raised his hands.

Taylor flicked her gaze from the man to Vic’s hovering form and gently tilted her head in Carol and Mark’s direction. The older couple had moved to hide behind trees, and it was clear that they were attempting to put down the other team without killing them and having a time of it without their armour. Victoria suddenly rocketing into their mist with a stun weapon and blasting them from on high quickly turned the tide. Mark proved quite apt at covering fire with his bombs to keep Victoria from being shot out of the air, which left Victoria and Carol able to focus down the remaining troopers.

Taylor kept an eye on the team leader, watching to see if he’d make a move, but he simply stared back at her worriedly as she kept her loaded weapon aimed at him. It didn’t take long, maybe fifteen minutes before Carol, Mark and Victoria rejoined her, dragging another six troopers between them and dropping them down with the rest of the stunned. As Mark set to work zip tying the lot, Carol and Victoria joined her and Taylor in staring down at the man, waiting for him to try and say something.

“...New Wave, I’m sure that this is some sort of—” He cut off as Carol’s glowing warhammer suddenly found its way very close to his face, and he held up his hand placating and swallowed nervously.

“Where’s my daughter?” The words were cold and laced with an abject fury that startled Taylor. When Carol stepped closer, Taylor stared down at the man’s face as it shifted into a firm expression. A shimmer drew Taylor’s eyes back to the weapon that Carol held, watching as it visibly stuttered and then suddenly changed shape into a slightly terrifying looking Fauchard. The weapon glowed with a pearlescent golden light and seemed to pulse in time with Carol’s heartbeat. “This will cut through most anything, so your armour won’t save you, Trooper. I’m going to ask you once more. Where. Is. My. Daughter.” The man paled as Carol swept the weapon up and flinched back, sputtering.

“Wait! I don’t know.” He nervously quailed under their gazes and flinched back. “I don’t! I wasn’t told. My team was to get you into the vans. They’re all automated, and they would take you where the PRT wanted you. They didn’t tell us because they knew that with a Master on the ground if we got compromised, we’d give away the op.” He flinched a bit at their dark looks and nervously stuttered on. “You’ve all worked with the PRT, you know how this works.” Taylor watched as Carol stared at the man coldly for a few moments before stepping back.

“You mentioned suspected Mastering before. What were you talking about?” Carol’s voice was still laced with impotent fury, but Taylor let out a relieved sigh that she didn’t seem intent on killing anyone just yet. She stared down at the man as he glanced around at them all for a few moments before locking eyes with her. Taylor swallowed as the man spoke nervously.

“I-uh. Her. She’s been classed a major threat. It’s a Foothold Situation.” He pointed in her direction and Taylor flinched back. The others turned to glance at her and Taylor’s heart clenched as she nervously studied them all. Mark and Victoria exchanged glances the panicked man continued on
“We’re supposed to detain you all until the Protectorate can come in and screen you, they’re operating with Master/Stranger Protocols, Level 9.” Taylor stared at the others, her chest unclenching when Victoria’s eyes narrowed, and she glanced at the others.

“Mom!” Victoria spoke harshly, and Taylor’s gaze flicked that way, swallowing nervously at the surprisingly stern look on Carol’s face. She kept her weapon aimed at the trooper and let out a nervous sigh when Mark reached out, gently grasping Carol’s shoulder. The older woman stepped back and growled softly, glancing between Victoria and Mark.

“What, it’s not like we’d actually know. What if she is-” Carol started to speak, and Taylor glanced over when Victoria neatly hopped over the prone figure and stepped closer to her mother, her expression careful and restrained.

“Mom. I’m telling you that you do not want to finish that sentence if you want to ever have any chance of.” Whatever Victoria was saying was suddenly cut off as the trooper on the ground spun quickly and tried to jump up. One of his hands was heading for Victoria’s gun, and the other toward her neck. Taylor didn’t hesitate, her expression hardening as her finger slipped over the toggle and releasing another blast of swirling emerald light. She felt a surge of satisfaction as the light crashed into the man and blowing him back off of his feet once more.

Everyone stood nervously in the silence after the trooper fell, staring at each other. Taylor’s heart pounded rapidly as she considered the gun, gently lowering it from where she’d still had it pointed at the collapsed trooper. Glancing up at Victoria, Taylor nervously took in the girl’s hardened look, and Carol’s stormy expression and the deeply conflicted look on Mark’s face. She nervously shifted from foot to foot, struggling to find something, anything to say.

“Where’s Amy? And Lily?” Victoria’s voice was low and worried, and Taylor glanced up, looking over at Carol. She studied the woman’s paling face as she glanced over toward the vans that still sat waiting.

“They uh. They already got them. We saw the truck leaving when we got out here. They said that Sarah had been hurt and that we all needed to go with them. Some kind of attack at PRT HQ and they needed Amy to heal her. They said they suspected it was some sort of organized attack, so we all needed to go with them. We refused to leave until they found you, and then Dean… well, I suppose you know what Dean did.” Carol paused and frowned, glancing over toward the cars. “Did you-?” Victoria shot her mother a dirty look and Taylor spoke up.

“She broke his nose and knocked his balls up into his tonsils, but she didn’t use her powers to do it. Her uh, hand was pretty busted until I did my thing.” She glanced over and smiled a touch when Mark got this big smile on his face and reached out, ruffling Victoria’s already ruined hairdo much to the blonde girl’s chagrin.

Moving over, Taylor crouched down by the man she’d most recently shot, quickly picking over his vest and unhooking the vest pockets checking each. She drew out a few different things, a chocolate bar, several odd grenades, and a small round device with a pulsing purple and orange light. She pocketed that before moving over and unhooking the breast pocket and drawing out the walkie talkie, carefully removing the external mic and lifting it up.

She considered it for a few moments, letting out a quiet sigh. Radio seemed to be working. She thought back to the PRT Training classes and carefully checked the device, nodding at the encryption frequency being locked in. She carefully clicked the talk button twice, listening to see if anyone responded. When the line remained silent, she glanced at the others.
“I think that was the remainder of the strike force.” She shrugged and carefully clicked through the channels, frowning each time she hit static until the frequency clicked over. Taylor held up a hand to silence the questions, turning up the volume on the device and listening to a familiar voice crackling over the device.

“-sole, I know for a fact that Macmillan was supposed to be at the console tonight. You’re not Macmillan, ergo I require you to either give me the Director level Master/Stranger Verification for today, or you put someone on that can.” The line sat silent for several minutes and then a voice came over.

“As I’ve informed you, Mister Hollis. We’re operating under the standard procedures for a foothold situation. I’ve given you Armsmaster’s verification code, and he has ordered that you surrender yourself and the others with you to Master/Stranger confinement. If you don’t, we’ll be forced to take you in by force.” The voice that came over the line was crisp and frosty, and Taylor frowned down at the device. She stared at the walkie for a few moments before peering over at Victoria.

“Was that…” Victoria’s voice trailed off when Taylor nodded quickly in agreement, picking up on the curious looks from the others. “That was Assault. He was out with Crystal and Sabah tonight.” Taylor frowned at the device when it crackled to life once more, a third voice coming over the line.

“Sir. We were unable to apprehend the subjects. A Parahuman power in use at their location prevents us from removing them by force, and as we were attempting to convince them to leave of their own volition… Sir. It’s uh. General order fifteen.” The man went silent, and there was nearly an entire minute of dead air on the line before Taylor heard the cold voice of the man at console coming back.

“Retreat to a safe distance, establish a perimeter. If Hollis or the others attempt to leave, take them into custody. If subject forty-two attempts to leave, do not attack him or anyone with him. If he attempts to interfere in your capture of the others, do not attack him. He cannot remain with them constantly, and we’ll capture them elsewhere.” The voice cut off and then after a moment, it spoke again.

“It is twenty-one-hundred-and-thirty, all units switch over decoder frequencies.” The voice went silent before a long garbled chain of distorted noise came over the line. Taylor cursed with the others and dropped the walkie-talkie on the prone form, glancing up at the rest with a nervous frown.

“We should go after Amy. She’s probably at the holding cells at PRT HQ with the others, we can-” Taylor listened to Victoria speaking and loosed a gentle sigh before moving to speak, but before she could Carol cut in instead.

“We have no way of knowing that. For all, we know they’re all already on the rig, or at some other location that we don’t know about. We need to find someplace to retreat and regroup. Your father needs healing, and we need to change into something less restrictive.” Taylor glanced at the others before speaking softly.

“We should head back to my house.” She stared at them and shrugged simply. “If they were trying to get Lisa, they’d have checked there, and probably already have left. Besides that, our uniforms are there, and so is my Dragon phone. I uh. I could probably ask her what’s going on.” She studied the others for a few moments. Victoria glanced at her before glancing back at the conflicted look on Carol’s face.

The older woman stared at her for a few moments before glancing over at Victoria, staring at her.
silently for a few moments, deep in thought. Taylor watched as Carol squared her shoulders carefully and studied her daughter before speaking.

“Why did you break up with Dean?” The words were quick and precise, and Taylor flinched waiting for Victoria to get angry or explode. She was surprised at the welling of understanding that came over the bond, and she glanced up at Victoria’s face, taking in the obvious resolve in her eyes.

“He knew what Amy was going through. The lust, the hate, the apathy, all of it. He knew, and he never told anyone, not me, not you, not even Piggot. He could feel it, even when we were… together, at the house. The idea of him touching me repulses me.” The words were cold and resolute, and Taylor watched as Carol’s expression softened. The older woman glanced her way, and Taylor smiled nervously. She did her best to not quail under Carol’s searching gaze, and the woman let out a sigh.

“Let’s go. They’ll find us eventually no matter where we go, and I’d rather they not find us here. Your place is closer than ours.” The woman turned and stalked off toward the cars. Taylor stared down at the passed out figures on the lawn and looked around, wondering why no one had emerged from the dance and caught them. She figured it was only a matter of time and she stalked off after the others, Victoria on her heels.

She was almost to the truck when she realized that Victoria had vanished from her side and she spun around worriedly, until the girl came out from between two cars, dragging Dean by his leg in her wake. She bent down, hefted him up and stared into his eyes before speaking slowly.

“I’m tempted to put you in the flatbed of this truck, but I don’t trust myself not to hit sixty and then slam on the brakes, so instead you get to ride with my mom and dad; who’re both all too aware of what you did with what you knew about Amy.” Taylor watched Dean’s eyes widening as Victoria dragged him over to the sporty sedan and then opening the door. She leaned in, saying something to her parents before shoving Dean unceremoniously into the back seat.

Taylor opened the truck and climbed in, watching Victoria stalking angrily back over to her. She watched as the older girl clambered in next to her. Taylor’s own flickering irritation vanished when Victoria violently slammed the keys into the ignition and started the truck, pulling out and following after her mother’s car without even glancing at her. Something cold and worried replaced it as Taylor nervously shrunk down into her seat and stared out the window at the passing trees.

Taylor rested her hands on the edge of the plastic utility sink in the garage. She’d gracefully surrendered the shower to Victoria, and the sink in the basement to Carol to tidy up, and Mark had been given a change of clothes and left at the kitchen sink after she’d healed his arm. So Taylor was stuck out here, carefully scrubbing the remains of the makeup off her face with the ice cold water that the utility sink had access to. She reached out a hand and snagged the towel she’d left on the nearby table and carefully wiped her face and neck clean.

Part of her was tempted to heal the rest of the bruises on her neck, but she remembered the words that Victoria had uttered to her on those bleachers and instead she moved to carefully secure her uniform, doing up all the catches and glancing down at the nearby table. She walked over to the weapon that she’d ended up not using even once throughout the evening, and she carefully picked it
She studied it for a few moments before carefully unscrewing the emitter and the upper portion and replacing it once more with the practice ‘blade’ that she’d been using during the afternoon. She carefully swung it around, chuckling as she compared it to a Vibroblade, idly wishing that she had the time to actually make the modifications to turn it into an actual weapon like that. Taylor stared at the silver metal, frowning a bit as she flicked her eyes at the nearby cold forge, wishing not for the first time in the last hour that she had an actual lightsaber. Part of her felt like it was missing without the iconic weapon.

“Wishing that you had your laser sword?” The words were subtle and soft, and Taylor glanced up, staring over at Victoria standing in the door of the garage, now clad in her costume. Taylor glanced down at the weapon in her hand and hefted it up carefully.

“I uh. This is nice, a decent substitute, but… A lightsaber makes a Jedi in a fundamental way, Vic. It… Even if I’m not really much of a Jedi, I’d still feel safer with one in my hands.” Taylor frowned quietly, staring at the polished metal of her weapon, gripping its hilt and squeezing. “About all of this, Vic… I-I’m sorry.” The words were soft, tremulous, and she listened as Victoria padded across the concrete to her.

“Taylor, it’s not your fault.” The words were gentle, and Taylor felt the other girl’s hand on her shoulder, and she glanced up, frowning. She studied Victoria for a few moments and let out a weary sigh. She moved to open her mouth, pausing when Victoria reached out and set a finger over her lips. “Taylor, we’ve talked about this already, you’re not mastering us, and you certainly didn’t make the others do all of this.” Taylor stared at Vic and let out a quiet little chuckle as the older girl’s arms slid around her.

Stepping closer, Taylor wrapped her arms around Vic’s middle and dragged her in close, burying her face into Victoria’s hair and inhaling deeply. Taylor took a few minutes to just hold Victoria’s tightly, soaking in the warmth, scent and sensations with her eyes closed, taking comfort from the fact that Victoria held her just as tightly. In the end, it was Victoria that broke the lingering silence, leaning close and whispering teasingly.

“You healed my neck. It took me like two hours to convince Amy not to do that against my will.” The words were laced with a subtle reproach that caused Taylor to snort out a laugh, drawing back to peer at Victoria, a tiny smile gracing her lips at the playful expression on Vic’s face.

“If it bothers you that much, I’ll replace them later,” Taylor spoke quickly, her smile growing just a touch as Victoria’s cheeks darkened. The sound of the door opening cut off their nervous chatter, and they both turned to stare over at Carol. Taylor blinked at the look. Carol was wearing one of Victoria’s spare bodysuits, though it lacked the golden crest that typically rested on Victoria’s chest, and she’d replaced the sash and medallion with one of Taylor’s black belts, along with Taylor’s spare gloves and boots.

The effect was pretty intimidating, the stark blacks and whites paired with Carol’s grim expression and the flinty blue eyes peering in at them. The woman paused in the doorway to the garage, staring at them both. Taylor nervously tried to shift back, blushing when Victoria locked her arms around her and continued to stare at her mother. The growing tension in Taylor’s form faded when the older woman’s expression softened, and she gestured up to the house.

“We’re ready, let’s get this over with.” Taylor nodded and glanced at Vic. She studied the set of the girl’s jaw as she watched the door, the look of confusion on her face oddly cute. Taylor leaned up
and feathered a kiss over Victoria’s jaw, startling the older girl out of her reverie and causing her to step back quickly, the arms around her loosening. Taylor reached out, snagging Victoria’s hand and leading her back into the house proper.

Taylor walked through the doorway and past the entrance to the basement, heading into the kitchen. She glanced at Carol looming by the kitchen sink, her arms crossed as she looked toward the aged kitchen table. Taylor’s eyes danced over Mark where he sat dressed in a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt that had once belonged to her father, the man looking rather casual and comfortable in a way that didn’t fit the trendy man that Taylor had met a few times. The way he fidgeted with the shirt hinted that even he wasn’t sure how well he appreciated these developments.

But even Mark’s gaze was focused on the last occupant of the room. Taylor felt Victoria’s hand tightening on hers, and she glanced at the blonde, following her gaze to stare at the furious eyes of Dean. The man was still in his ripped and stained tuxedo, and he’d been tied to one of the chairs, a scrap of cloth stuffed into his mouth and tied around the back of his head. His nose was visibly broken and swollen, and it looked distinctly purple.

“So,” The words came from Victoria and Taylor glanced at her. “We’ve gotten someplace safe and changed. What’s the plan? That trooper said something about a foothold situation? Do either of you have any idea?” Taylor glanced over at Mark who shook his head smoothly before glancing to Carol who shrugged up a shoulder.

“It didn’t come up in my training, sadly.” The woman glanced down at Dean, taking in his defiant furious look and shaking her head. “We can try to interrogate Dean here, but I doubt he’s going to be that helpful.” Taylor stared at Dean, and something in her hardened when she caught the look he sent Victoria, and she stepped forward.

“I can-” The words cut off when Victoria jerked her back and shook her head. The older girl stared at her for a moment before releasing her and moving around the table. She reached out and carefully removed the gag from his mouth, staring at him. Taylor felt the buzz at the edge of her perception as Victoria’s shield slid into place, and Dean’s expression shifted between fury and distrust.

“I’m not going to fucking tell you anything about where they’ve taken her victims-” Victoria shifted back and shook her head, crossing her arms.

“No, Dean. That’s not what we wanted to talk about. You were explaining before you tried to tie up Taylor. You were saying we’re all mastered. What’s that all about?” Dean glanced around at the others before staring at her. Taylor nervously stepped back at the angry look on his face.

“It’s her. She’s corrupted you all. Done something to you. You’re all different, broken. She started with Amy, stepped in and just, cracked open her brain. Next time I saw her, everything was different, smoother. And then you. She did… something, changed how you think, it made you not immune to my powers, I could feel the distaste and loathing that she put into you.” The young man snarled and strained against his bonds.

“I knew that she was corrupting everyone around her, twisting you all, so I went to Miss Militia. She brushed me off, but Armsmaster heard. He believed me. Even when Piggot wouldn’t listen to us. He went behind her back, got help. Troopers. Capes. Even tinker-tech. He understood the threat.” His words were cold and laced with dark anger as he glared at her and Taylor crossed her arms.

“It’s just a matter of time. I won’t tell you where he’s keeping them, but you can’t hide out forever. There are capes in the city, Armsmaster’s friends from before he came here. They’ll find you, and
you’ll be screwed.” Dean glanced up at Victoria, stared at her before turning his head. Taylor met those eyes as the man’s expression twisted as he spoke coldly. “And, don’t worry Vicky, I forgive you. You can’t exactly control yourself. Once they’ve gotten her under control, I’ll be there to help you get back to normal.” Taylor stared at the man as he glanced back at her girlfriend, watching the way his eyes drifted over Vic’s face, the way his smile grew just a bit as he stared at the pale clean skin of Victoria’s throat.

The anger that had vanished in the cab of the truck suddenly roared to life in Taylor, and she watched as Dean’s gaze snapped over toward her. She pressed her lips into a thin line and stepped forward. She watched the wary looks from the others, but the abject fear in Dean’s face as she approached him caused a thrill of almost wicked amusement to sprout in her chest. She watched as his eyes widened and filled with fear as she approached. She didn’t say anything, merely keeping her eyes locked on his as she moved to rest against the edge of the table, lacing her fingers and watching Dean start to panic. When the abject terror on his face reached its climax, Taylor reached out a hand toward him and grinned as he flinched back, squirming desperately.

“Wait! Don’t! I don’t know anything else. I wasn’t told the rest of his plan. I don’t even know who he called for help. There’s no reason to do anything to me, I can’t tell you anything—” Taylor ignored his struggles and his cries as he got almost to the verge of tears. She rested the pads of her glove against the pale skin of the shuddering man’s face and then she reached into the Force and smoothly flooded the man with healing energy.

Taylor observed the healing with a faint smile as Dean struggled desperately, using the Force to snap the young man’s nose back into place, ignoring his hiss of pain and the trickle of blood. She fully healed the damage to his face, leaving his abused chest and testicles alone, before sitting back and lacing her fingers together. She stared at Dean’s furious look as he glared at her and then she reached down, opening the concealed pouch in the waist of her suit and pulling out the device she’d collected from the PRT trooper's vest, holding it up.

“So. Dean. Do you know what this is?” She held it up, watching as Dean’s eyes widened in concern and he glanced from the device to her and back. “I’m guessing that this is whatever Armssmaster used to make his forces immune to my telekinesis.” She watched the flicker of fear in those eyes, nodding as she reached out, grasping the gag and forcing it back into his mouth. She ignored the anger in his eyes as she glanced at the rest.

“I’m going to call Dragon.” She flicked her eyes back to Dean, watching his face go nearly white and nodding to herself. She headed out of the kitchen and up the stairs, ignoring the nervous chattering in the kitchen that she’d left in her wake. She ascended the stairs, flipping open the door to her and Victoria’s room. She walked in, nervously glancing around at the messy space, well aware that Carol had been in here once again.

Shaking her head to clear it of that particular thought, Taylor nervously opened her dresser and picked through the bric-a-brac in the top drawer, moving photos and various important documents aside and collecting the phone that she’d been given. She flipped it over and turned it on, blinking in confusion at the error message.

‘No Cell Service, Towers compromised. Emergency connections available, activate?’ Taylor stared at the message before carefully tapping the yes and watching as the device flickered off, a long string of code inputting itself and streaming on the screen before it snapped back onto its former screen. Taylor swiped into it and had barely gotten into her contact list when the phone began to ring. She stared at the icon on the screen as it rang for a few moments before swiping to accept the call and holding the phone up to her ear.
“Dragon?” Taylor spoke nervously as she held the phone to her ear. She walked over to the door of her bedroom and opened it up, leaning against the frame and listening to the murmur of the voices below as she listened to the woman’s rapid-fire response.

“Taylor! What the hell is going on? Brockton Bay squawked a Foothold Alert and then went dark to me. Every connection that I had going into the city vanished behind firewalls. I can’t get into any of the PRT Databases, all my transmitters are dead. The only reason this call is going through is that the type of phone I gave you has a backup satellite uplink that’s impossible to block from your end.” Taylor frowned and considered her phone for a few moments, glancing down the hall.

“If...hypothetically speaking, someone in the PRT were to order you to come to Brockton Bay to capture me, how long would it take you to get here?” She spoke softly, listening as Dragon paused and inhaled sharply.

“I uh. About twenty minutes? But if that’s a concern, I could deploy my suits away from the city, give you a couple of hours’ worth of breathing room.” Dragon’s voice was low and worried, and Taylor rubbed at her face. “Taylor, what’s going on?”

“I uh. Tonight was Vic’s prom. We were attending when, uh. A bunch of PRT showed up. Took Amy and Lily into custody after tricking them, tried to do the same to Vic’s mom and dad but they caught on, and they got into a firefight with these green laser things. They were going to attempt to do it with us, but Vic’s ex-boyfriend intervened and used a Tinker tech glove to try and capture us. Vic crushed his grapes.” Taylor nervously babbled, meandering through the night until Dragon cut her off.

“Taylor, stop for a second. What’s going on? Why is the PRT trying to capture you and your team?” Taylor paused and frowned, sharply letting out a nervous sigh before speaking.

“The team leader said something about a foothold situation. Apparently, Armsmaster and Dean think that I’m some form of Master and they’re attempting to capture us all. They have teams hunting down my other friends, but something else happened-” Taylor blinked when Dragon cut her off again.

“Taylor where are you and who’s with you?” Taylor blinked at the brusqueness and for a brief moment considered lying or not telling the truth... but something told her to trust the AI, and she sighed softly, glancing down the hall and speaking slowly.

“We’re at my house. It was about as safe as anywhere else, and it’s where I keep my uniform and weapon. I’m with Victoria, and her mom and dad. And we’ve got Dean tied to a chair.” She listened as Dragon went silent, processing that for a few moments and then spoke softly.

“Okay. Taylor. I’m going to hang up and call you back in ten minutes.” The woman paused before speaking quickly. “Actually, get back to the others and get the cellphone set up for Holo-reception, I’ll pop in that way to talk to you all.” Taylor blinked when the line went dead and frowned, staring at it for a few moments before sighing and slowly descending the stairs.

Walking into the kitchen, Taylor was surprised to see Marr’s armoured form lounging against one of the walls, and she paused in the doorway. She loomed quietly there, glancing around at the awkward silence that lingered around the table and ignoring the angry look on Dean’s face. Moving over to Vic, Taylor carefully set the phone on the table. She tapped the commands and watched as the tiny red device launched out of the cellphone and hovered in the air over it, scanning the entire room and
then lingering in the air waiting. Taylor took in the confused looks and shrugged.

“Dragon said that she’d be back in ten minutes.” She nervously crossed her arms and waited, checking her watch every minute or two until almost precisely ten minutes after she hung up, the floating device pulsed with ruby light and then Dragon’s avatar shimmered into being to Taylor’s left. The woman took a few steps around the space, checking everyone carefully before turning to inspect Dean’s bound form.

“Dragon,” Victoria spoke carefully and nodded politely, and the hologram offered her a nervous smile and nod in return before glancing around.

“Glory Girl, Brandish, Flashbang. Glad to see that you’re all in one piece.” The woman turned to glance at her and Taylor offered a nervous smile. Dragon returned it before turning back to the room as a whole and crossing her arms behind her back.

“So. Good news first,” The woman spoke, turning to study each person. “You can all stop panicking, none of you are being mastered.” Taylor watched as Carol and Mark stood a bit taller, and Dean began to struggle against his bonds. “This… concern was brought up after the Leviathan fight, and in response, the PRT screened most of you remotely. On top of that, Brandish, you and Panacea both were cleared individually by your psychiatrist.” Taylor blinked and frowned at that.

Taylor glanced over at Dean, watching all the colour draining out of his face as he stared in confusion at Dragon. Taylor glanced between the shell shocked looks on the faces of the others before turning to peer up at Dragon quietly. The AI frowned and shifted about.

“Bad news? Armsmaster has declared a Foothold situation using his Protectorate Codes and a Valid Director authorization. The city’s Protectorate and PRT assets have all been locked down, and almost all of the secured connections have been severed from that side, meaning that we can’t remotely order Armsmaster off. Chicago has also gone dark, giving us a fair idea of who initiated the lockdown on your side. The Chief Director is the only one that has any hope of putting a stop to this, and she’s on her way to New York. The Triumvirate is also gathering there, but it’ll be at least another two hours before they’ll be in a position to do anything.” The woman glanced around them all. “I’d suggest that you settle in and hope that the Triumvirate gets here before the local Protectorate finds you-”

“They’ve got my sister.” Victoria cut Dragon off, and Taylor nervously fidgeted, watching as Victoria glanced angrily toward the hologram. Dragon sighed softly and shook her head.

“Co-Armsmaster wouldn’t do that. He uh- He’s a bit rough-” Taylor blinked when Carol cut in this time.

“He sent an armed unit after my daughters and their dates at a dance with civilians. They were prepared to gun us down if necessary to contain the threat. What would he do to capture Taylor before she escaped?” Taylor watched as Dragon’s expression became more sombre and she glanced
around the room. Carol wasn’t finished, though. “What would he do to Taylor once he caught her? Something tells me he’d be very eager to be the person that saved an entire hero team, no matter the-” The words Carol was saying were cut off again but not by Dragon.

The phone on the table began to buzz, and Taylor glanced over at Dragon’s hologram who blinked and stared down at it with a frown.

“Shit,” Taylor blinked, staring at the AI as she cursed and feeling oddly tempted to say something like ‘language,’ but instead she listened as the glowing avatar continued. “Armsmaster must have tracked the satellite uplink.” The woman stared down at it with a frown before glancing at Taylor. “Might be worth just answering it, see what they have to say.”

On the table, the phone continued to vibrate as it rang silently. Everyone stared down at it vibrating and rattling over the wooden table. Taylor studied it nervously for a few moments before reaching out and swiping the call to accept it, turning on the speakerphone. She stared at the all as the number on the timer in the middle of the screen slowly began to creep upwards.

“Hello?” She tried nervously, waiting as the line remained silent for a few moments longer before a soft, breathy female voice came back, the words lightly accented.

“Aha, Armsmaster was right, this is you. Greetings Vigil. I hear that you’ve had quite the trying evening. I apologize about that, we never meant to cause you or your… friends any undue stress. Young mister Stansfield and his troopers were merely… overzealous.” The words were gentle, almost soothing, and Taylor glanced at the others curiously. “That being said, I must insist that you tender yourself to custody. This situation has rapidly begun to grow out of hand, and it would be better for everyone involved if you didn’t force our hand on this.” Taylor frowned at the others and leaned forward, moving to speak slowly.

“And if I don’t?” The words were spoken quietly but clearly, and she waited to see what the response would be. The hint of menace in the woman’s voice as it returned wasn’t particularly comforting.

“We’ve already established a perimeter around the exterior of your property, and you have no means of effecting an escape, Vigil. If you don’t exit the house in the next five minutes, then we will be forced to come in, and I cannot guarantee the safety of you or anyone else within if that is what it comes down to.” Taylor frowned at the phone, glancing at the others. She watched in confusion as Carol leaned down and spoke quickly.

“Who are we speaking with? What’s your name?” The words were cold, and she watched the phone as the silence lingered on between them.

“Brandish, I assume? My name is Revel.” She gave a moment, letting the words sink in. Taylor glanced around at the widening eyes around the table and swallowed nervously. “I trust that has made an impression. Five minutes, Vigil, starting now.” The phone line went dead, and the call disconnected, and Taylor shifted back on her feet.

“Who are we speaking with? What’s your name?” The words were cold, and she watched the phone as the silence lingered on between them.

“Brandish, I assume? My name is Revel.” She gave a moment, letting the words sink in. Taylor glanced around at the widening eyes around the table and swallowed nervously. “I trust that has made an impression. Five minutes, Vigil, starting now.” The phone line went dead, and the call disconnected, and Taylor shifted back on her feet.

“Who’s-” She started, but Carol waved her off and spoke.

“She’s a Protectorate cape from Chicago. Blaster and a Mover. She has a lantern which she can use to intercept energy attacks, like mine and Mark’s attacks and she shoots them back at you. She can also fly.” Taylor frowned and glanced down at the table for a few moments. She considered what they were working with for a few moments.
“We could just surrender? Sit things out until the Triumvirate gets here and hope that nothing too bad happens? I imagine that Armsmaster would be too distracted with me to do anything too unfortunate to the rest of—” Taylor trailed off as she looked at the others, watching as their faces hardened one by one. Even Dragon and Marr looked displeased. Letting out a soft sigh, Taylor glanced at Marr as he moved over and leaned over the table. She listened to the Sith Lord as he spoke and then turned to the others and started to talk.

“Right, then… Okay, I’ve got an idea. Here’s what we’ll do…”

There wasn’t a gradual shift back to consciousness. Instead, Amy suddenly snapped back into wakefulness, laying on something soft with her eyes closed. She lay, feeling fine for about six seconds before a roiling wave of nausea slammed into her as her head suddenly felt like it’d rapidly contracted around her brain. Amy curled up into a ball and swallowed, doing her best to keep from spewing her lunch out over whatever she was laying on. She remained solidly curled up, breathing in and out slowly as she counted in her head.

It took nearly two minutes before the physical symptoms seemed to almost evaporate, and Amy was able to finally relax. She lay there with her eyes shut, waiting to see if the pain or discomfort would return, only sitting up once she was sure that the symptoms would pass. As she lay there, she quickly ran over the last thing she remembered. Her and Lily in the van and the emerald light. Sitting up, she opened her eyes, glancing around hopefully to try and locate Lily.

Sadly, Amy found herself alone in a tiny room, and before she could get too freaked out, her gaze came to a stop on the inky black words that had been stencilled onto the wall in some form of dark sticky paint.

‘You’re currently in Master/Stranger isolation. The Protectorate and the Parahuman Response Team have reason to believe that you may be mentally compromised. For your own safety, you’ve been isolated here until we can screen you. Please remain calm and do not attempt to escape. Any credible threats will result in punitive measures being taken against you. This is your only warning.’ Amy read the sign with a frown, glancing around. She studied the room. Plastic desk, metal chair and bedframe, no plants, nothing alive. They’d done their research, apparently.

Amy shifted one of her hands down, spreading her fingers and dragging the palm of her hand over the scratchy material of the bed. As her hand moved, she curled her lips into an amused smirk, reaching out with her power as her hand ghosted over the dust mites scattered over the surface of the bed. She took control of them, altering their bodies, transforming them all into females and accelerating their production of mating pheromones.

She waited and moved her hand around the mattress, ignoring the acrid scent of the pheromones, and it didn’t take long for more and more of the tiny mites to gather. Amy kept a careful eye on the creatures, waiting patiently until she figured that she had enough biomass and then she set her power to work, taking control of all the mites and forcing them to merge together into a single mass in the center of her hand.

She shaped it, transforming it into a tiny creature vaguely reminiscent of a cockroach despite its
translucent colouring. She smoothly set to work, shaping and altering its physiology and then she closed her eyes and focused. This was something that she’d suspected that she could do, but she hadn’t actually had a chance to experiment with it. She focused carefully on the insect and then pushed with her power, feeling the welling of something in her hand. Her powers told her to keep pushing, despite the twinging pain that began to form in the center of her forehead, slowly spreading out.

Closing her eyes, Amy winced as she brought her free hand up to her head, but she didn’t stop until the feeling of needing to push her power out stopped and then she stared down at the tiny little creature as it hopped up and then skittered around her hand. She stared at it for a few moments before standing up and walking over to the door. Amy stood before the metal door, pushing up on her tiptoes to peer out the tiny square window. The wire that interlaced the glass made it hard to see, but she noticed two other doors similar to her own across the hall.

Sighing, Amy took a seat, resting her back against the door and lowered her hand, watching as the tiny bug smoothly dropped off her fingers and then did a quick search around the small room before vanishing under the crack of the door. Amy closed her eyes, resting the back of her head against the metal and waiting for the pain in her head to fade. She sat there, imagining the tiny bug crawling down the edge of the corridor and using its small eyes and antennae to hunt down increased concentrations of oxygen.

The creature needed to find a decently sized potted fern or tree and then the little surprise that Amy had left in its biology would allow it merge with and infect the larger plant with the delayed activation of her power. Keeping her eyes closed, Amy tucked her legs under her letting out a sigh as the pain in her head began to ebb slowly. She savoured the cold metal on her back as the pain faded and didn’t move until she heard the skitter of tiny claws scuttling over the surface of the door. She didn’t react, sitting there quietly, her eyes closed, but she allowed one of her hands to drop down to the gray tile on the floor as she waited. It didn’t take long, the ‘scout’ had been programmed well, and a thin coating of rapidly growing gray moss spread out from its body, expanding under the door. Amy pressed her fingers into the moss and used it as a connection to the creature she’d made.

This was the first fully functional one that she’d made, the ones that she’d created for the petting zoo had been stripped down, lacking the thin layer of delicate leaves that covered its tiny ferret-like body and served as a form of active camouflage. Even now, Amy could sense the adapted chromatophores that she’d created in the leaves and the structures that she’d attached to them to shift the various photosynthetic pigments into the plants to allow the creature to shift colour and pattern much like a mollusc. Amy observed, silently fascinated as the photosensitive cells built into several parts of its body fed ‘data’ back into its ‘nervous system’ and the channels worked continuously to keep its body perfectly matched to its surroundings.

Amy focused on one of the tiny bacteria on the surface of her inner arm, and she forced it to shift around and capture a hint of Lily’s perfume, capturing several of the aromatic compounds which she then fed back into the creature. The scouts had eyes of a sort, but they weren’t as complicated as a human’s, they were better trackers and, unironically, scouts. They could detect where people were and how many, but finding a specific face would be an issue. But tracking a scent, that was different.

Amy finished programming the creature and then shifted back, listening as the tiny clicking of heels scattered off. It didn’t take long, not that she’d expected it to, for the creature to apparently locate Lily. Amy closed her eyes, breathing quietly and doing her best to mime sleep as she felt the faintest hints of exertion creeping at her. When the skittering of claws returned and then halted near the door, Amy shifted her fingers back into the dry loamy moss, reaching her power out through it as the
creature came to a stop and ‘reported’ a success.

Frowning as she considered what she’d need to do to see the results of the scouting trip, Amy let out a nervous sigh before letting her power reach into the ‘Scout’ as a pair of thin tendril-like roots spread out of the tiny plant-ferret and across the mossy creep. It spread through the moss and then sought out Amy’s fingers. She felt the roots wrapping around her fingers and slowly spreading over her hand.

Amy sat there, feeling the tiny roots growing up and along her arm and into the sleeve of her dress. She had to fight off the instinct to shudder and shake off the growing roots, and she closed her eyes as she felt the roots curling up along her shoulder blade before finding the back of her neck and then pushing into her skin. She’d expected pain, but she wasn’t sure why. The roots were thinner than hypodermic needles, and they penetrated her skin without much fanfare.

The itching began surprisingly quickly, as the roots pressed past the skin and muscles and burrowed down toward her spine. Amy had to fight the itching off, and then the burning. She held herself still and grit her teeth at the discomfort and the way her mind was screaming at her to brush the roots away to rip them free. Clenching her eyes shut, Amy was surprised when the connection was finally made, flickers of colour suddenly appearing in her ‘eyes’.

Keeping her own eyes shut, Amy did her best to focus, to still the rapid beating of her heart. She focused on the flickers and impressions and the shuttering images that suddenly expanded and filled her mind. The perspective was odd, she was way closer to the floor than she was familiar with, and there was no colour in the images, and worse, the contrast was ramped up to the extreme. Despite this, the details were fuzzy, almost as if the definition in the image was off.

Amy focused on what was being shown. She smelled the perfume, tasted it almost, and the tiny feet skittered across the floor as quickly as the tiny thoughts whirled while it tracked the scent trails. ‘To the left? No, salt lies that way, source of scent, not destination, to the right. Down the hall. Many scents. Many people. Two? No. More. Four? No. More. Six? More. Eight? Yes. Including the creator. Eight. But only one has the scent. At the end of the hall. Sterile, Cold. But the scent terminates at door...’

The mind continued to whirl, but Amy focused on the view. The tiny feet carried it over a massive rotating door that would snap down and into a recessed section the wall. A big door, impressive. The creature skittered over the door, looking for any break in the seal, finding no hint of the scents within. It skittered along the wall and came over a sizeable transparent section of the wall that peered into the room, an observation hatch.

The image within was stark. The room appeared to be roughly the same size as Amy’s room, through the perspective made it hard to tell, especially with the differences in design aesthetic visible even to the limited view of the scout. The walls and the floors were smooth and reflective, hinting at steel, and there was nothing in the space beyond except for a slumped figure curled up in the middle of the room. Amy paused the playback and rolled it back before pausing again. She let the image of Lily’s hunched over form in that dress sink in, something in her clenching as she observed the way that Lily’s body trembled, the hands on her face implying that it wasn’t the cold that was causing the tremors.

Anger swirled into her mind, and Amy clenched her free hand. She drew the root out of her body, severing the connection and forcing it to retreat back and into the scout. She focused on what she wanted to do and already began to feel the flicker of exhaustion washing through her, the headache rapidly returning as she let her powers sink into the moss and through it, into the scout.
She started by collapsing it into four mice instead of the larger creature, robbing it of its various upgrades and assets, leaving them as tiny plant-like mice that were a close enough gray to the surface of the hallways. She focused, programming them. It wasn’t hard, make them able to sense salt and to follow it, find the most expedient path.

They’d crawl through the halls and into rooms or offices with open windows and then out into the night, and from there into the ocean. Same concept as the cockroach on a bigger scale. Amy winced at the warnings her power gave her, but she pushed, feeling the pressure increasing almost tenfold on her head as she bit her lip and tensed, doing her best not to scream as she forced her powers out of her body and into the moss and through it, into the mice.

It felt like an eternity as she focused and worked on the mice, but it was almost certainly closer to ten, maybe fifteen minutes. The mice scurried off the connection once the charge was done and Amy collapsed weakly against the door, shifting and pressing her aching head to the cold door and letting out a relieved whimper. She lay there like that, supported by the door and closed her eyes, the sweet release of darkness reaching up to claim her as she prayed that at least one of her creations made it to the water.

It was the slow heady thumping that dragged Amy from the darkness. Her head ached, and her body felt sluggish as she slowly pried her eyes open. She shifted, resting a hand on the floor and blinking at the repetitive thumping. Reaching up, she wiped at her face, blinking when the hand came away, and there was stark crimson on it. She stared at the blood coating her palm and brought her fingers back down, touching her upper lip and pulling them back to see more of the blood.

She nervously stared at the blood coating her fingers and then shifted back as the rumbling became more noticeable. Scrabbling away from the door and getting her feet under her, Amy peered out the door's tiny window, staring at the empty hall. Even standing now, she could feel the subtle vibrations as something substantial approached. Despite the pain that she still felt, a tiny smirk graced Amy’s lips when a robust dark brown frame passed into view, the shape vaguely reminiscent of a human.

Taking a step back, Amy waited as the construct took a few moments before she heard the heavy thud of dense wood smashing into metal. Again the sound came, and then a third time, though this time the noise of something solid striking steel was quickly followed by the sound of metal straining. Amy watched as the wall around the left side of the door visibly dented inwards with an ominous shriek of metal. Everything went silent for a few moments before the door to her cell suddenly dented inwards with a meaty thump.

Long jagged black claws forced their way through the gap formed by the dented door and curled around the metal, and the sound of strain was much louder this time as the hand pulled. Glancing around in confusion, Amy listened to the sounds of the metal pins that secured her door snapping one by one as the hand ripped the door itself out of the wall opposite her. She was frankly shocked at the lack of reaction from the base, not hearing any alarms, and not seeing any automated response to her jailbreak.

Frowning, Amy watched as the hulking shape of her latest creation finally succeeded in ripping the door clean out of its housing, dropping it to the side next to a tangled mess that had once been a great
many wires, a pin pad, and whatever mechanism controlled the door. The hulking shape ducked
down and squeezed through the door. It stepped into the room and straightened to its full height
staring down at her with glowing violet ‘eyes.’

In truth, they weren’t eyes at all, merely patches of phosphorescent moss that sat where eyes would
be and served as a visual indicator of the threat level the construct was operating at. Blue, of course,
being standard, purple heightened and red being critical. Amy stared up at the construct quietly. It
was vaguely human shaped in the same way an orangutan or gorilla was. Tall and broad with
powerful arms and a body shape that meant it could move on all fours, or on two legs.

The outward aesthetic was reminiscent of a knight in the way that her mount from the night she and
Lily had fought Cricket, and Stormtiger was reminiscent of a gazelle. A hint of padding or armour
here, and the vague outlines or impressions of a helmet, armour. It made it look like less of a monster
and more of a suit, which was intentional.

Amy stepped up to the construct and reached out, touching its arm and issuing commands. The shape
spun in place and dropped to kneel on one leg, its barrel torso cracking down the back before Amy’s
eyes and opening to reveal a recessed chamber within the wood. Amy stared at it quietly, studying
the smooth interior and the nubbins visibly worked into it with a sigh.

She glanced out the doorway, and after verifying for the second time that no alarms were going off,
and no one seemed to be coming, she slipped back into her room and took a deep breath before
stripping out of her dress. She stood there in her underwear for a moment before bracing one of her
stocking-clad feet on the ankle of the suit, and the next on the back of the other knee.

She clambered up and then curled up in the chamber, her back facing the direction that the suit itself
would be facing. She tucked her legs up against her chest and wrapped her arms around them,
squeezing down into the deceptively shallow space and then reached out, placing a hand on the
interior wall of the chamber, watching as the wood closed down over her and sealed up, the dense
wood forming a protective barrier.

Her powers pushed into the suit and activated the structures that she’d worked into it when she’d first
designed it. Tiny roots like the ones she’d included in the scout began to sprout from the interior,
wrapping around her body and bracing her down as they spread over her nearly bare form. The roots
wrapped around her face and transformed into a mask that issued fresh, clean air into her mouth and
Amy shifted nervously as a something very similar to sap began to fill the cavity.

Amy let out a relieved sigh as the cool sap wrapped around her, the aches in her body fading as the
analgesic in the sap went to work soothing and relaxing her body. The roots started to push into her
skin, and she closed her eyes as the healing sap prevented the process from being as uncomfortable
as the last one.

She still felt the tiny roots pushing into several spots along her spine, into each arm and wrist, knee,
ankle, hip. Amy closed her eyes as the sap completely filled the chamber she was in, dulling the
sensations from her skin and Amy subsumed her mind into the impressions that the suit was giving
her. She stood up slowly and glanced around.

The optics on the suit were better than the scout, but not by much. There were no eyes, so much as
patches of photo-sensitive pseudo moss worked into the construct’s body. Compared to human eyes,
the details weren’t all that sharp, but the field of view was significantly more comprehensive than
what Amy was used to. On its own, the optics of the suit would lack depth perception, but a variant
of echolocation and a similar scent tracking suite to the scout made the suit very aware of what was
Amy tested out each limb carefully, lifting them and then dropping them. They were close enough to human that after testing it a bit Amy felt confident that she could walk. Amy moved carefully, ducking out of the shattered entrance to her cell and made her way into the hall. She glanced to the left and then to the right, staring toward the large window that the scout had seen Lily through.

She came to a stop at the window and stared through it. She reached up and rapped one of her ‘knuckles’ against it, testing the material. The suit lacked actual nerves, but there were bladders built into the arms and chest that served a similar function while also cushioning Amy inside even better against percussive attacks. She considered the sensation and the sounds from the rapping. Some form of transparent metal, either the same density or better than the surrounding metal.

Amy watched as Lily slowly stood and stared at her. She studied the girl for a few moments, taking in the stark image of the Lily-shaped blur in a dress standing in the middle of the room and staring. As Lily approached the window, Amy felt a tremor in her chest and reached out with her power. She needed to see, and she subsumed herself into her power, ignoring the twinge of pain growing in her head. Her powers seemed to scramble for a moment, almost ‘processing’ before the clarity of her vision gradually improved.

Organic crystals began to grow out of several parts of the suit, clusters forming and Amy watched as colour bled into her view, the crystals shaping and altering and then the details sharpened. Amy saw the confused look on Lily’s face and felt her heart clenching at the clear tear-tracks visible from her dark purple make-up. She tried to speak before realizing that she hadn’t included that functionality either. She brought her power up again, and this time, the flicker of pain was less intense.

She’d done this before, and she smoothly worked the vocalization system she’d designed for the lions into the ‘neck’ of the suit, opening a half dozen recesses into either side of the throat to allow the sound to propagate. It took her three tries to alter the mechanism to the point that it could reliably produce human-ish vocalizations. Once she was confident that she’d issue more than a garbled roar Amy moved over and lifted a hand of the suit and pressed it to the com-panel watching the green light flicker on.

“Amy?” The words were laced with concern and confusion, and Amy studied Lily’s worried look as she glanced up and down the corridor.

“I, uh…” Amy paused, the sound echoing back at her. The multiple orifices from which the voice issued gave it a deep echoing quality as if a half dozen people were speaking at once, and the suit’s version of vocal cords made the voice exceptionally deep. Amy stared through the window and coughed, which sounded… odd coming from the suit and she continued. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“Amy! We’re in Master/Stranger isolation, what are you doing?” Amy flinched back, but kept her hand on the comm panel, shifting nervously under Lily’s low hissed chastising comments. When she didn’t respond, the older girl continued. “There’s a message on the wall that warns you what happens when you try to subvert your isolation, why did you think it was a good idea to break out?” Lily stared at her and Amy felt the instinctive need to rub her own neck, blinking when the suit itself followed the command, its shoulders slumping a bit and the hand dragging over the back of its broad neck.

“I uh,” Amy paused, watching as Lily’s eyes softened, and she pushed on despite how foolish she felt. “I was worried. I woke up and saw the sign and I wondered where you were. They underestimated me, though, and I summoned something that I used to create a scout.” Amy glanced
at Lily, taking in her blank look. “The uh. The ferret ones, with the active camouflage. I set it to look for you.” Amy glanced off to the side, staring at where her hand rested on the com panel. “You… you were crying.”

Amy stood there, watching as Lily’s expression softened again, and she glanced down quietly at the floor. Amy studied her for a few moments, taking in the cold, stark room around her. Solid reflective walls, and that monster of a door.

“You didn’t deserve this, you’re only mixed up in it 'cause of me. I couldn’t just…” Amy growled and shifted. “Let me just-

“Amy, I’m remaining here voluntarily.” Amy blinked down at Lily quietly, staring at her. The girl studied her before gesturing down at herself.

“Whoever put me in here isn’t familiar with my file. They took everything out, but they didn’t strip me. They just took my shoes and my purse.” Amy stared at her quietly, and then Lily stepped up to the glass and held up a hand, showing off the fake violet nails on each finger. The girl casually focused for a second before swiping her hand and leaving a series of four-inch gashes in the clear metal with almost no strain present. Amy stared at the marks and was very thankful that the suit itself couldn’t blush as she shifted quietly.

“So you uh. You didn’t need me to rescue you. Right.” Amy coughed again and then glanced up and down the hall, feeling rather foolish as she considered the situation. She stared nervously up the corridor, feeling more and more concerned as time went on that the alarms still hadn’t issued, and no one seemed to be coming to investigate her escape. She also idly wondered where-

“I’m touched that you went to all this effort though.” The words were gentle, and Amy glanced back, staring at Lily quietly. The girl studied her for a few moments before letting out a sigh. “Can you make me a sword? This’ll be easier with a weapon. I’d rather not have to use my underwire.”

Amy stared at Lily for a few moments, blushing, before she touched into her power, ignoring the twinge of pain in her head and causing a wooden sword to grow from the chest of the suit.

She’d been tempted to use the organic crystal but making those had hurt, and it was easier to just shape the wood into a rapier. As the weapon emerged from her chest, she carefully cradled it in the suit's massive clawed hands, despite it being much less fragile then it appeared. It was wickedly sharp, though. Amy glanced up and watched as Lily used the fake nails on her hands to claw out a divot in the transparent metal, carefully clearing out a hole large enough that Amy could slip the end of the sword through it.

Once Lily had touched the end of the sword and powered it up, Amy carefully drew the weapon up and in a shallow arc, carefully cutting it back across near the base of the wall and then bringing it back up to rejoin the hole the Lily had carved with her nails. Staring at Lily for a few moments, Amy watched with a hint of amusement as the older girl stared back in confusion. With a mental roll of her eyes, Amy gestured for the other girl to take a step back, and when Lily did, she pulled the sword free and dropped it.

She paused and stared down as the powered up weapon casually cut through the floor and vanished earthward, nervously staring for a few moments before shaking her head and returning to the task at hand. Glancing up at Lily, Amy set both hands on the metal and heaved, pushing it inwards, listening to metal scraping across itself as it was pushed in.

“Is that going to fall through the center of the Earth and destabilize it or collapse us all into a black
hole?” Amy watched the wall slip free of the hole and topple inwards with a resounding crash. Lily stared at her in wry amusement before stepping up onto the wall piece and approaching her. Amy held out a hand and watched as Lily took it, ducking through the gap and stepping out.

“I’ve dropped several things into the ground, and the Earth is still here, we’re probably okay.” Amy studied her for a few moments before sighing. Lily glanced at her before looking at the doors around them.

“So who else is here?” She spoke quietly, and Amy frowned, glancing up as well and coughing lightly.

“I uh. I was sort of distracted and didn’t check any of the other cells.” Amy moved over across the hall and paused, staring at the very wide, anxious-looking eyes of her younger cousin, and she blinked glancing over at Lily. The girl lifted an eyebrow and Amy ignored the pain once more as she manifested a smaller knife that would, hopefully, be easier to keep a hold of. She considered it for a moment before handing it to Lily.

The girl studied her before rolling her eyes and taking the dagger moving to carefully cut away the bolts of the door that kept Eric trapped. Once it was loose, Amy grabbed it and ripped it out of its housing and set it against the wall to the left of the door. The excited voice of her cousin as he bounded into the hall saw her glancing over.

“Lily! You escaped. I saw them bringing you in earlier, you were -really- out of it.” He paused and glanced up at her and Amy watched as he nervously shifted closer to Lily. “Is this a new one of Amy’s? I thought they were mostly animal shaped.” He spoke nervously, and Amy chuckled, causing him to take a step back and actually slip behind Lily. “It talks?”

“It’s called a Sentry Unit, Eric. And it’s less of a construct, more of a suit.” He stared up at her in confusion, frowning quietly. She glanced at him as he studied her before shaking himself out of it.

“Mom and Dad are here too. We were having dinner when a trooper came in. They said they had something we needed to see, then they set a device on the table, and suddenly I’m here feeling like I have the worst flu ever.” Amy studied him before glancing at the doors.

Lily gestured to the left, and Amy shrugged, moving to the right, checking the next door over. She stared in at the sight of her uncle sitting patiently on the bed, his fingers laced and his elbows on his knee.

“I think this is Lady Photon,” Lily spoke from down the hall. Amy glanced over and chimed in.

“Manpower is here.” She glanced over and blinked at the pale look of her cousin’s face. “Eric? What’s wrong.”

“Guys, we’ve got a problem.” Amy blinked again and walked over, moving to crouch down to peer into the room as well. As she stared into the room, she felt her eyes meeting the stormy eyes of Director Piggot as she sat in a desk chair, her legs crossed and her hands resting on them. Suddenly, she understood the concern on her cousin’s face.
So, I heard you guys like cliffhangers, so I put cliffhangers in your cliffhangers. =D

On a more serious note we now progress into the meat of the chapter. We get a lot more information about what's going on in the city from various sources and we get to see Amy finally going all out with her powers. Also, we make time for people to be awkward and nervous around each other despite the insanity they're drowning in. An interesting aspect of this was Taylor's burgeoning fury and jealousy in this arc. She's started to finally get to the point that she feels comfortable reacting that way which is neat.

Next chapter should be out sometime this weekend, and it'll be interesting. We'll be starting by jumping into a Taylor perspective as she finally cuts loose at Marr's guidance. Should be interesting. Then we'll be hopping back to rig to join up with Lily to see how that entire tangled mess gets unravelled. =] And then we'll see the final chapter of the arc sometime early next week where Taylor confronts Armsy while we ride along with him, and then we get to see the aftermath of this entire mess. =]

Anyway, as always, looking forward to all of your feedback, and as always, thanks to Noelemahc for going through all of this twice as I wrote and rewrote it.]}

Chapter Summary

[[WOO it’s only a day late. I got distracted by holiday celebrations since I’m a Canadian. It’s our national birthday today. Anyway, I won’t spend too long chattering here. Notes at the bottom, enjoy the insanity. Hopefully, it reads well.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 19th, 2011

Protectorate HQ ("The Rig"), Brockton Bay

Sat on the uncomfortable bench in the far corner of the room, Lily curiously glanced around at the rest of the occupants. She and Amy had used the dagger and her power to carve open the rest of the doors and Piggot had herded them here. It seemed like a mess hall for the troopers, but it was empty and clean enough that it probably wasn’t in use much. They’d spread out over the room, and everyone was murmuring among themselves, comparing notes.

Piggot had claimed a table to herself, and a short distance away Miss Militia was sitting at another table, speaking softly with two boys that Lily did her best to not look too closely at. Secret identities weren’t games, and she’d rather pretend that she didn’t know the faces behind her team-mates masks for the moment. Another table housed Amy’s aunt, uncle and cousin, and Lily was surprised that Amy hadn’t parked herself near them. Instead, the biotinker was next to her, watching the exits to the room quietly.

Lily took a moment to truly inspect the monster that Amy was fully concealed within. The other creatures that Amy had made had an almost artistic flair to them. They were designed to be elegant and practical, but at first glance, they didn’t look any more dangerous than a regular animal. Lily had seen them in action and understood that animated bark and wood was significantly more durable and dangerous than animated flesh, but at least initially on seeing them, one typically was reminded of a walking topiary which put them at ease.

This was different. The Sentinel, as Amy had referred to it, was over seven feet tall at the shoulder and it had the general body shape of a gorilla. A massive barrel chest within which Amy’s real body was apparently hidden, powerful arms and enormous hands with claws, long sturdy legs and tridactyl feet. Lily turned up to study the glowing light visible from within the slats of the ‘helmet,’ though to call it that was misleading. It was part of the construct’s ‘head,’ it’d merely been fashioned in a way the evoked the image of a plate helmet, as the bark pattern and the crystalline growths over the robust frame evoked the vaguest sense of armour.

Lily frowned quietly as she considered the armour, her mind drifting back to the street market, to the way that Amy had looked being forced to maintain a half dozen tiny versions of her creations. She studied the Sentinel and shook her head, wondering quietly at what keeping something like that running was doing to her.
“Calm down, Lily.” Lily jumped at the voice that came from the suit. Amy was clearly trying to speak softly, but even then, the words came out rough, threatening. It sounded as if someone was growling out a whisper as harshly as they could, while two others hissed along with them. Lily glanced up at Amy and studied the Sentinel as the glowing azure eyes turned toward her.

“Amy, how’re you maintaining that thing? Handling half a dozen baby animals nearly wiped you out after two hours, and we’ve been going here for nearly forty minutes already.” Lily spoke gently, sliding closer. She studied the suit carefully, frowning at the detail, the quality of the work. “Which is nothing to say about what it cost you to actually create it.”

“I actually made four, I’m unsure where the others went. And it’s not as taxing as it could be Lily. I intentionally designed this suit to operate on its own ‘power’ for a bit. When it was being created, it drew on extra biomass and converted it into energy stores. A battery so to speak.” Lily stared up at Amy quietly and frowned as she glanced from the Sentinel toward the door.

“Four? Where’re the other three?” She glanced over at Amy, frowning as the armoured constructs shoulders lifted in a fair imitation of a shrug.

“I imagine, Miss Horrocks, that they’re what’s keeping the patrols from checking up on us.” Piggot’s voice cut across the dining area and Lily jumped, turning to glance over at Piggot, flushing at every other eye on the room staring in her and Lily’s direction. Amy’s suit shifted quietly in place and stood a bit taller as it responded.

“That’d been my guess as well. The seeds that would use the seaweeds under the rig to grow into the Sentinels were all programmed to find their way back into the Rig the way they’d left and return to me. I wasn’t sure if they’d been destroyed before reaching the ocean, failed to find an exit, or if they’d been intercepted on the way there. Without me controlling them, they’re much less potent as weapons.” Amy glanced toward the door, frowning quietly and crossing her arms over the Sentinel’s chest. “It’s the alarms though, that’s what has been bothering me.” Amy’s voice was low and worried. Lily glanced over at Piggot, who looked up at the roof.

“What alarms?” Eric’s voice cut in curiously.

“That’s the problem, Mr. Pelham,” Piggot spoke softly. “Your cousin just broke out of one the most secure prisons in the state, and she took us all along for the ride, and there was no automated response. No alarms, not lockdown, and no containment foam. She shouldn’t have been able to make it out of her room. That suit of hers never should have made it fifteen feet into the rig. The foam would have secured it.” Piggot glanced at Amy when she chuckled.

“Wouldn’t work,” Amy spoke after letting the other stew for forty-five seconds. At the incredulous looks, Amy sighed softly. “The Sentinel is designed to react to attempts to restrain it by secreting a resin. Highly acidic. It’d melt the containment foam off, and it’d allow the Sentinel to just walk through areas inundated with it. Also means that attempting to pin the suit down is a bad idea.” Amy tilted the Sentinel’s head toward the door and hummed audibly in thought. “...Wonder who they have fighting the other suits.” Lily stared at Amy and frowned quietly, a shiver going down her spine. Amy glanced down at her and Lily frowned when the girl let out a sigh and spoke softly in her direction.

“The Sentinels are also programmed to use the minimal amount of force necessary to put down their opponents, and they can secrete a sort of sap that neutralizes the acid and promotes rapid healing.” Lily blinked quietly and studied Amy, offering a quick smile at the reassurance that’d been offered.
“Though that was more because I knew that it might come up that I’d need one of these things to cut me out of containment foam, and the only way it could do that was dousing me liberally in acid. A prospect I was not looking forward to.”

“Well...as terrifying as that thought is, the point is, there was no automated response. There were no alarms. There’s power, the lights are on, so it can’t be from damage to the Rig since containment would take priority over general power systems. The only way we could have all gotten out of there…” The woman paused, nodding at Amy. “Without grievous acid burns, anyway, would be if someone had turned all those systems off. Consider who’s absent…”

Lily glanced around the space quietly, considering the faces present and the ones missing. She frowned slowly as she tapped her fingers on the table.

“Lisa.” She spoke up, watching as the others glanced in her direction. “Uh, Tattletale. I saw her this afternoon. Just after lunch, she was out of uniform. She let me in when I went to Taylor’s to uh… get ready.” Lily glanced over at Piggot, tapping her hand against the side of her dress. The Director nodded back, lacing her fingers quietly.

“That’d be my guess as well. She wasn’t present when they showed up and took me into custody. And considering what I overhead as I was lead into the cells, they weren’t able to locate the troopers assigned to work with her and Miss Hebert.” The older woman glanced at the group and rested her elbows on the table. When she didn’t seem inclined to continue, Lily wasn’t surprised that Amy’s aunt cut across.

“Alright, Emily, I’m tired of this. What the hell is going on? Why are your troopers attacking us? And what’s going on with the Master/Stranger isolation?” Lily studied Lady Photon’s face as the woman shifted in her chair and looked directly at the Director. She considered the older women for a few moments frowning at the lingering suspicion between them. Her gaze was drawn to Piggot, though when she began to speak.

“They’re not my troopers, Sarah, Armsmaster has gone to an outside department lead and claimed that I, and parts of the local Protectorate and PRT, are compromised. The troopers are from Chicago.” Lily blinked quietly at that and frowned. She glanced at the others and saw similar looks of confusion on most of the faces present. Piggot glanced around before rubbing at her face quietly.

“Essentially, if a Protectorate team leader believes that his local PRT infrastructure has been compromised by a Stranger, Changer, or a Master, they can go to the director of an outside department and request assistance. Near as I can tell, Armsmaster has convinced Director Hearthrow to assist him in this insanity.”

“...Chicago?” Sarah spoke, her voice laced with apparent confusion. “Why would he go to Chicago, Boston’s less than an hour away? And why would he stay at this level and not take it to Costa-brown or Tagg? They’re the Chief Director and Deputy-Chief Director, right?” Lily glanced over and studied Piggot’s face as she shook her head.

“Several reasons. The procedures don’t require that you escalate, nor do they obligate the people you contact to assist, and they definitely do not stop them from going around you and reporting your attempt. I imagine that Armsmaster chose Chicago because he knew most of the Protectorate capes there, not to mention knowing the Director as well. He was probably reasonably certain that he could convince them to assist, and if not that, they would at least not give up his attempt to me.” The older woman shifted carefully in place and shrugged.

“...So Armsmaster thinks that we’re mastered? All of us? By whom?” The words came from Amy’s
monstrous suit, and everyone glanced at her worriedly. Lily glanced back as well and blinked in surprise at the dully glowing violet eyes.

“Look around, Miss Dallon, who do we all share in common, that has effected changes, be they minor or major, on all of us?” Piggot gestured to everyone present, and the girl in the suit loomed there for a moment. Lily frowned quietly when the hands of the suit clenched and the eyes darkened to a more pure violet.

“Taylor? This is insanity. That’s impossible.” Amy spoke coldly and glanced around. Lily stared up at Amy in confusion at the resolute certainty.

“It’s not, eh, not completely out of the question, Miss Dallon. Miss Hebert has made certain… waves recently with her choice in friends and you all have been undergoing signif-” Miss Militia sputtered, her voice crisp and precise. Lily turned to stare at her, her eyes snapping back when Amy’s mocking laughter cut off the sentence.

“You are aware that I’m still in therapy, yes? I assume my aunt has mentioned it in those meetings that she’s always attending here.” Lily glanced up at Amy in confusion, her brows furrowing at the bit of information. The Sentinel paused and glanced down at her and then Amy sighed before turning back toward Miss Militia. Lily followed her gaze watching the older cape nod. “My therapist is the leader of Recourse. The PRT-affiliated Master task force. I would assume that if I was suffering under a long-standing master effect that she might have said… something?” Lily watched as Miss Militia’s stern frown slowly faded, her eyes widening minutely.

“Perhaps Arms-” Lily glanced over at the familiar voice of Clockblocker, wincing as she quickly turned away again. Piggot speaking served as an appropriate distraction.

“He is aware, I informed him when he brought his concerns to me. He informed me that no power is foolproof and that he had a vast preponderance of evidence and insisted that he be allowed to take Miss Hebert into custody for ‘testing.’” Piggot rubbed at her face. “I might have been a bit brusque with him after that.” Piggot tapped her fingers slowly on the table.

“Brusque?” Amy’s uncle spoke quietly, and Piggot shrugged as she stared at the massive figure of the man. “Forgive me, Director, but you’re already a touch… harsh at the best of times, I shudder to think about what you being short with someone might be like.” Lily found herself oddly impressed when the man returned the narrow-eyed look of the director with a sort of stoic tolerance.

“I pointed out that he only got on this track because he was listening to the petty bitching of a boy about the girl that he’d lost his girlfriend to, and that all of his evidence was circumstantial at best. I told him that the PRT had already looked into concerns like this and addressed them,” Piggot shook her head. “He got… irritated. Asked for our proof and I told him that it wasn’t his business and told him to focus on doing his own job. Miss Hebert isn’t on his team or a villain in his city, so instead of bothering with chasing teenage drama he could be turning his considerable skill-set to dealing with Lung, or Coil, or helping us finally put the Empire down. He agreed and left, while I assumed the matter was dropped. Evidently, I was wrong.” Piggot shook her head and shifted back in her seat, sitting up a bit straighter.

“Now what?” Lily herself finally spoke, and everyone turned to look at her. She glanced around and shrugged quietly, feeling oddly exposed in her dress and ruined make-up. “You said he triggered a foothold situation right? What happens next.” Lily stared at Piggot, and the woman sighed.

“Next? The city is cut off from the larger PRT infrastructure, and a task force is assembled in a
nearby city. Boston, maybe, but New York seems more likely. Once they've assembled enough troopers and capes for the task force, they'll fly them into the city and take control of the PRT assets here.” Piggot rested her elbows on the table. “As Miss Dallon has indicated, the PRT has already cleared Miss Hebert, so I imagine that Armsmaster will get quite the rollicking from Legend when he arrives. I imagine that if we sit here for an hour or two, the situation will be resolved for us.” Piggot crossed her arms and settled in, clearly intent on waiting.

“There’s an issue with that plan though.” Amy’s flanging voice cut over them all and Lily glanced at her. “Taylor and Victoria were with us at prom, Director. Along with my parents, and if they’re not here, that means that they’re free. That would be the four at them at least, if not more if they went to get Crystal and the others. They’re not clued in on all of this, and they think Armsmaster and PRT have taken us all hostage.” Amy spoke coolly, and Amy glanced over at Piggot, and the rest as a faint undercurrent of unease began to spread around the room. “What happens if they get onto the rig before Legend and his team does?”

Taking a deep breath and gripping the door handle, Taylor frowned as she studied the wood. She tried to grasp at the burning anger that she’d felt when Dean had sat there, staring at Victoria as if he could see through her, but the lingering dark feelings had faded as she’d explained the plan to the others. Taylor hoped that pique would be enough to see her through this. Taylor carefully twisted the handle and stepped out onto the porch, leaving the door open in her wake.

When all the weapons came up as one to point at her, Taylor paused and held up her hands placatingly as she submerged herself into the Force, preparing to dodge and run for everything that she was worth. When the weapons didn’t immediately open up on her, Taylor took a deep breath.

“Hey. Revel, right? I thought that I still had like,” Taylor glanced down her wrist obviously, doing her best to keep a smirk on her lips. “Like two and a half minutes? I just wanted to check something.” She watched as the troopers glanced at Revel and then remained where they were without reacting until the older cape minutely inclined her head. Watching as the weapons all dropped a fraction of an inch, Taylor took this as an offer to ask her question and tucked her hands into the small of her back.

“You’re here at Armsmaster’s behest, right? I’ve spoken with a friend of his, and she said that he wouldn’t let you do an op like this without watching it himself. You’ll have body cams on you, of course, standard procedure, but my friend, she’s pretty certain that he’s also got a few remote cameras around her.” Taylor studied Revel, her smile oddly growing as the woman’s control kept her face cold and implacable.

The troopers around the woman reacted though, and Taylor watched as they shifted their heads minutely, their poses changing, and she followed where they were all looking. She studied the flickering shape curiously. A drone of some sort, perhaps. She reached out a hand and grinned when the tiny shape was ripped out of the air. Probably too small for the device they’d used to-

The Force screamed at her and Taylor halted the device nearly four feet from her. She studied it and frowned. A weapon or a self-destruct. She considered it before smoothly crushing the tiny rotors that
generally kept it aloft against its body. She rotated the device around to face her and held it carefully in place with the camera oriented on her, staring at it warily. Once she was sure it was still broadcasting, she flashed the camera a broad grin and waved casually.

“Hey there, Colin.” She paused, humming. “I guess it’s a bit bold to assume that we’re on a first name basis, but you did send all of these friends of yours to my house without even asking.” She shook her head. “You did a lot of things lately without asking. If you’d really wanted to have a face to face chat that badly, well I’d have been happy to come out and visit you on the rig.” She crossed her arms.

“I mean, my good friend Dragon’s informed me that you’re going to be having a personal visit from the entire Triumvirate and the leader of the PRT sometime in the next two hours. And I’d absolutely love to meet them. I’ll even let your friends out here escort me. Though me and my friends will have to be conscious and not in restraints if that’s what you want.” Grinning, Taylor glanced at the nervous looking troops. She spoke casually toward them, moving the camera up to keep her and the soldiers in the shot.

“Dragon’s also informed me that she’s spoken with Alexandria herself and that amazingly enough, when my Dad formed every cape in the city into a Gestalt in May, the PRT actually decided to check me out to see if I’m a master since our powers are so similar. They’ve cleared me.” Taylor glanced at the camera and narrowed her eyes at the lens for a few moments before turning back to the others.

“So how about it Revel? You get your friends there to put their weapons down, and I won’t have to get to the rig through you and every PRT trooper between Armsmaster and me. Sounds fair?” She stared at the woman, the friendly affectation she was using falling away. Revel stared coldly at her and didn’t react for a few moments until she lifted a hand and touched a device in her ear. Taylor watched as the woman’s dark eyes narrowed and she sighed, opening her hand behind her back.

“Armsmaster thanks you for your kind offer, but he personally feels that it would be better if you and your… friends were-” Taylor didn’t let her finish, focusing. The ‘practice-blade’ that she’d made shot into her hand. Taylor moved with as much speed as the Force could afford her, flicking the weapon around and releasing it. She nudged its spin-rate up, watching as the weapon blurred into a spinning silver disk as it arced across the grass.

Revel barely had time for her eyes to widen before the weapon crashed into her chest and blew her off her feet. Taylor didn’t give the soldiers around her any more time to move. She loosed a roar as launched herself through the air with the Force, leaping across the distance between her and where Revel had stood.

Dragging the Force into her, Taylor collected her power and hit the ground with both fists as she landed, sending out a glowing azure shockwave that blasted the half dozen troopers directly around Revel’s moaning form off their feet while ignoring the felled woman. Taylor slid to her feet, reaching out. She’d been able to maintain her control on her saber until it hit the woman and now that it’d bounced away Taylor quickly summoned it back into her hand.

Taylor stood and glanced around, ignoring the brief flickers of emerald in the distance. Feeling the Force screaming at her, Taylor smoothly kicked herself to the side, dodging away from guns spinning her way. When her feet touched the ground, she launched herself at the closest trooper and skidded to a halt before him, using her weapon to smash his gun aside before slamming her elbow into his chest, ripping his weapon free as he flew away.

Taylor considered the gun as she leapt back, keeping the remaining four troopers from getting a bead
on her. This gun seemed more like a garden variety PRT issued weapon, and it lacked the non-lethal stunners of the others. Feeling much less guilty about her actions now, Taylor turned and hurled the gun in her hand at one of the troopers, watching as it hit him hard enough to take his feet off the ground.

Taylor glanced at the other two troopers and felt her own eyes widening as she kicked off the ground toward the fallen trooper. She skidded across the ground, slamming one foot on the strap that kept the trooper’s weapon secure and used her free hand to rip it loose. She tossed the gun up, using the Force to grab the other one off the ground and spun to face the two remaining troopers, their weapons lining up on her chest as her own two came to a stop, hovering on either side of her and pointing at the nervous looking troopers.

“Lower them,” Taylor spoke quietly and used the Force to pull back both of bolts, ejecting a single round from each. She watched as the troopers glanced at each other before slowly lowering their weapons. Taylor stared at them quietly and frowned. “Unhook your belts and drop the guns on the ground and back away.” Taylor stared at the men as they obeyed, carefully unhooking their belts and setting the rifles down before backing away, keeping their hands up.

Taylor grasped the other two weapons and picked them up, holding them close as she glanced around. She stared at the groaning and knocked out men scattered around the ground with a tired frown on her face. Taylor stared at the weapons before smoothly activating the magazine releases and ejecting the rounds in the guns. Dropping the weapons into a pile on the ground, Taylor suddenly lunged to the side when the Force screamed once more in the back of her mind.

She stared in confusion at the panting cape with her long staff and hanging lantern. Triggering the staff portion of her spear, Taylor carefully spun the weapon around, slipping her hands along the shaft to grip the spear more comfortably. She backed up, blocking and deflecting the woman’s wild uncoordinated strikes with the swinging lantern, wincing each time the heavy object crashed into her saber and pushed her back.

“I thought you were a blaster,” Taylor grunted as she ducked under a wild swing and slammed her shoulder into Revel’s chest, pushing her back. “What’s with the sudden monk routine?” She kicked back and brought the weapon around, deflecting the swinging lantern with a clang that made her teeth rattle. The cape before her didn’t respond, continuing to push her. Taylor felt her feet moving back as the woman slowly and carefully attempted to box her in.

Remembering what Dragon said about Armsmaster’s probable contingencies, Taylor played along, continuing to deflect and block the attacks, but also allowing the cape to herd her toward the middle of the street. Though when the older cape reached up and touched something on her neck before trying to back off, Taylor struck out with her spear. She hooked the extended pole around the woman’s weapon and flicked both weapons away before using her hand to snag the woman’s arm and roughly jerk her back in close.

As Dragon had expected, Revel’s partner went to work, and several patches of the road around Revel and Taylor glowed a violent orange before being replaced with four perfectly round patches of manicured grass. Each piece of replaced terrain contained a large tinkertech device that burst into emerald light as soon as they arrived. After a moment of charging, the devices activated and a glowing shield formed around Taylor and Revel, trapping them within. Staring at the oriental woman, Taylor slowly raised an eyebrow.

“Armstrong created it. It’s a bunker shield. He based it off of other Tinkers he has seen at work but had the brilliant idea of layering the shields. He intends to use them at Endbringer battles to protect
healers and support personnel.” Taylor glanced around the devices and frowned, the energy feeling familiar. Briefly, she flashed back to the shields they’d used to hold Leviathan off, and she rubbed her face before glancing at Revel who smirked at her.

“If you place the projectors outside, they serve as a fair prison as well. There’s nothing you can do to escape from this. We’ll be trapped here until our reinforcements arrive. You’re trapped.” Taylor hummed faintly in agreement, studying the woman quietly before pointing toward the house. Taylor watched as Revel’s face suddenly fell as Carol and Neil stepped out of the still open door.

Taylor reached out, snagging the woman’s communicator when she reached for it, dropping it on the ground and stepping on it. She smirked at the woman’s furious look but watched as the two heroes strode toward the shield. Watching the woman’s face turning sour as Carol hefted up her hanging lantern made Taylor feel much better about all this. The woman straightened up and growled when Carol raised a hand and conjured a glowing sword near the projectors.

“There are snipers in range of all of us. They haven’t attacked because of the risk of collateral damage, but if any of you attempt to interfere with the-” The woman cut off as Victoria drifted down out of the sky and casually dropped half a dozen metal balls on the ground. Taylor took a moment to realize that the balls were sniper rifles that had been bent up like pretzels. Hanging from Victoria’s back was the stunner rifle they’d brought with them from Arcadia. Taylor glanced over at Revel and raised an eyebrow in amusement at the woman’s furious look.

“So. Do you agree to stand down until the Triumvirate arrive, Revel?”

Lily was struck by how large Amy’s construct looked in the hallways of the rig. The corridors had clearly been designed with the idea of moving freight and Tinker constructs around the space, but even then, at over seven feet tall the Sentinel dominated much of the open corridor where it walked several feet ahead of the rest of them. Lily studied Amy’s back and frowned quietly. She’d tried to walk next to the younger girl, but Amy had been oddly insistent that she stay back with the rest.

“Your date is kinda scary, Flechette.” The words came from her left, and she glanced over, staring at the redheaded boy that sidled up next to her. The boy was dressed in track pants and a t-shirt, and he looked like he’d been in the middle of a nap when he’d been dragged out here. She stared at him for a few moments before he coughed and rubbed the back of his neck, offering his hand out. “It’s uh, Dennis, by the way.” Lily studied him before reaching over and shaking his hand smoothly.

“Lily.” She smiled a touch and then blinked when a shorter kid with brown hair appeared on her other side, smirking up at her as he held out his hand.

“Chris! And Dennis is right. I was across the hall from her, and I saw her… thing just smash through that door, and she didn’t even hesitate. She uh…” Chris paused, blushing crimson and glancing off to the side before continuing. “Well. She climbed inside it and went straight for you. Didn’t even check any of the other cells.” Lily blinked and flushed a touch as she accepted the hand, shaking it smoothly. She glanced over when Chris continued. “Think she might let me poke at it when she’s done? My Tinker powers are going crazy trying to figure out how she did that.” He stared at her, and
she coughed politely and shrugged.

“It’s uh. Amy’s creation, I’m not sure how willing she would be to turn it over to other capes. I suppose it’d be best to just, you know, ask when things are less tense?” She smiled nervously and then glanced over when the boys nodded and then both shoved their hands in their pockets. Lily blinked quietly as they kept pace with her, studying each boy as they walked on either side of her, keeping their gazes directed outwards.

They were protecting her, she realized. They saw her in a dress with smeared makeup and didn’t see her weapon, and they were watching her back. It was an odd sensation, and Lily briefly entertained the idea of informing them that even in a dress and holding the tiniest wooden dagger she’d ever seen, she was still probably the most dangerous parahuman on the base. Instead, she kept quiet, smiled a little smile and watched Amy’s monstrous form, clearing a path down the hall for them.

They walked in silence for a while, reaching the end of the hall on the lower levels of the rig and Amy paused at the large door that secured the access to the stairwell. The girl stared through for a few moments before frowning and stepping back.

“I found out why we didn’t have any patrols.” Amy’s flanging deep voice spoke, and Lily stepped forward, staring in horror at a suit much like Amy’s current one that had been shredded by bullets and charred along one side. The construct was laying halfway out into the hall. Peering past it, she saw almost a dozen troopers slumped face down on the stairs above and below the door.

“Are they dead?” Piggot moved, stepping past the younger heroes and up to stand next to the Sentinel, staring into the space beyond the porthole. Lily was struck by the woman’s high voice, listening as she uttered the cold, dangerous words. Flicking her gaze back up, Lily studied Amy, but the Sentinel continued to stare coldly at Piggot until she took a step back, reacting only once she did so by shaking its head.

“No. When a Sentinel unit is perforated, it releases somniferous spores. They’re sleeping deeply. They should wake up with a hell of a headache in about four hours.” Amy crouched down and inspected the neutralized Sentinel, using one large hand to drag it out of the doorway. “It looks like they shot at it till they’d created a large hole and one of them shoved a grenade inside.” Amy shook her head and then glanced back toward them.

“The spores seem to have died off, it should be safe enough for us to move them.” Amy stepped forward, reaching in and grabbing two figures and dragging them carefully out of the stairwell and down the hall a short distance. Lily watched Amy set them down before moving over and helping Dennis in moving one of the smaller troopers.

It took the group a few minutes to make sure that each person was breathing fine and to move them out of the stairwell before they all clambered into it and followed Amy’s powerful form up the stairs toward the main level of the Rig. The darkened corridor beyond the porthole and the flashing red lights didn’t really fill anyone with much confidence.

When the bulky Sentinel glanced at them all and stepped out the tiny hole at the top, vanishing into the darkened hallway, Lily moved up and peered out in Amy’s wake. The dark shape of the Sentinel was only visible when the flashing red lights ghosted over its monstrous form, and Lily felt a flicker of apprehension in her chest at the idea of Amy being on the front line like this.

She jumped when Eric, Dennis and Chris joined her at the door. She glanced at them before peering over toward the gaggle of adults standing a bit further down the stairwell talking in worried hushed
“The power’s on fine down below. Do you think this was Tattletale? Turning off the lights up here?” Dennis spoke softly, and Lily glanced over when Chris shook his head and spoke softly.

“That’s not how the power on the rig works. She’d need to be down in the generator rooms to do that, and it’d be dangerous. A lot of the defences are tied into conduits running through this floor of the rig. I’m guessing it’s probably due to battle damage. The conduits powering the upper shield generators pass through the walls near here, so they’ve probably set up the electrical wiring here to fail in certain ways when they’re overloaded to keep from blowing the entire system.” Lily studied the boy and then glanced around.

“So, there was a fight,” Eric spoke, and Lily shook her head. She nudged the younger boy and pointed. There were claw marks on the metal at several sections of the wall, and scorch marks over most of the southern corridor. It was pretty evident that there’d been a battle of some sort in this corridor. Lily frowned as she moved over, slowly stepping into the hall. She ignored the hissing of the boys and paced over to the wall and gently traced her fingers over the jagged claw marks on the wall. She pulled her hand back and frowned. No wood splinters, that meant that it wasn’t-

“Freeze.” The words were harsh, and Lily froze in place. She stood there silently as the heavy panting came from the northern corridor, opposite the direction that Amy had gone. “T-Turn around.” The voice was harsh, and Lily turned, staring in confusion at the three figures looming in the darkness. Two were mostly shrouded in shadow, and the third cloaked in white and gold Roman armour was lit by the soft glow of his weapon. Staring at the three figures, Lily winced back a bit as the one in the front lifted his spear and did something that caused it to give off more light, illuminating all four of them entirely.

Lily stared at the three figures and frowned at their sorry state. She knew their names, she’d been briefed on the members of the Protectorate in Brockton Bay. Sadly, as this was her first time on the Rig, Lily'd only met one of them, and it’d been in passing at the PRT base as he hurried to a meeting. She’d oddly wondered why the speedster was always late, but she hadn’t commented on it at the time.

“It’s a Ward, the containment cells probably failed.” The haggard voice the speedster spoke as he did his best to hold up the battered bleeding form of Triumph. The man in golden armour was dripping blood from one of his legs as he hung off the taller, thinner figure’s shoulder. As she studied him, Lily noted the golden claws on his gloves and glanced at the scratches on the wall out of the corner of her eye and frowned. Lily stared at them all quietly. Eventually, when she still didn’t speak, the speedster continued softly. “Flechette. Right? You’re the new one. You shouldn’t be up here, it’s dangerous there’s something…” The man stopped and frowned. Lily had heard it as well, the slow rasp of wood dragging on metal. The armoured man glanced at the speedster before turning on Lily and speaking sternly.

“We need to get you back off this floor. It’s too dangerous. Did anyone else get out of containment?” Freezing, the armoured figure, who Lily recalled was named Dauntless, spun quickly toward the sound of something rattling in the stairwell. Lily winced and glanced over when he rounded on the doorway and spoke harshly. “Who the hell is in there? All of you come out. How did you four make it past the containment team we sent down ahead of us?” Shifting nervously in place, Lily watched as the three boys emerged from the stairwell and moved over to stand around her.

“Two more Wards, and the New Wave kid. The boy.” The speedster spoke softly, gently grasping his lapel with his free hand. Lily stared at him, studying the exhaustion visible on his form. She
shifted and spoke softly.

“You mentioned a containment team, right? There were about a dozen troopers at the base of the stairs here, they were surrounded by the battered remains of some sort of plant creature that they’d apparently defeated...” Lily glanced at the other three and Chris took the bait and quickly chimed in, playing along.

“It was pretty beat up. It looked like they shot it full of holes and then stuffed a grenade inside, it was almost shredded.” He stepped closer to her and gently grasped her shoulder and Lily took a breath, feeling oddly comforted by the touch.

“Yes, We discovered two of them entering the Rig on the level above this one. We’re not sure how they made it past the shield, but we thought we’d managed to seal them off. We were heading down to investigate the Biotinker to see if this was her work when they ambushed us. They came out of isolated sections of this floor and cut us off from the containment team. They seemed pretty focused on keeping us from making it any further into the rig.” The man’s voice trailed off, and the wounded Triumph cut in with an angry snarl.

“It’s clearly the fucking kid’s teammate. The extraction teams got back and shoved that kid into the fucking holding cells, and they barely make it back to the coast before these things are crawling up the side of the fucking base? And then every time we try to get down to her, they cut us off. The last one, nearly fucking killed me.” The man’s bitter words were accompanied by a hiss of pain as he tried to put his weight on his leg. Everyone in the hall suddenly froze as the powerful deep voice of Amy’s suit drifted out of the darkness around them.

“The Sentinels are specifically programmed to minimize injuries, Triumph.” The words were low, and sibilant and Lily glanced around, frowning as she tried to figure out if Amy was lurking behind her and the other young heroes or the Protectorate capes. “You must have been saying some very unpleasant things about what you planned to do to me for it to view you as enough of a threat to injure you like that. I didn’t even feel my ears burning.” Lily heard the sound of stomping feet as the massive suit emerged from the darkness behind them and stalked toward the Protectorate. She saw the look of concern on the faces of the adult capes, and she felt a flicker of guilt as she and the others smoothly melted to the side to allow Amy’s powerful form to walk through them.

“They’re designed to react to contain threats against me. So when it heard you threatening me specifically, it would have acted to capture and restrain you. I’m guessing that’s when your leg was hurt, and you left these delightful claw marks on the walls here.” Amy gestured with a powerful arm at the marks. Lily stared up at Amy, frowning when the suit passed her, noting that it’d changed while it had been in the dark. The back of the helmet had altered, opening to reveal nearly a dozen vines that hung from the head and parts of the back and dragged along the metal plating behind it. “Dragged you quite a way down the hall I’m guessing.”

Lily blinked when Chris let out a small gasp and quickly backed off, grabbing her and Dennis and pulling them back, moving them several feet from Amy. Eric followed along of his own accord. They stood nearly a dozen feet behind Amy as she stared down the three capes quietly.

“I assume that you’re the one that downed the other two Sentinels? They were both rather badly burned, and they seemed to have exploded. Fairly accurate for lightning strikes.” Amy’s voice was conversational despite how harsh and multi-toned it was. The three capes glanced at each other before they turned back to the sentinel suit.

“Yes, they were attacking the rig, we had to defend ourselves.” Dauntless’ voice was oddly
defensive, and Amy chuckled softly.

“Indeed? And they were only attacking the rig because I was defending myself. You attacked me with no provocation or warning, kidnapped me and my date from my prom and then imprisoned me in a cell.” The words were much less friendly this time, and Amy paused politely when Triumph called out.

“You were in Master/Stranger isolation! There was a message on that wall! You were supposed to sit there and wait to be screened.” His voice was harsh, and Amy snorted softly.

“Indeed? And I should take hastily scrawled messages on the wall as statements of fact from now on? It would never occur to the Empire or Yangban to try that one to get their hands on a parahuman with my power.” Amy spoke mockingly before crossing the suit’s arms over its chest. “No, Triumph, your team leader had me attacked, kidnapped and then had the audacity to both underestimate me, and make my date cry. So no, I wasn’t going to sit there.” Amy glanced at the men for a few moments before shaking her head. “In any case, I’m not here to embarrass you all any further. Stand down and take us to Armsmaster and I’ll heal the damage you’ve all suffered once this entire mess is untangled.” Amy stepped forward, pausing as the spear was suddenly levelled in her direction.

“Don’t move, Dallon. You’re supposed to be in containment—” The figure spoke powerfully, and Amy shifted into a more dangerous stance. Lily felt her eyes widening as she stared in mounting horror at what was about to happen when a cold droll voice cut them off.

“Stand down, Dauntless.” The words came from Piggot who finally stepped through the stairwell door, heavily exerted from the long climb, carefully adjusting her pant-suit and staring at the armoured cape. The man paused, nervously and adjusted his spear.

“Ma’am, with all due respect—” The woman stared at him and then gestured casually at the door. Behind her the large shapes of Amy’s aunt and uncle appeared, Miss Militia looming in their wake and staring out.

“Dauntless, you can stand down, or Lady Photon and Manpower will force you to do so with assistance from their son and niece. Armsmaster has cocked this up enough. These fine people wish to make their way to his lab to see the fireworks when the Triumvirate explains what a colossal mistake he’s made. You can join us in walking there, or the capes gathered here will take little care in dragging your unconscious bodies there. It’s entirely up to you.” The woman stared at Dauntless for a few minutes until the man nervously lowered his weapon and glanced at the worried eyes of the other two.

The speedster, Velocity, Lily finally remembered, nodded, and after a long furious look, Triumph nodded as well. When Amy began to move forward, this time the three heroes reluctantly stepped to the side to let her past. Lily watched Amy as she stalked forward, blinking when the Sentinel stopped near Triumph and Velocity, leaning in and speaking in that menacing voice as it settled its glowing eyes on Triumph.

“I’d offer to heal you now, but you’d never accept it. So once Alexandria comes here and tells you that I was never mastered, I’ll heal you. Well, after you apologize for whatever you said that resulted in one of my Sentinels dragging you screaming and clawing into the dark.” Amy loomed there for a few moments before turning and striding off.

Lily glanced at the others for a moment before turning and quickly jogging after Amy. She came to a stop at the girl’s side, walking a bit quicker to keep in time with the longer stride of the giant suit. She
Taylor did her best to avoid looking Flashbang in the eye as she leapt from rooftop to rooftop, the larger man cradled exceptionally carefully in her arms. She was trying to do this in a way that wasn’t horribly emasculating to Victoria’s father, and she imagined that it might have gone better if they both couldn’t obviously hear the faint laughter of Victoria and her mother in their wake as Victoria carried Brandish through the air.

Taylor suspected that Victoria probably could have carried both of them, but her girlfriend had seemed oddly reluctant to get too close to her father and something had told Taylor that it might be a good idea to offer to help out. That didn’t stop this from being the most awkward twenty minutes of her life.

“Taylor,” The words were soft and laced with obvious amusement and Taylor nervously glanced over at the man as he spoke. “This isn’t the first time that I’ve been carried around by a teenage girl in the course of a mission. It’s fine, you can stop looking like you’re terrified that I’m about to do something suitably manly to assert my masculinity.” Taylor stared at the man in confusion, blinking quietly at the odd wording.

“I, uh. Right. Still. Bit awkward.” She commented faintly, splitting her attention between studying Mark and making sure that she didn’t run out of rooftops between them and the waterfront in the distance.

“Honestly, I’m a bit grateful for this chance. I uh. I’ve wanted to speak with you for a bit now, Taylor.” Taylor glanced at the man and swallowed nervously as he stared at her. She inspected him quietly and blinked when he let out a small laugh. “No, this isn’t a shovel-chat. You’re both significantly more powerful than me, and I imagine that if I did anything to scare you off, Victoria would leave me stranded on a desert island somewhere.” Taylor carefully studied the older man’s face for a few moments before chuckling as well.

“I uh. I mean she might yell, but I doubt that she’d leave you somewhere. Victoria… she’s pretty possessive about the people that she loves. She wouldn’t want you too far away. I could tell that not being able to talk to her mom was sort of eating at her.” Taylor glanced over her shoulder as she and Mark soared through the air, landing carefully. The man nodded quietly as they both watched Victoria and Carol talking in hushed tones.

“Yeah, Carol’s the same. They’re… they’re a lot alike. I’m glad that they’re talking again,” Taylor glanced at Mark, studying his face as she crossed the distance to the far edge of the roof and crouched low, leaping off and sailing toward the roof of the next building. “I wanted to thank you, Taylor.” Taylor blinked and flushed, her feet staggering as she hit the ground, stumbling a bit. She
recovered quickly and was quite thankful that Mark didn’t comment on her slip up as she resumed running and jumping.

“You don’t need to thank me, I uh. This entire mess was my fault in the first place.” Taylor muttered quietly, wishing the coast would creep toward her faster as she leapt along, frowning softly and trying to avoid meeting Mark’s eyes as she kept her own gaze on their path through the rooftops.

“Taylor,” The word was soft, and Taylor let out a sigh, glancing nervously at the man. “We’ve sort of been barrelling toward an explosion like this for a long time, and despite everything, you’ve been there nervously picking up the pieces and helping us put it back together despite having no stake in the outcome. Because of you, despite everything finally coming to a boil and us all going through at least three family destroying revelations, we’re still together, mostly. You helped Amy when she needed someone there, and you’ve been nothing but good to my daughter.” Taylor felt her cheeks darkening, and she sighed.

“I- She’s…” Taylor frowned as she hopped along staring at the road. “She’s an amazing person, and I love having her in my life. She picked me, Mark, and as long as she’ll have me, I’ll be here.” Taylor shrugged quietly and frowned a bit when the man chuckled.

“She says the same sort of things about you, Taylor. For what it’s worth.” Taylor glanced at Mark, confusion humming in the back of her mind. She glanced up at the shape of Victoria zipping along above and to their left. She studied the way the girl spoke gently to Carol, taking in the oddly warm expression on the girl’s face. When Victoria glanced down at her and smiled, Taylor flushed and glanced down at the coast.

“I- I’m going to have to do some pretty… tough things here, Mark. I-” Taylor paused and considered her words as she hopped off the edge of the roof, using the Force to cushion her fall. She gently set Mark down on the ground and glanced at him. “I need to make a point here. This is the second time that people have gone at the people around me and me.” She straightened up quietly when the man merely nodded and gestured her forward.

Taylor waited until Victoria and Carol touched down next to them. She ignored the slight puffiness in Carol’s eyes and the way that Victoria carefully stepped away from her before assuming her business face. She considered the pair, taking in the lessened tension between them with a gentle smile.

“So-” Carol spoke quickly, and Taylor gently held up a hand.

“I’ve uh… I’ve got a plan. I sort of want to make an impression here, if that’s okay?” She glanced at Carol, taking in the woman’s stern look for a few seconds before continuing. “They attacked Victoria on her prom because of me. I just. Every anniversary, or date, or birthday will become some sort of vulnerability, Carol. If I don’t make a point about this, then we’ll be hassled for the rest of our lives.” Taylor stared at Carol until the woman finally nodded and waved her on. Taylor glanced over at Vic flashing her a nervous smile before stepping forward.

“Gimme a few minutes' head start.” She called back at the others. Stepping out of the alley that she’d landed in, Taylor smoothly deployed her staff, walking to a stop ten feet from the massive gate blocking access to the Protectorate’s private ferry access. She rested the butt of her pike on the ground, glancing up and around, taking in the various bits of surveillance around the walls.

Taylor stood silently in place for almost two minutes, giving Armsmaster plenty of time to notice her lurking. When she heard the sounds of movement beyond the wall, she glanced up at one of the
cameras, offered a jaunty salute and then stepped forward and around her staff, using the Force to keep it suspended in her wake.

Coming to a stop about ten feet from the heavy steel gate, Taylor set her feet firmly on the ground and focused. She drew heavily on the Force and moved her arms in practiced motions as she dragged the energy through her feet, then up over her torso, forming a nearly solid ball of glowing azure telekinetic energy and then shooting it forth once it had reached full power, watching as it arced toward the gate.

Taylor opened her eyes, watching as the door was smoothly ripped out of its housing and merrily bounced twice before skidding along the empty lot beyond in a shower of sparks. It ended up clearing the end of the small pier and vanishing over the edge into the inky water of the bay. Taylor strode smoothly through the now wide open gate and reached out with the Force.

She didn’t wait for the troopers to escalate, to draw their weapons, Taylor reached out with the Force and smoothly collected three of the PRT vans sitting scattered around the lot and lifted them cleanly into the air. She did her best to maintain her facade of casual implacability despite the strain that this was putting on her. Glancing over at the guard booth, Taylor lifted and hand and waved at the troopers staring out at her and the floating vans quietly. She turned fully to face them and allowed the vans to float menacingly around her for a few moments before turning her hand and gesturing that they should step out and come to her.

It took nearly two minutes, but almost a half dozen troopers filed out nervously, staring in fear at the floating vans while Taylor stared at them coldly. A gesture of her hand saw that these men lacked the tinker-tech that Armsmaster had given his task force and the weapons they carried all ripped free and floated toward Taylor. She stared at the worried looking troopers for a few moments. Considering the words that Marr had said about making an impression, Taylor felt a lingering sense of empathy. Studying the worried looking mechanics and guards, Taylor let out a sigh and set down the van without a containment foam cannon on the roof on the ground. She inspected it for a moment before gesturing.

“All of you get into this. I’ve got no qualms with letting you all go. You didn’t attack me. If you get in and drive to PRT HQ, then I won’t hassle you any further.” She stared at the men quietly as they glanced at each other nervously. “Or I could tie you all up and leave you sitting here for several hours until I’ve dealt with Armsmaster and the Protectorate. Up to you. Consider it a strategic retreat for backup.” Taylor watched as the men stared at each other for a few moments. All of them nodded, and all but one of them climbed into the back of the van. Taylor studied the remaining guard as he gestured to the kiosk.

“I-I need the key, Miss… uh, Vigil.” Taylor stared at him for a moment before waving him on. She watched as he scurried into the kiosk, returning with a key in hand and clambering into the driver’s seat. Taylor watched as the truck rumbled to life and then drove away. She stared after the fading tail-lights until the others joined her at the edge of the lot. She glanced at Victoria and flushed at the amused smirk on her lips.

“So,” The words were low and teasing, and Taylor huffed. “I thought that you were here to make a statement, Taylor.”

“They were just doing their jobs. I scared them plenty. Let’s get going. We need to get through that shield.” Taylor strode over to the edge of the dock. She glanced at Carol and Neil when they headed into the kiosk. She doubted that the shield would have a cut-off within it wouldn’t make much tactical sense to have your last defence shield able to be shut off from outside, really.
“Maybe we could call Dragon?” Victoria’s voice drifted toward her and Taylor glanced in Victoria’s direction, watching as the sea wind blew her long blonde hair around her face. Taylor briefly wondered why the other girl wasn’t eating her hair, having it loose like that, but she didn’t comment. Instead, she glanced toward the rig.

Taylor glanced down and reached for the concealed pocket on her uniform, smoothly unzipping it and dragging out the phone she’d been gifted. She fiddled with it and activated the holo-call feature and then sent a request to Dragon. It didn’t take more than a minute before a glowing crimson image appeared standing before her.

“Taylor! The Triumvirate is on their way. They’re flying in by helicopter though, so it could be another hour depending on the weather really. They’re coming in along the coast so thirty-forty minutes is more likely. There’s an issue on the Rig though. Alexandria says that she’s got a source that’s claiming that nearly a half dozen silenced alarms are going off on the inside.” Taylor glanced at Dragon before glancing over to Victoria. She rubbed tiredly at her face when the other girl shrugged and mouthed her sister’s name.

“Right. We’re here Dragon, but we need that shield down.” Taylor pointed, watching as Dragon turned to stare in the rig’s direction with a frown.

“It’s a tactical shield, Taylor, it’s designed to hold up against most conventional weapons and mid-to-high tier blaster powers. I’m not sure if you could do enough damage to-” Taylor stared at the woman quietly before reaching out.

She let the Force search along the nearby sea floor until she found the wreck of a small fishing boat. Carefully wrapping it in the Force to keep it from crumbling under the strain, Taylor raised it from the ocean floor, watching the water sloughing off it. Watching as Dragon’s face slackened in awe at the sight, Taylor smoothly flicked her wrist, sending the ship careening out to crash into the shield and crumble, nodding when the barrier flickered.

“I guess that would work, but you’d need a lot of ships of that size or bigger. At least a dozen. Something bigger or explosive might do more damage to the shield, but you risk-” Taylor turned and stared at the nearby parking garage a wicked idea overcoming her. Armsmaster certainly did love his bikes, but she doubted that the tinker was the sort to take them back and forth to the rig on the Ferry unless he needed to tweak them.

Taylor walked away from Dragon and reached out a hand, grasping the heavy steel door of the secured parking building and ripping it free with a grunt of exertion. She flicked the door off to the side, watching as it splashed into the water. A voice in the back of her head pointed out that Taylor probably could have used that as an attack as well, but she brushed it aside. She stared in at the personal vehicles of what she assumed were the Protectorate capes.

Most were civilian models, almost certainly intended for their alternate lives, but toward the back, in a marked off area, a trio of nearly identical bikes sat. Taylor smoothly levitated them off the ground and carried them out of the garage toward where Dragon was staring in her direction. She found herself smirking at the nervous look on Dragon’s face and the mischievous one on Victoria’s.

“Taylor, those are pretty light compared to ships. And they’d just upset Colin if you used them like this.” Taylor glanced at the tinker before gesturing.

“You helped him design a lot of his creations, Dragon. I’m betting you were pretty involved in the
later upgrades to these, right?” She stared at the tinker as she nodded slowly, the worry on her face growing.

“Considering the shit he’s pulled tonight, I’m betting that these come with anti-theft measures that culminate in a self-destruct.” Taylor stared at Dragon as her eyes widened. She saw the woman moving to speak and held up her hand. “Tess. He kidnapped my friends, attacked my girlfriend, and conspired with her jealous prick of a fucking boyfriend. He should consider it lucky that I’m just breaking his toys. This would be way easier with your help, but something tells me that if I just hit this thing against enough other things, it’ll trigger on its own. Or hard enough against one thing.” Taylor watched as Dragon stood there before sighing.

“There’s keypad inside the ‘gas-tank.’ It’s how you unlock it. Enter whatever code you want. You get three attempts free, and then after that the fourth triggers an electric shock, the fifth issues a sleep gas, and the sixth initiates the self destruct.” Taylor glanced at Dragon and nodded before levitating the first bike about ten feet out over the water. She smoothly opened the console and mashed the buttons with her power.

True to Dragon’s word the bike burst into electricity, then issued a cloud of gas that Taylor used the Force to blow away before it finally began to release a series of loud, ominous beeps. Taylor flicked her hand, lifting the bike skyward before launching it viciously toward the shield. She watched as it smashed into the shield and bounced off a bit before detonating violently and causing the shield to flicker.

The second bike detonated against the shield itself and caused it to fail entirely and Taylor found herself nodding in satisfaction. She paused when she heard the third bike crash to the ground. She stared at Vic, studying the blonde as she loomed over the bike a moment before picking it up and hefting it in her hands.

“We don’t need this?” The older girl spoke softly, and Taylor shook her head, blinking when Victoria dug her fingers into the metal, denting it visibly around them and then savagely ripped the bike in half. She casually tossed the two chunks into the water and Taylor watched in fascination as the water visibly bubbled up and then bubbled violently again a short few minutes later. Taylor glanced in Vic’s direction quietly.

“Why?” She spoke quietly and stepped closer to Vic, blinking when the other girl shrugged and reached out, feeling her cheeks darkening at the gentle contact from Victoria’s fingers. A flicker of light out of the corner of her eye told Taylor that Dragon had absconded, leaving her to face Victoria’s intense blue eyes on her own.

“He ruined your prom too. And because of him, I’m out here finding a way to get out there and teach him why it’s a poor choice to poke at us instead of taking you to bed.” Taylor flushed and glanced over, staring, worried at the kiosk where Carol and Mark were talking and watching them. She ignored Victoria’s amused chuckle.

“Go get your parents. The shield’s down. We can ride one of the dinghies here over.” Taylor glanced at Victoria, ignoring her teasing grin and walking over toward the dingy. She heard Victoria shouting something in the distance but tuned it out to avoid whatever reaction the older girl was hoping to engender as she smoothly climbed down onto the boat and began to fiddle with the controls.

Chapter End Notes
[Hm. I’m sort of looking forward to getting back to the more character-focused parts. Pushing this much action together tends to make it a bit harder for me to write fast. I’ve sort of been looking forward to writing the second half of 11, and the aftermath stuff. The b-side with Amy/Lily’s fallout. And the interlude which is coming up all seems sort of fun.

Still, though, we do get to see Colin’s perspective soon. We’ll see his reaction to Taylor’s little show here and his reaction to the arrival of the forces trapped on the Rig. We’ll get to see his perspective as he finally confronts Taylor and we’ll get to see the aftermath when the Triumvirate finally arrive before we follow the girls home and get to see the aftermath of a mission like this.

I’d like to take a moment to thank Noel, who did a lot more work here fiddling with structure and pacing in addition to his regular tip top work on grammar and spelling. His additions made a world of difference in helping the combat scenes, which I’m not the strongest at, feel a touch smoother.

The alternating perspective thing was also his suggestion, and I tried it out, it kept the narrative structure smoother instead of us having two conflict arcs mushed together with both Lily’s at the top, and both Taylor’s at the bottom. So that’s good.

I’ll leave it there since I know you guys have been eagerly awaiting this for like five days. I’ve got short shifts tomorrow and Wednesday, so if I can wrangle my muse, hopefully, 7.11 will be out by Friday at the latest, but it’s a long week this week since one of our cooks is on vacation. So it might take a bit longer. But, ideal world, 7.11 on Thursday at the latest with it’s b-side out on Sunday.

As always, looking forward to your reviews and comments. Thanks for the feedback.]
Chapter Summary

[[So, uh, that took a bit longer than I was expecting, xD. Whoops.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 19th, 2011

Protectorate HQ (“The Rig”), Brockton Bay

“Hey there, Colin.”

‘Fuck.’

That distraction had just cost him internal communications, the system shuddering offline before his eyes as Tattletale’s onslaught of code continued to stream across the screen. Colin had been splitting his focus between the two main displays on his workstation. One of them showed the operation in progress, or it had, before the screen had suddenly been filled with Taylor Hebert’s face and shoulders as she stared into the camera of his drone.

“I guess it’s a bit bold to assume that we’re on a first name basis, but you did send all of these friends of yours to my house without even asking.” Colin’s hands stilled the rapid typing that they’d been doing up to this point, his attention drifting away from the complicated string of code he’d been trying to piece together to wrest control of the Rig away from Tattletale and to the feed from the drone. Staring in confusion at the live feed, Colin frowned as the young master continued to speak with an affected calm.

“You did a lot of things lately without asking. If you’d really wanted to have a face to face chat that badly, well I’d have been happy to come out and visit you on the rig.” Colin gritted his teeth quietly and changed the secondary display from the coding interface, calling up the instance of his OS that was running the drone.

He checked the drone’s systems as he listened to the girl speak. The wings were damaged, probably gone. Enough charge for the stunner but the range was wrong and the angle poor. The self-destruct was damaged but active, but the girl seemed to be keeping the drone at a safe enough distance. Colin frowned sharply as he turned his attention back to the screen.

“I mean, my good friend Dragon’s informed me that you’re going to be having a personal visit from the entire Triumvirate and the leader of the PRT sometime in the next two hours. And I’d absolutely love to meet them. I’ll even let your friends out here escort me. Though—” Colin growled, doing his best to ignore the name drop, typing quickly. With a flare, the second screen rapidly swapped to a system status readout. External communications were still locked out. It was possible that the Triumvirate was already assembled and on the way but... Truthfully, it felt like an entirely too fast
response. Colin’s most generous estimates had afforded him at least six to eight hours before PRT forces resecured the city.

“-Dragon’s also informed me that she’s spoken with Alexandria herself and that, amazingly enough, when my Dad formed every cape in the city into a Gestalt in May, the PRT actually decided to check me out to see if I’m a master since our powers are so similar. They’ve cleared me.” Colin gritted his teeth at the name that was dropped again and turned his attention to the drone’s footage once more. He stared at the display as it panned out to show him the Hebert girl and the forces that he’d sent.

“So how about it, Revel? You get your friends there to put their weapons down, and I won’t have to get to the rig through you and every PRT trooper between Armsmaster and me. Sounds fair?” The determination in her tone gave Colin pause. The calm, the almost banter like tone, Colin’s drone told him that these were affectations. She was bluffing. But this was no bluff. She fully intended to attempt to get through his forces. Colin tapped a few keys and swapped the second screen again to show the suit cams from the troopers, clicking through them all, searching for where the ambush would come from, where Hebert had hidden the remaining members of New Wave.

The lingering silence on the line drew his attention and Colin glanced to the drone feed, seeing the concerned look on Revel’s face. He reached up, touching the small radio in his ear and tapped it. He waited for the beep from the headset that indicated that the signal repeater in his suit had picked it up and amplified the signal.

“Revel. Your orders are unchanged. Apprehend Vigil and the remaining members of New Wave. Be careful. This is almost certainly a set up for some sort of ambush.” Colin tapped his earpiece, watching as Revel started to speak. The drone panning away to give him a better view should have been a warning, Colin realized as Hebert suddenly launched an attack. As the weapon smashed into Revel on camera and blew her off her feet, Colin stared in mounting horror as Vigil suddenly closed the distance, using her shaker ability on herself.

When she hit the ground and exploded, blowing half his troopers away, Colin realized the mistake that he’d made. He’d expected her, now that she was revealed, to fall into Master behaviours. Hiding behind her more powerful minions. He’d negated her shaker ability, after all, and her file was sparse on alternates. It occurred to him that her record might not be entirely complete when Taylor turned the four weapons on the watching troopers and ordered them to surrender.

When they dropped their weapons, Colin narrowed his eyes and tapped his earpiece once more, listening for the beep before speaking. “Revel. Plan B is a go. Shuffle, be ready. Prepare to go on my mark.” He stared through the floating camera as the girl took every weapon and then almost casually disassembled them before the troopers. Colin watched as Revel smoothly regained her feet, bringing her staff around and attacking.

Colin observed quietly as Vigil extended her weapon, the bo-staff she’d been using up to now absent and her current weapon some sort of pole-arm with a metal cylindrical metal attachment at the end. He wondered if this was some intentional slight, some mocking gesture to get his attention. The girl was good but only just good enough to counter and block Revel’s movements. Colin’s concerns about a suspected combat thinker rating began to grow. It was clear that she was couching her responses, allowing Revel to push her around the street.

He was tempted to connect to the comms, warn Revel, but it was already too late. They were getting into position. Hopefully, the girl was operating with some sort of over-confidence that he could exploit. The HUD on the drone observed their ongoing battle, and once they were within the glowing square on it that was demarcated as ‘Contingency B,’ Colin tapped his earpiece and spoke.
“Contingency B, Mark, Shuffle.” He observed as the ground around the two combatants burst into light. Revel attempted to disengage, and Colin watched in abject fascination as the girl sacrificed both her own weapon and Revel’s to keep the older cape from escaping. Colin watched silently as Shuffle’s power went to work, and the bunker shield emitters were deployed. A careful tap of his keyboard and they activated.

He stared at the two capes, unable to hear what they were saying through the shield. When Hebert pointed at something off camera, Colin switched the body-cams to Revel’s and watched as the woman turned to stare at the house. He cursed as Brandish and Flashbang stepped out of the darkness and into the street, their weapons at the ready. As they approached the bunker, he moved to tap his earpiece, speaking coldly.

“Contingency C is a go.” He sat there listening to the dead air on the line, his expression hardening as he stared at the still approaching capes. He watched as Revel spoke, but the words were still lost behind the shield. As the capes grew closer and closer to the emitters, he tapped his earpiece again.

“Can I get a confirmation, Squad C. Contingency C is a go.” When the line remained dead, Colin had to clench his fists to keep from smashing his keyboard. The sight of the tinker tech stunner that he’d appropriated hanging from the back of the pristine white uniform of Glory Girl as she emerged into view of the camera feed was especially galling, made even more so when she casually deposited a half dozen metallic orbs that had almost certainly been acquired from Squad C.

“So. Do you agree to stand down until the Triumvirate arrive, Revel?” The words ghosted over the line and Colin slammed his hand on the keyboard, silencing the feed. Sitting there in impotent fury, Colin shut his eyes and began to audibly recite pi in his head until he could fully resist the urge to smash his fist through the screen that showed Vigil’s smug features as she spoke down to his troopers.

Once he’d opened his eyes and gotten his breathing back under control, Colin could admit to himself that despite how logical it had seemed at the time, sending Revel to face Hebert had probably been a poor choice. That sort of seemed to be his mantra for this evening though, and it was a theme that sort of continued from every interaction that he’d had with the Heberts since the fucking daughter had triggered.

Countless plans, all of them technically perfect, had all collapsed around him through randomly accruing tiny mistakes and errors. His attempt to face Leviathan had been doomed to failure when the creature hadn’t emerged where his model had predicted. When he’d gone after the healers. He’d been out of position, his pawns had been out of position, and then Hebert’s father had descended from the heavens like a literal god of fucking war and proceeded to utterly wipe the streets with Leviathan while Colin himself had stared on, slack-jawed.

Every attempt at a win since Leviathan had collapsed before it could get off the ground. As the truce wound down, Colin’s efforts to shine had met nothing but disdain and failure. Colin had known that his previous attempts to contain the ABB had resulted in the gang harming bystanders and turning the public against the Protectorate, but he’d been willing to suffer the indignity to deal with the fucking threat. Piggot though, had forced him to turn his attention to the fucking Nazis. Once again he’d created meticulous plots and plans and prepared to launch his own offensive.

He’d know that it’d only be a matter of time before the ABB made their move, after all, and the Empire would be forced to respond. He’d held off, kept his forces from intervening until the capes had come out until Kaiser and his minions took to the field.
And instead, before Kaiser had shown himself before Colin could give the order to get to work and break things up, four young heroes had been cut down in the evening, by said Nazis no less, and Coil of all fucking people had swooped in and saved the day. And the Protectorate had been seen as sitting on their fucking hands again while the streets were torn apart by warring gangs.

Every plan of his that even went near the fucking Hebert girl was derailed and Colin should have fucking expected this. It’d been perfect. He’d had it all timed to the second. There would be no mixups this time. Every contingency had been accounted for, or so he thought. But then the mistakes began to show up. Someone had gotten too close to Piggot and Tattletale had disappeared, feigning illness.

There had been too many threads that Colin himself had had to oversee personally. He hadn’t realized the threat until it was too late. She wasn’t with Piggot when he’d secured the Director and Emily had no idea where she might be. Colin had checked the logs and discovered that she’d returned home. He’d entertained the idea of leaving her in the wind and focusing on the task at hand and then the kind of things that she’d have access to as Piggot’s personal assistant occurred to him.

And, in a stroke of utter genius, Colin had chosen to send the backup PRT detail he’d had at the school sitting on Stansfield to secure Tattletale at Hebert’s residence, only to discover that surprise, surprise, she wasn’t there. Not only had this resulted in Dean being left to his own fucking devices and causing an upset that split the targets up; it had also distracted him sufficiently that he only noticed Tattletale’s re-appearance when the troopers reported that she’d shown up. She had somehow managed to intercept the handlers assigned to herself and Hebert before they could check in at the PRT HQ.

As he’d been attempting to rectify the utter garbage fire that the school operation had been, other fires had sprouted up all over the fucking city. Battery and her child of a husband had taken two of his targets to karaoke at a parahuman bar run by villains. He’d been trying to figure out a way to bypass Pax’s defences and issuing new orders to the capture squad that had just delivered Panacea and Flechette when the entire base had gone down around him, one system at a time.

Tattletale and her rescues had apparently managed to acquire fitted PRT Trooper uniforms, bypassed three entirely separate layers of M/S screening and then removed the guards and technicians from the Rig’s chief security office before locking themselves in, and then locking the entire base down. Colin had fought a losing battle to try and stop them, and it’d taken every last ounce of his meagre skill with coding to maintain control of the external defences. Truthfully, the only reason he even had those was that he was the one who made the most recent batch of upgrades, and his system was directly connected to the generators.

Not for the first time, Colin desperately wished that he’d had Dragon here to help him, but considering the things that Hebert had said, she was almost certainly compromised as well. Shaking his head to clear it, Colin turned his attention to the feed from his drone. While he’d been distracted the drone had been dropped on the grass and the view was tilted oddly, but he could clearly see Revel checking on the moaning troopers on the ground. Colin reached up and tapped his earpiece.

“Revel. What is your status? Where’re the targets?” He watched the upside down image of the woman stop and straighten up, touching her uniform and speaking softly.

“Armsmaster, I’m sorry. They overwhelmed us. We were forced to back down. Once we’d stopped out hostilities, they moved on. They’re headed your way. Vigil’s going on foot and carrying someone, so you have some time.” Colin tapped his fingers on the keys, his expression hardening.
“Alright, Revel. Get your forces dealt with and then head back here. Check the house. Stansfield wasn’t found at the school with the rest, so he’s probably there. Bring him with you.” Colin disconnected the feed from the camera and stared around his lab, carefully considering his options.

Turning back to his console, he called up the system he’d used to create the predictive model that he’d once hoped to use to defeat Leviathan. He created a new model and set his system to feeding in every scrap of recorded footage he’d had of Vigil in and out of costume. He considered the time, moving to allocate more power and processing power to the session to ensure that it completed the task well before he expected Hebert to arrive.

Turning away from the console, Colin briefly considered hunting down Dauntless, Velocity and Triumph, but without internal communications, it would take longer than he had, and considering the creatures that they’ve reported facing off against before communications had failed entirely, Panacea had almost certainly broken containment. The lack of alarms meant that the internal defences were offline and he’d have issues coming from that direction too.

Colin let his eyes rove over his spacious lab from the design/office nook. It wasn’t the most strategically sound location to do this, but he was more comfortable with it than most places on the Rig, and there was plenty of space to work with. The lab itself had already been large for a Tinker lab before he’d collapsed the walls that had sectioned off his office and living quarters to make room for the Vehicle Bay that led out toward the forcefield bridge-

Colin paused and tilted his head, a thought occurring to him. He turned back to his console and accessed the lab control systems. Colin tapped through the various menus and brought up the field strength testing programs that he had created back when he was examining and experimenting with the shield generators. He studied the programs, his mind whirling as he considered the possibilities. Perhaps-

A tiny smirk ghosted over Colin’s face, as a plan began to formulate in his mind. Sliding to his feet, the tinker headed toward the nearby vault. He carefully tapped in the access code to the vault and swung it open carefully. He stared at the shield emitters that he’d been tinkering with. They’d worked to harden the emitters on a smaller scale, but the increased power drain had made them impractical with a larger shield. As he was considering the devices, he let his eyes drift over the other half completed projects in the recessed storage space.

When his eyes landed on a particular half-finished device. Currently little more than a trio of half-finished projectors connected to a large circular base be a tangled nest of wires, it had been started as he’d been examining the fascinating scans that he’d managed to get of Keltar’s powers in action. He reached in, his mind quickly filling in the missing pieces he’d need to finish this. He had the parts he’d need on hand, well… most of them, but he could cobble up the difference. Colin quickly carried the large device over to a table, setting it down and reaching out, grabbing a few nearby tools.

He had time. Fifteen...maybe twenty minutes to finish this, ten to install the emitters in the hallway. As he worked, a thrill of eager anticipation washed up Colin’s spine, and he ducked closer to the device, pulling apart the casing and grabbing a nearby processor and making rapid adjustments to it.
Colin hunched quietly over the console, doing his best to look like he was working. Reviewing his workflow checklist, the tinker considered every step of the current iteration of his plan. He wasn’t sure if the plan was on 2.5 or 2.6, but he was as prepared as he was going to be. He’d installed the forcefield emitters in the corridor outside his lab, the other traps had been placed and calibrated. Before his eyes, the predictive model continued to compile, and everything was as ready as it was going to get. *And not a moment too soon*, Colin admitted as the sensors in his suit detected the sound of approaching footsteps.

At this point, there was nothing that he could do but wait, listening as the footsteps crept closer. When he heard two pairs of feet pressing ahead into his workspace, Colin tensed. The sound of the emitters whirring to life saw the tinker holding his breath and doing his best to keep from wincing. Counting slowly to ten in his head and waiting to see what would happen.

When the whine suddenly died down, replaced with a soft hum, Colin let out a tiny breath of relief that the entire system hadn’t detonated from the load. When he’d tested the isolation fields the last time, the rest of the defensive suite had been offline. He was severely tempted to ignore his guests for a moment to check the system readouts on the shield generators, to verify that his position was secure, but unfortunately, other matters merited his immediate attention.

Colin pushed away from his work station and turned, stalking around two tables laden with half-finished projects and heading toward the glowing pillar of azure light at the other end of the workspace. As he cleared the last half-finished project between him and the intruders, his eyes darted around his heads up display, bringing up the bastardized stunner that he’d integrated into the gauntlet of his armour. He stared curiously at the sight that awaited him.

He’d expected to capture Lady Photon and Manpower, or perhaps even Panacea and some of her creations at the head of the party. A bargaining chip to keep those trapped outside the lab from doing anything stupid with their powers. Truthfully, while the idea of her leading the charge here was unexpected, having Flechette inside the isolated field and separate from the others meant that she wouldn’t be able to sabotage the fields in the corridor that were keeping the rest of the capes trapped, and that did strengthen his position. However, if she did press the issue, Colin didn’t relish the thought of stunning a Ward, or battling whatever the hell that monstrosity that Panacea had created.

He’d seen images from his drones of the creatures when they’d first appeared. He’d watched as three of the things had crawled up and out of the ocean, scaling the supports of the rig with almost casual ease despite their aberrant form. Colin frowned as he stood before the shield, staring into the glimmering field in silence. This one was different, the crystal growths over its form weren’t present on the ones that had assaulted the rig earlier.

Colin stared at it in open curiosity, studying the crystals and wincing in pain as his powers skittered over the glimmering material. Gritting his teeth, Colin focused, and suddenly, something shifted in his mind, and he understood what the substance was. Organic crystal, focusing and light sensitive structures. Eyes. The suit had eyes that were as good, if not better than those of a human. Fascinating-

When Flechette lifted a wooden object that had been fashioned into a dagger, Colin snapped out of his thoughts, staring curiously as the young Ward pointed it toward the field that kept her isolated. Raising his hand in preparation, Colin was taken by surprise when the construct reached out and touched Flechette’s shoulder. When it spoke, he took a step back, both at the disturbing manner in which it spoke, and the words it uttered.

“No, Lily. While I’d love to peel him out of that armour myself, that’s not why we’re here.”
construct turned its head, those glowing eyes focusing on him and Colin stood there outwardly stern and implacable. “Armsmaster.” The head nodded slowly, and Colin kept his arm up, the stunner charged, though he briefly wondered what the weapon itself would do to that plant creature.

“Panacea. An interesting construct. I wonder how you’re controlling it remotely.” He stared at her quietly and then glanced back toward the crowd of figures lurking behind his isolation fields. Their mouths were moving, but the emitters he’d used in the corridor kept them silent and mostly trapped. He felt a pang of regret at the sight of familiar faces among their number, but they didn’t seem violent, and it was best to keep that entire group contained until he could deal with the matter at hand.

“Who says that I am? Perhaps I took a look at that two-bit collection of scrap that you’re carting around on your back and thought. ‘Wouldn’t it be fun to show him up.’ What would you say to that?” Colin tensed, but he knew his face betrayed none of his irritation at the tone. His attention drifted over the const-suit, taking it in fully now that he understood what it was. It was different than his suit, an entirely different branch of design, really. Something akin to a miniature biological mech as opposed to his armour which was more of an armoured augmentation platform.

Rather than giving in to his base irritation and attempting a rebuttal, Colin settled for privately making time in his schedule to dissect the thing once they’d cut Panacea out of it. Perhaps he’d find out all its flaws, and if he had a weekend free, he’d make something more robust for his own use. Blue and silver though, with more rounded edges. Fascinating idea.

An alarm issued from his computer and Colin frowned, turning away from the captured teens and accessing the built-in remote link between his suit and his workstation. The CCTV and exterior observation systems had suddenly come back online. Not city-wide, merely the dock-front, but they were there. Quickly accessing the system, Colin moved to shift from camera to camera. He’d not managed to wrest the control back which meant that Tattletale had released it. She wanted him to see someth-

There. Protectorate Docks, Secured Parking. He stared at the camera feed as cameras focused and zoomed in without his input focusing on the sight of Hebert standing in the street outside the secured gate. Colin scrolled through the feeds and watched the guards. He ached for the external communication systems, to contact and warn them. Almost as if they heard his thoughts, the half dozen men present in the kiosk all perked up at once and crowded around the small console in the space and stared in concern at the display.

Switching back to Hebert, Colin stared in worry as the girl casually released her weapon and left it standing ramrod straight where she’d been holding it and walked around it. The camera rotated, courtesy of Tattletale again, no doubt, and he watched in abject fascination as the Hebert girl set her feet, braced herself and then seemed to draw from some unseen well of energy. Her arms made a specific gesture before releasing a wave of azure light that blasted the two-foot thick slab of steel and titanium off its rolling track, sending it skittering through the secured parking lot and into the ocean.

As she strolled into the lot and the vehicles began to lift off the ground around her and float menacingly, Colin made a note to personally adjust the girl’s god-damned files to reflect the numerous inconsistencies that he was seeing here. He was tempted to curse when the troopers themselves stepped out and surrendered... but he admitted that if he’d been in that kiosk without his armour and she’d threatened to crush him with a van like that, he would have done the same.

He was a bit surprised when she allowed them all to scramble into a van, even allowing the team leader to enter the kiosk with its fully stocked armoury. When the man came out, keys in hand, she
stood patiently and watched the group leave with a patient expression on her face.

“So. How long till Taylor gets here?” The words startled him, the harsh flanging voice causing him to slowly turn to stare at the towering suit. Gritting his teeth and imagining the expression that must have accompanied that mocking tone, Colin didn’t bother to dignify it with a response, turning and striding a short distance away from the trapped girls. He focused on the display as Glory Girl and the remainder of New Wave joined Taylor by the water and began to speak.

Watching with one eye, Colin activated a transfer from his workstation, uploading the changes to his predictive suite and setting the updates to patch as the two older members vanished out of shot, heading toward the now empty kiosk. The camera continued to follow Hebert as she strode away from the water and headed toward the secured vehicle storage. Ripping this door off its mountings proved even more trivial, and Colin was utterly unsurprised when she returned, hovering all three of his bikes after her.

When Dragon appeared on that blasted hologram of hers next to the bikes and began to speak with the girl, Colin felt his blood running cold. Watching as Hebert almost casually hovered one of his bikes and spent several minutes tearing the center console apart and triggering its defences. Colin watched his HUD as it reported the security breaches and then the notice that the self-destruct had been initiated. When Hebert launched it like a missile toward the rig, Colin barely had time to brace himself before a shudder rocked through the base from what he suspected was a glancing explosion. A cold fury broiled in his gut as Dragon’s image winked out and Taylor set to work on the second bike.

Colin strode away from the trapped girls, ignoring their questions as he moved to his workstation, quickly calling up the system's display, checking to see if that attack had actually done any damage to the shield generators.

“Colin.” The voice issued from one of the less used monitors, and he froze, glancing up at the image of Dragon on the screen. He’d blocked out ever—The bike. She’d used the bike’s communication suite to engineer a backdoor. Turning his attention to his main screen, Colin called up a runtime environment, and his fingers blurred to work typing out code as he worked on a patch. “Colin! You need to st-”

“Armsmaster.” Colin cut her off coldly, glancing up at the face on his screen, watching the glimmer of pain on the features and doing his best to quell the minute spike of regret that he felt at putting that expression on Dragon’s face. “You’ve betrayed my trust and given my secrets away, Dragon, and you’re working for the enemy. We’re no longer on a first name basis.” Colin kept his gaze on the screen, quickly and carefully writing the code, double checking the various holes and shortcuts that Dragon might have gained access to by examining the back doors that he’d created for his own creations.

“I betrayed you?” Seeing the brief impression of fury on Dragon’s face, Colin swallowed quickly and redoubled his efforts. “Colin, you used our friendship against me and sabotaged my systems on numerous levels to keep me from interfering in this monstrous cock-up that you’re currently waist deep in. Worse than that, you stole tech that I designed and gave to you in good faith to help test, and then you used it against our allies. Against someone that I consider to be a friend.” Colin stared at the code. It was finished, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to launch it just yet.

“You tech, Dragon? Do you think that I couldn’t tell that this shit was Leet-tech? Even with you serving as his glorified bug tester, his personal flair was practically dripping from it. But that’s what you do, isn’t it, Tess? You latch on to Tinkers and then insert yourself into their genius. Can’t quite
come up with the great designs on your own, so you have to piggyback off of others.” Colin stared up at the blanched features of the woman on the screen and continued. “As for borrowing this two-bit laser tech, Leet should be thankful that I deigned to make some modifications, and I’ll be happy to pass them along to PRT with my assessment of his original design and just how utterly worthless it was in the field.” Colin stared at Dragon, watching as the paleness in her cheeks vanished suddenly suffused with brilliant crimson.

“You know what, Colin? If you wanna flush your god-forsaken career down the toilet, then so be it. But I just thought that you might want to fucking know that the Triumvirate is currently in flight escorting a Chinook with a task force to your location. And they’re not on your side.” The voice was harsh, and Colin glanced at her. “Colin, you’re wrong, I don’t know what you’ve seen, or heard, but you’re–” Colin reached out a hand, touching the keyboard and activating the program, watching as Dragon’s face flickered out.

Colin was saved from having to consider that for a scant few moments when the rig shuddered far more violently, Colin turned his attention bitterly back to the shields, watching as the generators fluctuated wildly. If they kept this up, they’d sabotage the ones in the rig. With a few key-strokes, Colin casually disabled the exterior shields, letting the attackers think they had won. Typing away, Colin made a few adjustments to his predictive model as he considered Dragon’s words.

It’d occurred to him that he might have been wrong, that his interpretation of the data might have been flawed, but the evidence that he’d uncovered had been particularly damning. The apparent gaps in the Hebert girl’s file, the numerous baseline comparisons of her growing cadre of powerful capes. He’d performed tests and watched as the players reverted to form. The first test with Brandish had been dangerous, he’d nearly been discovered, and the changes had been too noticeable. Smaller more subtle tests had followed using different emotions, and they’d had successes disrupting the artificial harmony of the group, though it had seemed that less overt tests didn’t manage to disrupt the synergy with Hebert herself, even if they did negatively impact the group's cohesion.

Panacea had been subtly affected with jealousy before being released from the hospital, and there’d been a visible series of altercations, and when Victoria had been subtly hit with a wave of suspicion that had caused even more strife among the group. Every test proved the tenuousness and fragility of what Hebert had constructed, the sheer artificiality of it. But every attempt that Colin had made to get it handled locally had been rebuffed. Every concern brushed aside. They had refused to see, or… they’d been unable to see.

Colin had eventually realized why he’d been special, why he’d finally realized what was going on. Every cape that hadn’t had the good sense to refuse the connection that Hebert’s father had put out had been blinded. They couldn’t see the effect that Hebert was having on the people around her, and as he scrutinized it, he’d witnessed the insidiousness of it. Randomly accessing the databases of seven different departments had shown a similar trend of increased synergy among the heroes and reduced conflict between the various groups.

The effect had been fading, and it’d become clear to Armsmaster that the threat must be contained. A master with that kind of power could see themselves toppling the entire structure of the PRT and the Protectorate as they existed. If she’d been able to gather enough capes to her banner, she could have declared herself an empress.

In the end, It’d been easier than he’d expected to find sympathetic ears. With the exception of his mentor, none of the Chicago team had been present at the Leviathan fight, and Myrrdin at least had been willing to hear him out. They’d approached Hearthrow together, and the man had greenlit the operation once he’d understood the threat that they’d all faced.
Colin tapped at the keys, setting the changes to upload and let Dragon’s words drift through his head. If the Triumvirate were truly already on their way, already arrayed against him. He wondered if they’d been compromised as well, or if he’d made some colossal mistake. He briefly entertained the idea of surrender. He sincerely doubted that Hebert would do any damage to him, but the idea of giving himself up didn’t sit right with him. He’d committed to this course of action, and he’d prepared.

Even if the Triumvirate were going to arrive soon, he’d at least have something to show them. A Master in chains and her minions safely contained, all done by his own hand. Colin heard the sound of approaching footsteps, well, in fact, the audio sensors in his suit detected them, they were still too faint for human ears. He glanced at the screens, watching as the internal PA system began to initialize. He didn’t hesitate to launch his own lockout protocol and sealing off the system.

He observed the security programs that he’d designed attempting to crack the lockout. It wouldn’t hold long, but it didn’t need to. Colin slid to his feet and strode past his workbenches and moved over toward where Dallon and Flechette were stood within the barrier, speaking softly to each other. They fell silent at his approach, and he didn’t talk to them, watching as three figures in white stalked up the long corridor that connected his lab to the Protectorate docks and holo-bridge access.

Hebert was in the front, moving with a determination that impressed Colin, and he watched as she emerged into the lab. As she approached, Colin lifted his hand, triggering the device he’d installed into the floor outside his lab. Watching Hebert whirl in place in horror, staring at the empty corridor behind her, Colin glanced over to the sealed off hallway where he’d left the rest of his captives, staring at two figures in white and one in plaid that were now suddenly among them.

Turning back, Colin stared at the furious eyes of Taylor Hebert and stood stoically in place, staring back at her. He watched as she approached, stepping out of the vehicle bay and coming to a stop almost thirty feet from him. When she glanced to his right, Colin turned and looked over to Flechette and Panacea as Hebert spoke.

“Lily… and, Amy, I assume? You guys okay in there? Everyone else fine?” Taylor spoke quickly, her hand gripping her weapon. Colin remained silent, watching curiously as the trapped heroes replied.

“Yeah, Everyone but Sabah and Crystal are here. When we got here, he trapped us in this. The rest of us are trapped in that corridor,” Panacea’s growling multi-toned voice seemed like a surprise to Hebert and Colin smirked as she shifted uneasily at hearing it. Colin watched as Taylor gave them a once over before turning back to stare at him.

“I’m going to give you one chance to stop this, Armsmater.” The words were cold, and Colin remained silent, keeping his head pointed at her to imply that he was staring. “The Triumvirate are on their way, and this is your last chance to rectify the mistake you’ve made here. Release my friends.” Colin stared at her and then reached back, unhooking his halberd quietly.

“You’re right about one thing, Miss Hebert. This is my last chance to fix the colossal fucking disaster this night has been.” He stared at her coldly watching as the predictive model fully came online, casually holding out the lance, pointing the head toward the Master. “Surrender.”

She moved so fast that he’d barely had time to see it, but the HUD activated, and he followed it, his weapon coming up and smoothly deflecting the blow. He watched as she kicked off and back, staring in fascination as she darted to one side before lunging back in.
Each strike she launched was deflected, and more than that, the model began to adapt, to learn the quirks to the parahuman’s technique, each block becoming more smooth, more casual, as it began to predict them with greater speed and reliability. Better still, the faster and more efficient the model became, the more uncoordinated and unskilled that Hebert girl became. He watched in fascination as the girl's expert and precise lunges and slashes turned to wild jabs, the blocks she did imperfect and hurried.

“You’re a combat thinker.” His voice was casual as he stepped forward, lashing out with his blade. “And your powers are having issues predicting what I’ll do.” He watched her eyes widening and lashed out with his halberd, smoothly disarming Taylor and sending her weapon pinwheeling away to clatter nearby on the floor. He watched as she kicked off as the model indicated and skidded to a halt a short distance away and reached out, summoning her weapon back to her hand.

“You’re worried.” He spoke coldly but didn’t pursue her. “You should be, Hebert. I’m using a predictive model against you. It learns to predict your moves, and it tells me what to do to counter them all. Your powers are failing because you can’t read me, and the machine that’s doing this isn’t here.” Colin took a step forward, pausing as the girl’s weapon came up, the long ‘spear’ pointed at him. “You should surrender, Hebert. If you continue to push this, I cannot guarantee that I’ll be able to subdue you without doing damage to you. You’ve no hope of stopping me, I can almost read your mind, know what you’ll do before you do.” His voice was cold, precise, and he watched her waiting for any sign of weakness.

He wasn’t expecting her to freeze up. He watched in confusion as she lowered her head. As her body shifted slowly, a soft warning began to flash over his HUD. Her body changed stance smoothly, back straightening, shoulders pushing back. Colin ignored the increasingly irritating warnings from the model as the girl flicked her hand, causing the rear of her pole-arm to collapse and brought the weapon around to hold it with both hands.

The yellow warnings became red warnings when the girl raised her head, a terrifying smirk on her lips. When her eyes opened, each ringed with brilliant golden light, Colin took a step back. She charged, and the model frizzed on his screen, suggesting three different responses to intercept. Before he could do any of them, the metal sword crashed into his chest and sent him reeling back.

Glancing up, Colin stared in horror as the tall thin girl sailed toward him with a roar, the weapon flying back into her hand en route. She hit the ground less than a foot for him and charged. Any finesse in her technique had fled, and it’d been replaced with primal fury and raw power. She wielded her weapon like a claymore, and he had horrifying flashbacks to sparring with Chevalier.

He was on the backfoot, dodging and blocking as best he could as her weapon crashed into his over and over, smashing it backwards and aside. When the girl loosed a roar of fury that caused her entire body to flare-up with crimson lightning, he felt himself pushed back a scant few feet despite his immunity to her telekinetics. She moved even faster as the crimson light danced over her form, slamming the tip of her weapon into his chest before twisting it and jerking down sharply to rip the halberd from his grip despite the magnets in his gauntlets.

The weapon clattered to the floor between them, and the girl shifted, spinning rapidly in place and winding up, slamming the sword into the ground atop the fallen Halberd with a roar of rage. The violent lightning coating her form exploded out of the weapon and Colin stared in horror as his weapon was shattered into a dozen pieces by the wave of energy. She turned those glowing yellow eyes on him and lunged in. He moved without thinking, activating every actuator in his arm and torso and augmenting his strength and speed as best he could and viciously backhanding her.
He’d expected to take a hit from the sword as recompense, but he was pleasantly surprised when she staggered back at the savage strike that would have left normal humans spitting teeth, and he was left utterly untouched. That is until Hebert straightened up with a familiar blinking device clasped in her hand. Colin reached down toward his belt where’d been keeping the disruptor, and found its spot empty. He watched in horror as she reached out and made a gesture, and his feet left the ground.

His bones *creaked* when he struck the wall of his lab hard enough to bounce. The pain doubled when something, apparently Hebert herself, hit him in the back hard enough to cause him to crash face first into the wall once more, only this time he stuck there as if gravity had shifted to a lateral direction and tripled in strength. He lay there, pinned to the wall and struggling to breathe until the invisible force grasped him and flipped him over, letting him see Hebert standing ten feet below him on the ground and staring up at him in cold fury, holding out a hand.

He opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn’t inhale, couldn’t force his chest to expand to utter the words. He stared in mounting horror as darkness began to creep in around the edges of his vision and she strode closer, staring coldly up at him. She closed the hand that she’d been holding up and Colin managed to astound himself by letting out a long hissing wheeze as the pressure on his body doubled again and forced the air out of his lungs.

“Miss Hebert, I imagine that you’ve made your point.” The words were cold and laced with concern and Colin stared in relief when the girl stopped advancing on him. She stood in place wavering for a moment before closing her eyes. The pressure on his body suddenly vanished as the girl’s eyes opened to reveal they were once more a dark chocolate colour. The fact that he remained suspended was a concern. Hebert turned her head, and Colin followed her gaze, taking in the group assembled at the entrance that Hebert had used to enter.

The Triumvirate was at the lead, staring in concern at where he hung from the wall, and next to them stood the stern figure of the Chief Director. Opposite Costa-Brown, a woman that seemed to be composed entirely of crystal stood next to Legend, watching in abject concern. Colin stared in worry at the three dozen soldiers arrayed behind them, especially considering that his own forces were among them, including a very sheepish looking Dean Stansfield being held back by Revel herself. His eyes narrowed at the sight of Tattletale and the missing troopers standing close to the crystalline woman, watching in fascination.

“Please set him down, Miss Hebert.” The words came from the Chief Director once more, and Taylor turned back to stare at him. She moved her hand, and Colin felt himself lowering to hover an inch off the ground. She stared up at him and then she spoke, her voice sounding a touch deeper than normal.

“*Inhale deeply.*” Blinking, Colin did as asked, inhaling sharply and frowning when his suit suddenly issued a series of faint pops and sharp cracks. A series of crunching noises accompanied the HUD of his suit suddenly failing, and Colin grew a bit concerned. That concern multiplied when she dropped him, and he teetered in place, utterly unable to move his body. Taylor stared at him coldly and spoke, her voice once more it’s familiar rasp. “My mother and I used to have arguments about who was a better hero. You or Brandish. I was on your team. I’m… I’m glad that she wasn’t here to see how wrong I was proven.” Shaking her head, Hebert stepped away and strode over to his work-station.

Colin was forced to stand there impotently as she pulled out a Guild Issued phone and directly connected it to his system. It took less than thirty seconds for a glowing image of Dragon to appear next to Hebert. The holographic woman glanced at his system for a moment before the isolation fields all collapsed, and she turned to face the Triumvirate.
“Chief Director, I’ve gained control of all of the rig’s systems. I’ll start effecting repairs to the damaged code.” Colin watched in bald confusion when Hebert turned away from the holograms and the approaching Triumvirate and strode across the floor to crash into the knot of teenagers forming around where he’d had Panacea and Flechette trapped. The confusion lingered as he studied the group as they seemed lost to anything but each other, the entire group muttering quietly to each other.

__________________________

“Vigil, if I might have a moment of your time?” Cool and cultured words washed over her and Taylor ignored them as she focused on what she was doing, staring at Eric and Lily as she rested her hand against the sides of their necks and let her power ghost through them. The rage that had sustained her in the battle with Arsmaster had long since faded and now she merely felt empty and tired, though being able to see that her friends was somewhat reassuring. Glancing over Eric’s shoulder, Taylor took in the worried faces of Sarah and Neil, offering them a quick smile.

“Everyone seems fine, S- er, Lady Photon.” Taylor watched as the relief washed through their forms. “Nothing seems to be damaged, though you all seem a bit dehydrated. Dragon said that nausea and headaches weren’t observed effects in her and Leet’s original iteration of the device. It’s probably a side effect of Arsmaster adapting them. Drink some water first chance you get, and you should all be fine in the morning.” Taylor turned to study the two standing before her, flashing them a smile as she pulled back her hands. She saw the group all turning to stare behind her, but she didn’t spin until she’d heard the polite cough.

Carefully spinning, Taylor stared curiously up at the impressive towering form of Alexandria as the older woman crossed her arms and returned the look with an unimpressed twist of her lips. Taylor adjusted her costume and flashed the woman an apologetic smile.

“Apologies, Alexandria, I was seeing to the health of my companions. They were kidnapped using untested tinker-tech after all. What can I do for you?” She watched as the woman’s frown smoothed out, and she attempted to use her powers to see if that subtle joke had landed. She was surprised when even with the aid of her powers, she wasn’t able to glean anything from the intimidating cape.

“Understandable, Vigil. I would hate to separate you all so quickly after your reunion, but it seems there’s an issue that you might be able to help us with. Arsmaster seems to be having some issues with his suit.” Taylor stared at Alexandria and tilted her head, clearly affecting a tone of innocence as she blinked slowly.

“I’m not really much of a tinker, truthfully. I’m not sure how much help I’d be with that sort of thing, but I’m happy to take a look.” She saw the tiny twitch at the corner of the older woman’s lip, and Taylor felt a tiny smirk growing on her own face, and she gestured for the woman to lead the way. She wasn’t surprised when the rest of what Eric had dubbed ‘Second Wave,’ or at least the members present, fell into step behind her.

The group trailed quickly in Alexandria’s wake, following the Triumvirate member to where Taylor had left Colin. The Tinker remained where he’d been, wholly still and unable to move. When Alexandria came to a stop and glanced at her, Taylor moved casually around the woman and stared at Arsmaster. She watched the way that his teeth gritted and studied the suit humming in though.
“So, as I mentioned, I’m not much of a Tinker. But, if I hazard a guess, I might posit that when Armsmaster hit the wall, perhaps, as a sort of… opportune coincidence, every single servo, motor, latch, and processor in his suit all failed quite suddenly and disastrously, at the exact same moment. Bad luck that.” Taylor stared casually at Armsmaster, crossing her arms. She glanced over at Alexandria, watching that tiny tic as it grew just a bit and stepped back toward her friends. She glanced up at Alexandria innocently.

“If that were the case, I’d suggest bringing in another tinker to get him out, since he’s basically trapped in a very heavy Armsmaster shaped statue at this point. I mean, I’m sure that Dragon or Leet would be happy to come out and visit their good friend Armsmaster to extract him from this situation. And until then? I suppose that the ongoing opportunity for growth and self-reflection is merely an aptly needed fringe benefit.” Taylor stared at Alexandria before glancing over at Colin, observing the tense set of his jaw.

“Indeed? I’ll have to make a few calls. Armsmaster, I suppose that we can postpone your debriefing, considering the situation.” The older cape turned to glance toward a handful of nearby troopers, Taylor assumed that she intended to have them drag Armsmaster someplace more private.

“Postponing the debrief would merely drag this entire mess out, Ma’am. I’m fine to give my report as is.” Taylor studied the man’s face, turning toward Alexandria just in time to catch the brief glimmer of surprise that ghosted over her features.

“If you insist, Armsmaster. I’ll speak with the Chief Director, and we’ll locate a space large enough to contain everyone affected by this… operation.” The woman turned and strode off. Taylor turned toward the others looming near her. Amy’s deep flanging voice was still unsettling as were the words that she uttered.

“I could attempt to melt you out of that with the acid that this suit produces, Armsmaster. I could probably keep from burning you too badly.” The suit’s vocalizations lacked any capability for overt malice, but Taylor assumed that everyone heard the threat evident in that tone. She was surprised by Armsmaster’s mild response.

“Thank you for the offer, Panacea, but I’ll wait for an expert to come and remove me from my suit.” Taylor glanced at the others and let out a sigh of relief when Victoria stepped forward and spoke.

“Alright, everyone, let’s just find someplace to stand that’s out of the way until we’re needed.” Victoria gestured, and the rest of them followed her off to an open part of Armsmaster’s lab. When the rest of the Wards and New Wave joined them, Taylor made a point to carefully check each of them over for injuries before offering the same advice she’d given Eric and Lily about taking in fluids and taking it easy.

The uneasy silence that hung in the air over the entire group was almost suffocating, and Taylor was glad when Piggot and the older Latina woman returned and indicated that the groups should follow them. Having been expecting a conference room, Taylor was surprised to find themselves in a small auditorium. The Triumvirate, Resonance and Tattletale were all present on the stage, most sat on chairs, though Eidolon lurked to the back, his form tense as he observed the capes filing in. Something told Taylor that if a fight broke out, he’d be the one to put it down. Taylor moved with the rest, watching as the others took seats in small clusters among the various rows of tiered seats.

Taylor and the younger portion of New Wave had ended up in a knot with Clockblocker and Kid Win near the edge of a row so they could be closer to the seated shape of Amy’s suit. Miss Militia had joined the remainder of New Wave a short distance away with Ralph, Maria and Jenkins seated
Feeling a hand coming down to rest on her own, Taylor shifted it, lacing her fingers with Victoria’s.
Glancing over, Taylor studied Victoria’s drawn features as the other girl stared across the aisle at the
group that had been primarily arrayed against them this evening. Half of Brockton Bay’s
Protectorate, plus the capes from Chicago. Taylor stared at Victoria, studying the hard set of her
features for a few moments before leaning up and gently pressing a kiss to the older girl’s cheek to
distract her from her dark thoughts. When Victoria blinked in surprise and turned to offer her a smile,
Taylor’s heart warmed.

The shimmer of crimson light on the stage announcing Dragon’s arrival kept either girl from
returning their attention to the group across the aisle. Glancing at the arrayed figures on the stage,
Dragon nodded to the older dark-skinned woman, and she pushed to her feet, dusting herself off and
approaching the lectern that had been set in the stage. The woman took a moment adjusting the
microphone and speaking into it casually.

“Greetings. To those of you who don’t know me, my name is Rebecca Costa-Brown. I am the
Chief-Director of the PRT.” Taking a moment to survey the room, the director continued after a
moment. “I’m the one responsible for cleaning up the mess that this entire situation has become, and
since it’s already nearly midnight, and I don’t want to still be here tomorrow morning, we’ll be doing
this in as quick and efficient a manner as possible. Tonight will be a preliminary debriefing, and you
should all expect to undergo interviews as the week progresses. I will say that while these interviews
are not ‘mandatory’ per se, refusal to acquiesce to the investigation will merely prolong its duration.
Keeping that in mind, I will turn you all over to Armsmaster who can probably explain why we’re all
here.” The woman stepped back. Alexandria stood up as the Director approached her seat. She
moved over to the edge of the ‘stage’, stepping off and returning a moment later with Armsmaster,
who’d been secured to a dolly. The Amazonian cape carefully wheeled the tinker over to the
microphone, setting him down and adjusting the microphone to bring it close enough to his face so
that he could speak.

“As you are all aware, I’m Armsmaster, and I am the nominal head of the Brockton Bay
Protectorate. I initiated the foothold situation that we find ourselves in with the approval of Director
Hearthrow of PRT Department Four, better known as Chicago. He agreed that the situation had
proven dire when I brought evidence to him outlining the threat and influence of the Parahuman
known as Vigil. I began my investigation after being approached by the Ward known as Gallant in
relation to the numerous...” Armsmaster’s recitation was monotonous and dry, and Taylor listened with
almost morbid fascination.

The Tinker listed off the evidence that Dean had brought and she’d had to tighten her grip on
Victoria’s hand to keep the girl from leaping to her feet. The Triumvirate as a whole had been forced
to step forward to silence their half of the auditorium when Armsmaster had described in detail the
various tests he’d performed, the loud reactions from Taylor’s team-mates warmed her heart, though
it also meant that Armsmaster was forced to repeat himself once they’d settled down. On it went,
Armsmaster detailing every bit of evidence he’d accumulated and the various cost-risk analyses.
Personality models were described, and the apparent holes in Taylor’s own official documents were
mentioned.

Eventually, he ran out of things to say, and Alexandria had stepped forward once more, carefully
wheeling him back to the line of chairs, after which she’d returned to her chair as Legend stepped
forward moving to stand at the lectern. He studied the assembled group for a few moments,
considering his words carefully before speaking slowly.
“Greetings, I am Legend, leader of the Protectorate as a whole, as well as head of the Protectorate in New York. I’m also the presiding Protectorate cape for this Foothold Response Team.” Taylor realized that the recitation that each cape was doing had to be for some sort of official recording and she frowned at the idea of this all being preserved on tape. She glanced up when Legend continued smoothly. “I would like to start by offering my own personal apology to New Wave that this situation got so out of control. Mistakes were made on both sides of this particular mess, and I’d like to start addressing them here.” He glanced around the room, making eye contact with each person before continuing solemnly.

“First of all, I would like to state that as far as the PRT and the Protectorate as a whole are concerned, Vigil isn’t classed as a Master. Concerns of this nature were brought up among the upper levels of the command structure of both groups concerning the feat that Miss Hebert’s father accomplished that nearly allowed us to defeat Leviathan.” The man paused, gesturing toward the nearby crystalline woman who nodded. “Despite assurances from Resonance of Recourse about the natural changes in Miss Dallon and her mother, it was decided to err on the side of caution. In considering the possible implications of these powers, significant… assets were allocated to assess the threat posed.” The man glanced apologetically at her and Taylor did her best to harden her features.

“On top of their ongoing stalled mission to locate Lung and his bomb, one of the secondary duties of the reduced Watchdog task force remaining in the city in the wake of the disruption of thinker powers was a detailed analysis of Ares and Vigil’s powers at work, as well as detailed inspections of Miss Hebert’s companions. The conclusion at the end of the investigation was that contrary to the classifications in Miss Hebert’s public file, instead of being a Trump, she was, in fact, a Thinker/Trump. As was Ares, though the examination of both in action revealed that while Ares’ powers seemed to lean toward a Combat Thinker application of his powers, Miss Hebert was a fairly clear, if exceptionally advanced, Social Thinker with a primary expression through emotional interpretation and comprehension.” Taylor stared around at the auditorium watching as shock and understanding rippled through most of the older members present.

“...So what?” The words came from Dean who’d managed to rip himself free of Revel’s hold and made it to his feet. “What’s the difference if she’s a Thinker vs a Master, she’s still manipulating them all. She’s still—” Dean was cut off when Triumph of all people grabbed him and forced him roughly back into his seat. Legend stared at him coldly from the lectern, but it wasn’t him that responded. Tattletale was the one that stood and spoke, her voice carrying across the auditorium.

“The difference, Gallant, is that Taylor didn’t force your girlfriend to dump you. She didn’t force her to fall in love with her or to leave you for her. The difference, Gallant, is that your girlfriend ended up with Vigil because Vigil understands her better than you do.” The words were soft and laced with obvious distaste and Taylor stared up at Lisa when the younger girl flashed her a teasing smile. When Victoria slid to her feet, Taylor blinked, staring up.

“The difference, Gallant, is that Taylor didn’t force your girlfriend to dump you. She didn’t force her to fall in love with her or to leave you for her. The difference, Gallant, is that your girlfriend ended up with Vigil because Vigil understands her better than you do.” The words were soft and laced with obvious distaste and Taylor stared up at Lisa when the younger girl flashed her a teasing smile. When Victoria slid to her feet, Taylor blinked, staring up.

“Taylor didn’t steal me from Dean.” The words were uttered with fierce determination. She stared around at the confused looks coming her way. “I didn’t leave him to be with her and acting like that was the case paints our relationship and us both in a very poor light. I left Dean weeks before I got together with Taylor.” Taylor glanced around, seeing the sudden nervousness in Dean’s form as well as the tightening jaws on Armsmaster and Revel’s features.

“I- That was just a fight, Vicky. We have them all the time, you ignore me, or we break up and then a week later we’re back together, but instead, you’re suddenly spending all your time with her and refusing to talk to me, to return my texts.” Dean pointed viciously in her direction.
“Dean, that wasn’t just a fight. You utterly destroyed any trust I had in you..” The girl glared at him quietly. “You… You kept secrets from me about my sister. You… we did things while you could feel her hatred and loathing, you clearly couldn’t have loved me like you said if you could feel her suffering like that, and knowing how I loved her, refused to do anything to help.” Vic’s voice was tired and laced with bitterness, and Taylor studied the growing nervousness on Dean’s face as more and more eyes turned to focus on him.

“I told you, Vicky. It wasn’t my secret to tell, there are rules I have for my powers, I have to respect people’s privacy. The old you would have understood. Instead, you vanished, and when you returned, I could suddenly tell that you were broken, twisted by her powers. Every time I looked at you, I could feel the crawling wrongness.” The man glared over at her and Taylor straightened her back, returning his look with a steely gaze of her own until he glanced away and moved to speak to the podium.

“And you’re wrong, even if she has thinker powers, she has to have Master ones too. She did something to me at her house. She touched me and healed my nose, but afterwards, I couldn’t sense it anymore. The wrongness. She used her powers to blind me to the changes that she’s making in people.” Taylor stared at Dean, a sinking sensation growing in her gut. When Resonance stepped forward and spoke, Taylor bit her lip. Glancing at Victoria, Taylor winced at the look of dawning horror on her girlfriend’s face.

“Did you sense this… wrongness in anyone else, Gallant.” The woman’s voice hummed and chimed as it drifted through the air. Taylor watched Dean as he glanced toward the shimmering woman, his face full of confusion before he finally responded.

“I uh. No. Just Vicky, but I wasn’t as close to anyone else. And I could tell that she’d been twisting Amy’s mind, it settled far too quickly, changed too fast. All of that love and lust and hatred all suddenly twisted and vanished one day. It was replaced with different emotions. It was clear that she’d done something. She didn’t even look at Vic—”

“Gallant.” The tone was low and laced with displeasure and Taylor glanced up and stared at Piggot as she slowly pushed past Legend. She stared at Dean as the colour drained out of his face. “Take a look at that.” The director pointed, and everyone turned to stare at the terrifying suit that Amy sat in for a moment, turning back when she continued. “Do you mean to tell me that you knew that the girl capable of twisting sea-weed into that was filled with self-loathing and hatred and who knows what else, and you didn’t see fit to tell anyone?” The words were loaded with such blatant disbelief that Taylor almost felt sorry for Dean.

“I-I, It was none of my—” Dean’s voice cut in and out, and eventually Legend spoke, cutting off the boys aborted attempts at speech and drawing the looks of mounting horror and confusion from him.

“We’re getting off track here. Rest assured that this is something that we will discuss with Gallant at length at a later time, but it’s of secondary concern to the tense situation that we find ourselves in. Suffice it to say that as far as the Protectorate and PRT are concerned, you are all free of any influence, be it Vigil’s or otherwise. With that in mind, I would like to suggest that we adjourn this meeting for now and agree to let tempers cool. Our procedures require that we investigate every aspect of this situation, including how it was handled.” The man flashed them all a comforting look. “This will take a day or two, and once we’ve figured out what’s going on, we can meet again and speak about everything, including our working relationship going further.”

Legend stared across the hall at Sarah and Taylor followed his gaze, watching most of the other heads turning in Lady Photon’s direction as well. Sarah’s expression hardened, and Taylor felt a pit
of nervous dread forming in her stomach, but eventually, Sarah offered Legend a careful nod before she responded.

“I won’t commit to anything until I’ve seen the report, but I’d be willing to give you time to assess things. I assume that we’re free to go?” Taylor glanced up at the figures arrayed across the stage, watching as the Triumvirate and Director Costa-Brown studied each other for a few moments before nodding.

“Yes, in truth,” Legend paused, glancing around the auditorium. “Most of you should head home. There’s little else to be done here tonight. Eidolon, Alexandria and I will deal with the patrols today, and our troopers will assume command of the forces in the city. Expect calls tomorrow, well later today, about returning to work Tuesday.” Legend paused, and the Chief Director spoke up, cutting in.

“We’re going to attempt to keep this investigation from disrupting the already tenuous situation in the city, and we’re hoping for your assistance with that, especially in regards to the press. Near as we can tell, they’re aware of some sort of operation going on tonight, but the details are still vague. I shouldn’t have to tell you what the details of tonight’s disaster would do if it were revealed that we were fighting amongst ourselves. Considering how isolated most of the incidents were, it shouldn’t be difficult to imply that we were dealing with local threats instead of tearing at each other’s throats.” Taylor glanced back at Sarah, watching as the woman pressed her lips into a thin line.

“I’d rather this didn’t tear the city apart, Sarah,” Taylor spoke softly when Sarah still said nothing and saw the older woman glancing at her before turning back to the Triumvirate with a sigh and nodding. Taylor looked at the group on the stage one last time before slipping to her feet. She frowned when Lisa waved her on instead of joining them and then sighed, turning to follow the rest of the capes out of the auditorium.

Tucked under an impressively large comforter with Victoria a short distance away, Taylor watched the blue and purple light of the television dance over her girlfriend’s face. The lack of focus in the other girl’s eyes told Taylor that Victoria was retaining about as much of the movie as she was, though the difference was that Taylor was distracted by the distance that Victoria was keeping between them, whereas Victoria was instead lost in her own dark thoughts.

Restraining the sudden desperate urge to say something, anything to garner Victoria’s attention, Taylor stared down at the container of Thai food in her lap instead. Using her fork to push the pad thai around, Taylor carefully teased out a roasted prawn with the sharp tines of her fork and speared the morsel, lifting it to her mouth.

The post-operation meal and movie had been Lily’s idea, something to help them cope with the post-adrenaline crash. None of them had eaten anything since lunch, the plan to go out for dinner after the dance having fallen through quite spectacular given the situation. Lily had dragged her off to procure the meal while Victoria had tidied up and Amy had disappeared into the bathroom to try and rinse off the lingering traces of whatever she’d been marinating herself in within that suit.

Taylor glanced over at Lily and Amy, studying them both quietly and chuckling as it became clear that literally none of them were actually paying attention to what was playing on the screen. Amy
had apparently barely touched her food before she’d passed out, and she seemed to be using Lily as a pillow. Lily sat as still as she could, gently holding Amy’s form and staring down at the numerous dark marks covering Amy’s bare shoulders and arms.

Amy had explained that the marks would fade in a day or two, and they were side effects from how the suit interfaced with her nervous system. She’d insisted that they be allowed to heal naturally, so that she could see the way that they developed to ensure that there were no other side effects from using the Sentinels as she had. Taylor had reluctantly agreed, much to the consternation of Victoria and Lily both. The bruises seemed mild, and they *certainly* didn’t seem to be impairing Amy’s ability to cuddle, something that Taylor felt a touch jealous of.

The rustle of shifting cloth as the blanket she’d been sharing with Victoria fell aside made Taylor turn and stare at the flutter of gold-blonde hair as Victoria disappeared from the room. Staring in her wake, Taylor was tempted to get to her feet, to follow, but she hesitated, wondering what she’d say, how she’d fix this. The sound of water running in the distance killed her motivation to move, and she’d let her shoulders slump.

After a few moments, Taylor forced herself to stand, gathering up the boxes off the table. She waved off the soft comments from Lily, the older girl in no position to be doing much of helping at the moment. She carried the leftovers into the kitchen and took her time carefully extracting them from their containers and placing them into Tupperware and tucking everything away into the fridge as neatly as she could.

Hearing the shower still running, Taylor busied herself with washing dishes until it stopped and the sound of feet padding across the floor above her reached her ears. Having finished up the cleaning, Taylor slipped out of the kitchen, peering in at Lily as the girl tenderly pushed Amy’s hair away from her face and watched her sleep. She was tempted to say something, to make a comment of some sort that might help the girls find their way, but she held her tongue. Getting involved here might not be the best idea.

Taylor turned and headed up the stairs. Instead of heading into their bedroom right away, Taylor moved into the bathroom. She stripped out of the pyjamas she wore and set the shower to going once more, waiting for the water to return to full heat before climbing in and showering quickly. She took her time ensuring that every last trace of the make-up was gone before carefully showering and doing her best to avoid getting her hair too wet in the process.

Once she was done, Taylor studied herself in the mirror as she towelled off carefully, taking extra care to dry off her hair and tuck it up into a towel to keep it out of her face. Slipping her glasses on and wrapping herself in her pyjamas once more, Taylor padded across the hall. She took a deep breath in the hall and then pushed open the door to her bedroom, trying and failing to paste a smile on her lips.

She immediately realized that she needn’t have bothered, since Victoria barely reacted, remaining where she’d been seated on the edge of the bed, staring forlornly at her hairbrush. Taylor studied the other girl for a few moments before slipping over and gently reaching out. She pulled the brush from Victoria’s unresisting fingers and slid up onto the bed and around behind her girlfriend. She slid as close as she dared and when Victoria didn’t move, Taylor brought up the brush and began to slowly run it through Victoria’s damp hair.

When Victoria’s shoulders tensed, Taylor paused, but resumed once the shoulders slowly relaxed. Taylor quietly hummed an off-key tune and shifted closer, losing herself in the task at hand. Slow, sweeping strokes, scalp to the tips of the hair, one section at a time. When Victoria finally spoke, it
was so soft that Taylor nearly missed it.

“How can you stand to be close to me.” The words were laced with such bitter sadness that Taylor was at a loss. She swallowed nervously and then said the first thing that came to her mind, attempting to defuse the situation with a hint of humour.

“Well,” Taylor spoke softly and continued to drag the brush through Victoria’s hair, studying the back of her head. “You smell quite nice, and it’s actually rather pleasant being around you. I’m also sort of fond of that cuddling thing that you do sometimes, it’s really-” Taylor trailed off when Victoria turned to stare at her, eyes narrowing.

“Taylor, I’m being serious.” Victoria’s tone was sad and weary, and Taylor tried her best to smile.

“I was too, Vic, I-” Taylor saw the way the girl’s jaw clenched, and she sighed, dropping the teasing and speaking softly. “Vic, what makes you think that I wouldn’t want to be close to you? You have to know how I feel about you by now.” Taylor spoke earnestly, staring into Vic’s eyes. She watched the welling guilt and fear in those eyes until Victoria turned away.

“Taylor, you shouldn’t want to be near me. Everything that happened tonight was my fault.” Shifting closer, Taylor reached out and touched Vic’s shoulder, swallowing when the other girl quickly shook her hand off. “It was! You fucking heard Dean, it was just like how Amy described me without my aura. He was-” Taylor reached out again and grabbed Vic’s shoulder and pulled her back around, cutting off the words spilling from the blonde girl’s lips.

“Vic! You don’t know that that’s what it was. And even if it was? That doesn’t make any of this your fault.” Taylor saw the way that Victoria’s eyes hardened and she bit her lip.

“Taylor, you don’t understand-” Vic’s voice was low and weary, and Taylor let out a bitter laugh, cutting in quietly.

“I don’t understand, Vic? Me? Of course, I understand. My mom was killed in a car accident, you know, Vic? She was talking on the phone when she died, Dad banned cell phones cause of it. What most people didn’t know was that I was the one on the other end of that line...” Taylor stared at Vic, watching the way the girl’s expression finally softened.

“Taylor that’s different-” Vic tried, and Taylor rubbed her face.

“Yeah, Vic, it is different. You know why? Because you had no agency in what happened to you. You’re as much a victim of this aura as everyone else that was affected by it. But for me? I chose to make that call. I knew she was driving, and I could have waited till she got home, but I chose to be selfish ’cause I wanted to hear my mom tell me that things were okay. And instead, I had to listen to her screams.” Taylor stared at Vic quietly, studying the girl’s pale features.

“What Dean did, Vic? That was on Dean, no matter why he felt the way he did. Your aura didn’t force him to lie to people or to attack us. It didn’t force him to ignore your concerns. Your aura didn’t make Armsmaster listen to him or the people that listened to him. And your aura certainly wasn’t the massive threat they were hoping to contain. You didn’t deserve any of what your aura did to you, Vic, and you shouldn’t have to feel guilty because you tried to save yourself from suffering under it.” Taylor reached out and gently cupped the older girl’s cheek, staring into her eyes as they began to glimmer with moisture. “You have nothing to feel guilty about, Vic.”

“T-Taylor,” Victoria let out a wet hiccup as she did her best to hold back tears. “I-...everyone that
loves me ends up going crazy, Taylor. What sort of future could I have, could we...” Taylor stared into Vic’s eyes, studying the naked fear there. Shifting nervously in place, Taylor took a deep steadying breath before leaning closer and opening the connection between their minds, studying Victoria’s face, observing her reactions. This time, she didn’t hold back from the warmth that those features filled her with, instead choosing to revel in it and share that warmth down the link. When the vulnerability and awe washed over Victoria’s face, Taylor spoke softly.

“I’m doing okay so far, Vic, so maybe don’t get so bogged down in what-ifs?” Taylor stared at Victoria, watching as the girl processed that, swallowing quietly. Taylor tilted her head to the side as Victoria opened and closed her mouth a few times trying to come up with something, anything to say.

“I-I…” Victoria paused and wet her lips, and a flicker of amusement washed back into Taylor as Victoria’s nervous expression shifted to one of mischief. “I-I guess it’s lucky for me that you were already crazy before I got here?” Taylor watched the nervous expression on Victoria’s face for a few moments before chuckling and deciding to play into the out that Victoria had attempted. She watched as the older girl’s body relaxed a bit and a wave of relief washed through her.

“Oh, really?” She commented with mock affront, grinning at Victoria’s nervous expression. She watched the nervousness grow when she set the brush aside and when Victoria tried to move, Taylor lunged, tackling her to the ground and landing atop her. Taylor smirked as she pinned the older girl down, straddling her and then casually leaning close. “Crazy am I, hrn? Crazy like a fox, maybe.” Taylor grinned as she reached out, and before Victoria could squirm away, Taylor attacked, her nimble fingers dancing over Victoria’s sides precisely.

Taylor’d discovered that one of the more... amusing side effects of Victoria’s shield’s constant activity over the last few years had made her uncommonly... sensitive to certain kinds of touch that the protection hadn’t automatically allowed through. Essentially, with her shield up it was impossible to tickle Victoria, but without it, she was one of the most ticklish people that Taylor had ever met, and she abused this bit of information with an utter lack of mercy as Victoria flailed beneath her, going red in the face.

Taylor maintained the upper hand for all of a minute and a half before quite suddenly Victoria’s entire body heaved and she stopped reacting to the tickling. She paused and flushed nervously when Victoria lay there panting and red-faced, staring up at her. When Victoria’s eyes narrowed, Taylor responded.

“It occurs to me that I might have acted with a distinct lack of-” When Victoria reached out, Taylor jumped away with an eep and leapt away, clambering over the bed. She barely made it a foot before Victoria was on top of her back, pinning her down. The fact that she still had ribs told Taylor that Victoria had released her shield, meaning that she could escape, but instead she lay there, listening to the sound of Victoria breathing near her ear. She expected Victoria to tickle her back, to say something silly, but the girl merely rested atop her and breathed quietly for several minutes.

“Did you mean it?” The words that broke the lingering silence surprised Taylor, not laced with mirth or teasing, but genuine, vulnerable fear. Taylor shifted and rolled onto her back, staring up at Victoria as the other girl moved to allow her to roll over without allowing her to roll away. Taylor didn’t respond right away, studying Victoria’s once more nervous features until she began to fidget, “Did you mean it? I just... I won’t be mad if you didn’t.”

“I did.” Taylor smoothly cut off Vic and watched the shock and wonder welling up in those blue eyes. When the fear didn’t immediately fade, Taylor gently moved to cup Victoria’s cheek with her
hand, smiling quietly. “I meant it.”

Victoria’s lips crashing into her own kept her from saying anything else, and the kiss lingered for several minutes until the older girl drew back to draw in a ragged breath, their eyes locking almost immediately.

“I,” Victoria tried once more, and Taylor was fascinated when a wave of determination seemed to push her through. “I, uh. Me too, Taylor. I-I love you too.” The words weren’t loud, or bold, but they got past her lips and Taylor lay there feeling the way her heart raced at the meaning behind them, one hand moving out to tangle in Vic’s shirt, dragging the older girl closer to silence any further stammering.

Chapter End Notes

[[Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeecccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccccc. Jesus that was a slog and a fucking half. Okay. 7.11 Finito. 7.x Nearly done, just need to the b-side that starts basically where uh, Taylor leaves the living room the second time and explores Lily’s stuff. =] Amy stuff. It should be fun. =]

We finally get to see Armsmaster’s evidence and conclusions, and his general impression of Taylor. More than that, we get a bit of explanation for some of the more egregiously out of character moments from earlier in the arc. We get to see how Armsy’s plan failed and what exactly has been going on with Tats.

And we get to see things come to a head only to be defused by the Triumvirate. =] Initially in planning Alexandria was going to be the one giving the debrief but as I was writing it occurred to me that it made more sense for Legend to do it. He’s more charismatic, he’s better liked, and he is, in fact, Armsmaster’s boss.

I’m off tomorrow and I’ve got shorter shifts this week so we can expect the b-side within the next couple of days. =] Till then, I look forward to your feedback as always.]]
Chapter Summary

[And thus ends arc 7.x, finally. Took my time with this one, my sister was down, and certain parts were a bit harder to get just right. But still! Enjoy the chapter, more notes to follow.]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 20th, 2011
Taylor’s house, Brockton Bay

Lily watched Taylor slip out of the room, her arms laden down with bowls and let out a minute sigh of relief. The awkward tension that had been lingering between her and Victoria had been almost palpable. This, combined with Lily’s growing nervousness over what Victoria would do if she ever snapped out of her malaise and actually noticed that Amy had basically ended up curling into her lap in sleep had made for a bit of a stressful evening.

Thinking of Amy drew her attention to the girl sleeping on her, and she studied the younger girl's peaceful features as they rested against her shoulder. Despite her worries, Lily was glad that Amy was getting some rest, the girl had looked utterly dead on her feet when she and Taylor had returned with food in hand. Despite this, Amy had accepted what Lily had chosen for her, even offered a satisfied smile as they’d ended up tucked into the opposite corner of the couch from where Victoria and Taylor were sat.

It wasn’t the best angle to see the television, but neither of them had paid much attention to the film anyway. Lily should have expected that with how tired she’d seemed that Amy’d barely make it through the first few bites of the food. It hadn’t taken long at all before the food was set aside, and Amy’s head been curled into her shoulder. That had been stressful enough, considering how close Victoria was and how the last week had gone, but then Amy’d muttered something about the cold and slid even closer.

Lily hadn’t been sure what to do when Amy had slid under her arm and curled even closer into her neck while the younger girl’s legs had ended up draped over her lap. She’d barely even considered pushing Amy off of herself. Instead, she ended up wrapping an arm around the smaller girl to support her and studying the dark marks evenly spaced up her arms and from the base of her neck and down into the back of her halter. Amy had been through a lot today, and Lily didn’t mind serving as her pillow or bed really, no matter how confusing it was for her.

Drawn from her thoughts by a rustle near the door, Lily blushed as she realized that her hand had been gently tracing up and down Amy’s arm. Halting her motions and glancing over, Lily caught Taylor as she vanished from the doorway, heading upstairs. She glanced at the movie and stared in confusion at the characters on display, not even knowing who they were. It was at least two in the morning at this point, and it’d be better if she got Amy into a real bed so that she could trudge her way back to her dorm.
She reached over and snagged the remote, carefully shutting the TV off before setting it aside and turning her attention to the slumbering healer. One hand lifted and gently nudged Amy’s shoulder, causing the girl to release a soft whine of disapproval. Lily felt Amy’s hand tangling in the fabric of her borrowed t-shirt, and she chuckled softly.

“Amy.” She tried gently, ignoring the muttered grumbling and gently shaking the girl again. “Amy, it’s late. We should get you into bed.” The girl muttered sleepily, and when Lily gently shook her again, she let out a soft sigh and quietly smacked her lips.

“Lily, m’tired. We can just sleep here.” The words were soft and clearly thick with sleep, and Lily blushed quietly, gently shifting much to Amy’s quiet disapproval.

“Amy if we slept like this, your back would very much disapprove come morning.” She stared down at the girl and then chuckled, moving to shift an arm down, carefully sliding it under Amy’s knees and keeping the other curled around her back. Amusement ghosted through at Amy’s petulant whine, but the girl didn’t struggle, and Lily carefully lifted to her feet and carried Amy carefully through the living room and up the stairs.

She was surprised at how light Amy was, but she was more surprised by the vulnerability and fragility that Amy so rarely displayed. The girl seemed to think that she had to be larger than life. She was the biokinetic, the great healer; she had to fill a room, or people would walk all over her. But at times like this, when they were alone, Lily could see the reality under that mask. The dark bags under Amy’s eyes hinting at the scarcity of sleep she got, and how thin she felt under the loose pyjamas. The way that Amy’s tiny hands which could reshape trees into gorillas felt so small as they gripped Lily’s shirt as if terrified that she’d vanish at a moment’s notice.

Lily reached the top of the stairs, glancing in the direction of the sound of running water in the bathroom, then peering over at the light peeking out from under the door to Taylor and Victoria’s bedroom. It took a bit of doing to brace Amy in her arms so that she could get one hand free to open Amy’s door and she carefully slipped in, coming to a stop at the edge of the bed. She gently lowered Amy down onto the bed and took a few minutes, disentangling Amy from herself as gently as she could. She glanced over to the door, finding it difficult to just take the first few steps that would lead her home. She stood there, thinking of what she’d need to do. Her car was still with the PRT, so if nothing else, she’d need to a call a cab, and then-

“...Lily. Where-” The words were gentle and laced with exhaustion and Lily glanced down at Amy, staring at the girl’s eyes glimmering in the moonlight. She moved to stand back a bit, blinking when one of Amy’s hands slid out and grasped something by the head of the bed. Soft crimson faerie lights flickered to life around the metal frame of the girl’s bed, leaving Amy’s lumpy shape under the blankets more visible, the light oddly warm as it danced over Amy’s pale, freckled features. She stared down at the younger girl, flushing at the intensity in the other girl’s eyes.

“Amy.” She said softly, taking a step closer and gently dropping to her knees at the edge of the bed. She curiously studied the dark eyes staring back at her, trying to decipher what sort of emotions might be lingering within them. “You’re in bed. You sort of passed out pretty quick after we settled down…” Lily paused and bit her lip quietly, glancing toward the door. “It’s late…” She tried, pausing when she felt that hand gripping her shirt again, she turned to study Amy’s suddenly concerned features. “...Amy.” She tried, pausing when Amy responded quickly.

“I-” Amy took a breath and steadied her sleepy features as best she could. “Don’t go… please. I just.” Amy shifted closer. “I’d feel better if I knew you were close. It’s late, right…” Amy stared up at her and Lily considered the girl on the bed. Having every intention of leaving, she gently disentangled the hand from her shirt and pushed herself to her feet, opening her mouth to speak. The
expression that drifted over Amy’s face killed the words in her throat, and she stood there, staring at the convoluted mess of emotions on the younger girl’s face, her heart clenching.

This was a bad idea, Lily understood that, and she also understood that she should politely excuse herself and go home. And yet, she couldn’t bear to see the hurt visibly ghosting around Amy’s features, and before she knew it, she was inspecting the borrowed jeans that she was wearing, admitting that they’d be uncomfortable to sleep in. Taking a deep nervous breath, Lily carefully unhooked the button on the jeans and let them fall away. Stepping out of the pants, Lily glanced up to see an entirely different set of emotions on Amy’s face as the girl’s eyes drifted over her bare legs. Lily felt her cheeks darkening despite being well aware that the borrowed shirt was long enough to preserve her modesty.

Two steps carried Lily to the edge of the bed, and she stood there, staring down at Amy’s confused face painted with that diffuse red light. After a moment of lingering silence during which she realized that Taylor’s shower had ended and she had probably already gone to bed, Lily spoke softly, leaning toward Amy.

“Move over.” She found herself smirking when Amy finally seemed to snap out of her stupor, quickly shuffling back on the small bed. Carefully drawing up the large blanket, Lily took a seat on the edge of the bed and slid in under the covers, getting comfortable. After a moment of laying there and practically feeling Amy’s gaze burning into her, Lily carefully rolled over and stared back at Amy, the new position on the bed leaving the girl’s face lined in shadows as she was backlit by the lights woven into the frame of the day-bed.

Lily let the eye contact linger, peering into the inky green depths of Amy’s eyes, waiting to see if Amy would say anything, do anything. Instead, the silence dragged out between them for nearly ten minutes, their breathing the only sound in the room. Lily had already begun to doubt her choice, and she’d almost convinced herself to climb back out of the bed and just go home when Amy’s form shifted forward.

One moment, they’d been on opposite sides of the mattress, staring at one another and then Lily had frozen when Amy’s face burrowed against her chest, the girl’s hands gently gripping her, holding onto her tight enough that Lily wondered if her temptation to escape had been visible somehow. Lily slowly relaxed, feeling the minute shaking in Amy’s form as the girl clung to her. Letting out a gentle sigh, Lily wrapped the smaller girl in her arms, holding her closer and inhaling the apple-laced scent of Amy’s shampoo.

Lifting one hand, Lily dragged her fingers gently through Amy’s hair, feeling as the other girl’s shaking gradually stopped, and Amy seemed to slowly melt against her frame, though the iron-fisted grip on her shirt remained through it all. Lily listened to Amy as the girl’s breathing slowed, though she could tell that Amy hadn’t been lost to slumber yet. Lily wasn’t surprised when the girl’s voice drifted out, somewhat muffled by the fabric of her shirt.

“Lily, about earlier, I-” The words Amy uttered were laced with exhaustion, and Lily shifted closer, tightening her arms around Amy and gently kissing the top of her head.

“Amy, it’s fine. Just sleep. I’m not going anywhere.” Lily listened as Amy took in a deep breath as if she might argue, but after a few moments, the other girl let out a long quiet sigh and curled closer. This time, Lily listened quietly as Amy’s breath slowly evened out, the hands gripping her shirt only loosening marginally as slumber overtook her. Despite her misgivings, Lily found this oddly heartwarming and she curled closer, letting the scent of clean skin and apples carry her into her own blissful slumber.
"Lily” The whimpered plea drew her blearily from slumber and Lily opened her eyes, staring down at Amy’s form as it still clung to her, gripping her shirt in a death grip and holding on for dear life. Reaching out a hand, Lily blinked quietly as the girl shook softly under her fingers and curled closer, muttering softly in her sleep. “L-Lily, w-wait, please... don’t go.” The whispered words cut through her, and she shifted closer, speaking gently.

“Shhh. I’m here Amy; I’m not going anywhere.” She leaned closer, wrapping her arms a bit tighter around the smaller girl. One hand drifted up and tangled in the chestnut locks on the girl’s head, and she watched as the soft words and the gentle touch stilled Amy’s muttering and caused her to ease back into a peaceful slumber. Lily studied the sea of dense freckles over Amy’s cheek and along the curve of her neck, the faint hints of silver light from the moon beyond the window across Amy’s pale skin leaving the dark marks lit in stark contrast.

Unable to drift back off, Lily lay there quietly cradling Amy in her arms for what seemed like an hour, carefully watching the smaller girl drift into a deeper slumber. She was fascinated by the girl’s mannerisms when she was like this, alone and unwatched the girl seemed to shrink back into herself, looking so much smaller than she typically did when they stood together. The lingering hint of distrust and worry that often ghosted around the edge of Amy’s façade had long since faded and the girl seemed relaxed.

Not necessarily at peace, however. Lily doubted that a warm pair of arms would be all it would take to put Amy at ease, but there was a certain air about the slumbering Amy that it seemed the pervasive exhaustion that was so often draped around her was lessened a bit. Lily imagined that it was difficult being on guard so constantly, and part of her hoped that her presence soothed that need from Amy, that the girl trusted her enough to let her watch her back.

Her thoughts drifting in lazy circles, Lily quietly lay there watching until the sunlight began to slowly drift its way over the wall behind Amy’s sleeping form. The growing pressure on her bladder convinced her that it might be time to move and she managed to gently wriggle free of Amy’s slackening grip.

Sitting up carefully, Lily set her bare feet to the floor and padded over to her discarded pants, taking a moment to slip them on, glancing back toward Amy’s dozing form as she zipped them up. She stood there with a curious smile on her face as the young girl’s brow furrowed, and she shifted over, curling into the warm spot that Lily had left in her wake. Part of her was tempted to just crawl back into bed, but instead, Lily turned and headed toward the door, padding out and into the hallway.

She vanished into the bathroom and took a few minutes to use the facilities and wash her face, running a brush through her hair before slipping back out and padding back toward the bedroom where Amy still slept. Lily came to a stop in the doorway, staring at Amy’s slumbering form, watching with an amused smile as the girl reached out, seeking her and dragging a pillow closer to cling to as a substitute when she couldn’t find her. She leaned on the doorframe, doing her best to resist the urge to just crawl back into bed with the other girl and spend the rest of the day sleeping.

The faintest hints of music drifting up the stairs drew her attention, and as she turned her focus that direction, the sound of movement from below became obvious. Lily turned and padded down the stairs, slipping toward the sound of the music, finding herself stood in the doorway of the kitchen.

A subtle wave of bemusement washed through her as she loomed in the doorway, staring at Victoria as the blonde girl quietly danced around the kitchen in a pair of shorts and a tank top. Lily opened her mouth to say something, anything, but the words died as the song dropped, and Victoria continued to sing along under her breath as she casually measured out dry ingredients and smoothly
deposited them into the bowl, moving with practiced ease around the kitchen.

“Finally, someone let me out of my cage, now, time for me is nothing, ’cause I'm countin' no age.”

Lily stared in fascinated wonder as Victoria continued to work, slipping over to the fridge, drawing out the milk carton. She then leaned up onto her tip-toes to open up the cupboard over the refrigerator, grabbing a measuring cup, carrying both to where she’d been working, setting them down as she continued to sing softly.

“Nah, I couldn't be there, now you shouldn't be scared, I'm good at repairs, and I'm under each snare, intangible, bet you didn't think, so I command you to, panoramic view. Look, I'll make it all manageable-”

Lily continued to stare in a mixture of fascination and amusement as Victoria continued her display, though the girl screeched to a halt when she spun toward the table to locate a lost whisk and found herself being watched, the words she’d been saying grinding to a halt, though the rapping continued in the background. Lily and Victoria stood silently, staring at each other for almost ten seconds before Lily let out the tiniest snort which saw Victoria’s cheeks flaring red.

Tensing, Lily waited for the harsh comment, or the angry question about where she’d spent the night, but Victoria merely let out a huff, muttered something under her breath about good taste being subjective and turned to start whisking up what Lily assumed was some sort of batter in the bowl. She stood there, awkwardly watching Victoria work as the music continued to drift around them.

“You gonna stand there, or come and help? We’re doing pancakes.” Lily started at the comment and then she padded across the cold tiles and moved over to peer down at the batter that Victoria was mixing by hand with evident fascination. Gertie had made pancakes from scratch a few times, but it was usually a special occasion sort of thing. “There are chocolate chips in the cupboard by the sink there, in a jar with a hinged lid, it says cornmeal… for some reason. Grab them for me? And uh, you can get the griddle warming.”

Lily nodded quickly, moving over toward the cupboard in question, pulling out the jar labelled ‘cornmeal’ and popping it open to find it half full of chocolate chips. She reached in, snagging a couple, and popped one into her mouth before handing the jar over to an amused looking Victoria. She headed over toward the stove and checked the various cupboards, frowning when she couldn’t find what she was looking for.

“Oh, Victoria?” She glanced up, smirking over at Victoria as the blonde continued to bob in place, adding a handful of chips to the batter, mixing them in and then adding more. She glanced in Lily’s direction before waving to the cupboard on the other side of the stove. “It’s in that one, but it’s a pan, just flat… You’ll see what I mean.”

Blinking, Lily closed the cupboard, moving over to what she’d assumed was a small utility closet. Opening it revealed the broom, mop and dustpan that she’d expected, but hooks had been installed into the side of the cabinet, and a number of fascinating-looking pans hung there. She studied them before finding a flat square pan that seemed like what Victoria was indicating, so she reached out to grab it.

When the pan nearly slipped out of her hand, she let out a loud ’oof,’ snapped her other hand out to catch it and grunted as she hefted it up. It had to weigh at least five pounds. Getting the pan under control, Lily looked over to see Victoria smirking in her direction. She adjusted her grip and flipped up the griddle, moving over and setting it on one of the larger elements on the stove.
“One doohickey below medium should do it. It'll take a bit to heat up.” Lily reached over, carefully setting the dial and then padded back over to where Victoria had finished with the bowl and was rinsing off her utensils. Lily reached out and snuck away a tiny scoop of batter and popped it into her mouth, earning a whack on the head with the wooden spoon that Victoria had been cleaning. Lily raised her hands in surrender, smirking and backing off at the threatening follow up wave, ending up leaning against the edge of the table.

“So,” the word was soft and curious, and when Lily glanced over, Victoria was carefully drying the re-washed spoon with a towel, staring down at it as she spoke. “So you spent the night, hm?” Lily shifted quietly, wondering how to react. The question lacked the vitriol or the suspicion of the last week, but there was something… dangerous there. Turning in place, Lily stared down toward her feet and spoke quickly.

“She uh, asked me to stay. When I was putting her to bed after everything. She seemed kind of shaken up.” Lily spoke quietly, glancing over and watching as Victoria carefully finished drying the utensil, setting it away and then turned to study her with those piercing blue eyes.

“Amy’s always been kind of… clingy after missions. She’s pretty decent about keeping her cool when the chips are on the table, but once she crashes, she uh.” Victoria paused and frowned in thought, walking over to the stove and holding a hand over the griddle, checking how warm it was before moving to the fridge, pulling out eggs. When she held them up and wiggled them in an invitation, Lily moved, grabbing them and the butter from the refrigerator. She set them all down as Victoria resumed speaking and proceeded to search for a frying pan.

“I uh. I guess it all sort of hits her at once when the danger has passed? What could have happened?” Victoria frowned and moved to collect bacon from the fridge and Lily set to work, dancing around Victoria as the girl cooked the bacon. “It’s probably a good thing that you stuck around; she would’ve been up with nightmares most of the night otherwise.” Lily worked in silence, considering the words that Amy had whispered into her chest and frowned down at the scrambled eggs in her pan.

Things got a bit more hectic as Victoria split her attention between the bacon and the pancakes, and Lily finished with the eggs and then puttered around, getting bread toasted and buttered. They had just finished breakfast in time if the footsteps slipping down the stairs was any indication. Drying her hands with a towel, she glanced over to see Amy coming to a stop at the door to the kitchen staring in at her with a look of relief on her face. They lingered in silence, staring at each other until Victoria coughed and chuckled before heading toward the door.

“I should go wake up Taylor.” The words were laced with faint amusement, and Lily felt her cheeks darkening. She turned to the dishes on the counter, moving them toward the table, setting the toast and bacon down, before going back for the chocolate chip pancakes and scrambled eggs. When she glanced up, Amy was slipping around the table toward her and Lily studied Amy’s face, taking in the dark circles under her eyes and the way she shuffled closer.

“You still look dead on your feet, Amy,” Lily commented faintly, moving to pull out a chair, smiling when Amy dropped into it. She sank into the chair next to it, speaking quietly as she put together a plate for herself. “Maybe after breakfast you should try for another nap? You did a lot yesterd-”

“I thought you left.” The words cut across her and Lily blinked quietly, turning to stare over toward Amy, her eyes dancing over the girl’s features, trying to find something, though even she wasn’t sure what she was looking for.

“I had to go to the bathroom, and on my way back I heard some music from down here. Your sister was working on breakfast, and I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to help out.” She spoke quietly,
swallowing nervously as Amy’s eyes dragged over her own face in search for something. After a few moments of intense mutual observation, Victoria and Taylor’s footsteps coming down the stairs broke the moment, and Amy smiled tiredly in her direction before turning toward the food, putting together her own plate.

Lily glanced toward the door as Taylor slid in, returning the young girl’s gentle smile. Taylor marvelled over the food and made a show about checking to see if it was poisonous, much to Victoria’s consternation. Said consternation only escalated when Victoria pointed out that Lily helped, and Taylor had teasingly taken a huge bite and commented that anything that Lily had a hand in should be edible. They’d all dissolved into chuckles, and for the rest of the meal, Lily’s thoughts had drifted away from whatever was growing between her and Amy, and she settled for soaking in the almost familial breakfast.

Lily watched as Taylor let out an exaggerated grunt as she dragged herself to her feet, leaving the step they’d both been sitting on and striding toward her car as it pulled up into the driveway and came to a stop. Lily watched both of the car’s front doors swinging open to disgorge Lisa and the older Latino woman that served as Taylor’s handler. Taylor and the woman began to speak softly as Lisa paddled around the car.

Lily turned back to the collection of bags that she had next to her on the stoop, a bag with her dress in it, another bag holding a few things she’d forgotten to pack up before they’d left to pick up Amy and Victoria last night. She opened the second bag, verifying everything was there, quickly moving the brush and make-up around, checking that her shoes were indeed tucked into the bottom.

Other shoes slapping on the pavement drew her gaze over to settle on an exhausted-looking Lisa as she started to climb up the steps. Lily returned the half-hearted wave that Lisa offered, and watched worriedly as the girl paused by the door, taking nearly a minute to find her keys. She opened her mouth to point out that the door wasn’t locked when it suddenly swung open. The incoming wood caused the Thinker to stagger back to avoid getting brained, and a squeak from within revealed Amy standing in the doorway, staring in confusion at Lisa.

The two girls stared at each other for a moment before Amy stepped to the side and Lisa staggered in. Lily watched her back as she padded straight toward the stairs and climbed them in silence before her eyes flicked over to Amy. The girl was also following Lisa’s ascent with her eyes, though it wasn’t long before Amy turned back and slid out onto the porch, closing the door in her wake.

Lily glanced down at the bags in front of her again, carefully tugging them around and setting them between her legs on the top step, nervously fidgeting with them as Amy padded up beside her and lowered herself to take a seat on the step. Staring down, Lily’s thumb and forefinger gently dragged over the smooth plastic of the handles of one bag, staring at the dark grey material, waiting for Amy to say something.

“So uh, it’s pretty clear that considering everything, that we’re taking the day off, yeah? Me and Victoria didn’t have any exams today, and we can afford to miss a day of our college stuff...” Amy spoke quietly, and Lily glanced over, staring over at the brunette as she fiddled with the simple t-shirt she wore, shoulders shrugging up as she spoke. “Victoria suggested a movie marathon, something silly like Back to the Future maybe, to laugh at. We’ve got all those leftovers too, so that should work for lunch, and we could maybe do some barbecue for dinner...” The girl paused, glancing over at her hopefully.

Lily stared quietly at Amy, considering the girl’s hopeful face. Part of her was tempted to give in,
grab her regular clothes from the car and change into them, go back in and spend all day with Amy. Part of her understood that could mean something that it’d be so easy to just give in and jump into this, but another part of her was utterly terrified at the idea. She studied Amy’s face, feeling her heart clench, and she glanced down at her hands, speaking quietly.

“It was a pretty intense day yesterday, Amy. I think I might need a chance to go back to my place. Take a shower, clean up and maybe take a nap.” She spoke softly, quietly scratching the plastic with her nail once more, tensing and waiting to see if Amy would get upset. She didn’t want to go, really, but she needed to process, she needed to figure out where she stood. Glancing over, she took in Amy’s falling expression and frowned, speaking softly. “Amy, it’s not.”

“I get it,” Amy tried gently, and Lily glanced over at the girl, her heart sinking and fluttering in equal measure. The conflicted feelings startled her, and she bit her lip, but something must have shown because the tentative look on Amy’s face stilled after a few moments, and she offered her a sad little smile. “I do get it, Lily. I can see the need to just, you know, breathe.” The girl blew out a long sigh and glanced over toward where Taylor was still speaking quietly with her handler by the car.

Lily turned and followed her gaze, staring at the two figures and wishing that they’d finish up their chat already. As the silence lingering between her and Amy started to feel almost oppressive to the point that she was tempted to just get up and head over so she could get out of here, Amy’s voice cut across her thoughts once more.

“So… Lily.” The words were uttered in a firm, oddly focused tone and Lily turned to look at Amy, studying the determined set of her features as she stared at the path. “Back at the dance, we were sort of in the middle of a conversation, when everything happened,”

“I know, Lily. But... I want to.” Lily felt her heart started to beat, and she swallowed nervously, shifting quietly and grabbing her bags. She glanced toward the car, moving forward as if to stand, freezing when Amy’s hand settled on her arm. “N-not now, I can see that you need to deal with… stuff. It’s been a hectic day, but uh… Wednesday?” She spoke quickly, Lily nervously dropped back down to the step, studying Amy’s face curiously.

“Wednesday?” She watched as the girl nodded firmly, sitting up a bit straighter.

“My last exam is on Wednesday. I’ve got to do two hours of healing after class and stuff, but after? I don’t have class on Thursday, so I can stay up a bit later. Just. We could have dinner or something and... talk.” Amy stared at her quietly, and Lily shifted in place, feeling Amy’s focused gaze pinning her to place. She stared nervously back, trying to decipher what she was seeing in her eyes. “Lily, I just... please?” Taking a deep breath, Lily nodded resolutely.

“Wednesday?” She watched as the girl nodded firmly, sitting up a bit straighter.

“I uh… okay, Wednesday.” Seeing Amy’s lips curling into a smile, Lily offered her own tentative smile in return. A flicker of movement in the corner of her eye drew her attention, and Lily glanced over, seeing Taylor headed her way, tossing a set of keys up into the air and catching them over and over as she walked. Amy’s hand released her arm, and she slid to her feet, taking a step or two before glancing back, still tempted to just stay. The amused smile on Amy’s face didn’t make it any easier to resist.

“I’ll text you.” The words were tentative, and Lily smiled when Amy nodded and shifted to get more comfortable on the stoop, leaning back on her hands. The pose caused the shirt’s sleeves to pull up, revealing the stark, dark marks on that pale, freckled skin and Lily frowned. “And, between all the fun, you should try to catch a nap too, Amy, you look exhausted still.” Amy opened her mouth as if
to say something, but she clicked her teeth shut a moment later.

“I’ll think of it.” Something about the tiny hint of a smile on Amy’s face as she spoke made her think that that wasn’t what the girl had initially intended to say. She stared at Amy trying to decipher the odd look on her face for a moment before a cough to her left startled her. Turning, Lily reached out, accepting the key ring from Taylor. She slid a finger into the keyring, twirling the keys nervously around it as she stared at the oddly mischievous look on the other girl’s face as she spoke.

“Alright Lily, Maria says she topped up your oil, but you’re good to go. And don’t worry, we’ll keep Amy from over-exerting herself.” Lily smiled softly at the indignant sound that came from Amy, turning and heading off as the indistinct argument started in her wake. She was in her car and driving home before she really realized it, her thoughts a tangled mess that she was having issues unravelling.

This task certainly wasn’t made any easier when an hour later, as she dried her hair in her room after her shower, her phone issued a ding and a message came across the line from Amy.

{This napping thing would be a heck of a lot more straightforward if you were here, Lily.} Lily stared at the words on her phone, dropping back onto her bed with a soft groan, crossing her arms over her face quietly and letting out a long whine. Though, in the privacy of her mind, Lily could admit, as she stared blankly at the roof of her dorm-room, that Amy was probably right.

Chapter End Notes

[So uh, things I learned today; ’That shitty double line thing and wiped out formatting thing that Google Docs does when you copy/paste it into SB can be fixed if you paste it into an ao3 rich text editing box first, and then copy it back into the box here. WHICH MAKES SHIT A HECK TONNE EASIER. Also uh, I’ve had to search up the school calendar for 2011 in Maine, and cross-checked a bunch of other stuff. (I’ve pushed back the uh, exam days 2 weeks to offset the time that the school was closed with Leviathan, but we’re almost done with working around High School Schedules, so that’s fucking great.

Lily/Amy stuff. Now I can imagine half of you pulling out your hair here, and to be honest I'd initially intended this scene to go differently, but uh, my friend person that generally helps me keep the girl's voices uh, authentic? She basically chimed in here and explained sort of where Lily's issues come from. And it is partly the Taylor thing, and now she's got even more questions about the discussion she overheard about Victoria, but that's only part of it. It sort of has to do with the fact that while Taylor/Victoria/Amy are all queer to varying degrees in this setting, they've all sort of come at it in rather odd ways compared to most teenage lesbians, and Lily, on the other hand has probably... not. She's got a supportive parent in Gertie, but there's the other two to consider, and the general culture around this kind of thing?

We'll sort of touch on this more in Interlude 23, where it's half Amy/Mel talking about stuff. (In Amy's bedroom since Mel's actually in town, which is amusing.) And Mel's going to help Amy understand where Lily's uh, issues might be coming from, and then we'll touch on it more early into Arc 8.x. Rest assured that I'm not gonna drag this out any worse then the Taylor/Victoria stuff, but it sort of... Lily's still not really in a place where she can trust things. I get the feeling that from what I've sort of gotten from 8.1's
super early planning stages, Lily's dating experience hasn't been great up to this point, in typical uh. Teenage Lesbian fashion, if that means anything. Anyway.

Interlude... 20? I think that's the next one? It'll be out Monday/Tuesday. I'll be putting them out every couple days, since they're shorter than actual chapters. In between I'll be enjoying a bit of time off, and taking the time to go back and deal with the proofreading that people have been doing. In any case, I'll still be around in the thread here, and I'm happy to chime in and I look forward to your guys input and comments as always. =].}
Interlude 20

Chapter Summary

[[Ooop, this ended up being a bit longer then I was expecting. There's clever exposition hidden in amongst it if you look real close. Hints about what's to come. =] Just to clarify in case it's a bit hard to understand, Prudence is Paige or Canary. She's mentally referring to herself as Prudence to help her keep up the new identity.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 19th, 2011
Downtown, Brockton Bay

Paige wouldn’t have tolerated this sort of treatment, Prudence admitted to herself. She’d have made a fuss and then shouted a curse word at the decrepit old man and then slammed the phone down on the base, but she wasn’t Paige anymore. She was Prudence, and Prudence needed this job. She couldn’t afford to slam this phone down, she needed the man on the other end of it to do her a favour and Prudence would attempt to convince the man to do what she needed.

Carefully holding the handset of the phone in place with her shoulder, Prudence gritted her teeth and made a mental note to acquire a handsfree headset at her earliest convenience. She’d have preferred to use one hand to hold the damn thing, but she currently needed both hands to manipulate the computer. She was splitting her focus between trying and failing to locate another electrician and listening as the ageing man on the other end of the line hemmed and hawed as he loudly moved metallic objects around.

The man, Darryl Crowe, was Enna’s first choice for an electrician and he’d initially agreed to come out tomorrow to replace the rest of the wiring necessary to get the office that Enna had purchased back in working order. Even now, only a single outlet in the outer office worked, and that had required that the desk that Prudence was using be crammed into the corner with her back toward the entrance, and her desk was currently littered with nearly half a dozen devices that had a collective effect of knocking out the power if more than two of them were used at a time.

Finding nothing promising in her search results, and finally having had enough of the man’s barely vocalized mutterings, Prudence leaned back in her chair, taking the phone in one and abandoning her efforts at the computer. She was splitting her focus between trying and failing to locate another electrician and listening as the ageing man on the other end of the line hemmed and hawed as he loudly moved metallic objects around.

The man’s muttering and movements slowed, and then stopped and the line was utterly silent. Prudence stared at the screen, considering whether she should really do this. She bit her lip and then frowned, staring at the coffee maker that was pressed right up against the edge of her mousepad, and she felt her expression hardening as she clenched her free hand quietly.
“Look, Mister Crowe- Can I call you Darryl? We’re all friends here, right? You want to be my friend.” She spoke sweetly, staring at the dusty keyboard on the desk. The silence on the other end of the line lingered for a moment before the older man’s dazed voice began to speak laconically.

“Er, yes. That’s fine, dear. Er, friends, yes, we can be friends, sure.” Prudence stared at the screen quietly, her expression softening and then she crossed her legs, feeling the soft material of the no-nonsense tan slacks that she was wearing as her legs dragged over each other.

“Good, Darryl, you can call me Prudence, or er- Pru, then. Look, I know that you’re a busy man, Darryl, and I hate to do this, but it’s kind of an emergency you know? You checked the place out, and it’s kind of unsafe for me to be here like this, never mind how it affects our work. And you did agree to come out this week when we spoke last.” Prudence spoke softly, and the man sat in silence for a few moments. Prudence waited and felt her lips curling into a smile as the man’s voice softened, and he continued.

“Right… Er, Right....” The man let out a cough, and his voice assumed an almost grandfatherly tone as he began to shuffle the papers that were apparently within his reach. “Er. Sorry, got a bit scattered there, Pru. Wasn’t sure what I was thinking, honestly. A contract came through, and they wanted to be bumped to the head of the line, but the work at your place should only take a few hours, I could head over there in the morning, you know, make sure that everything was okay.” Prudence nodded softly, letting out a quiet sigh.

“Thanks, Darryl. You’re a lifesaver.” The man’s voice drifted back up the line, his tone assuming a sort of faux gruffness known well to grandfathers the world over. Prudence blinked quietly and was reminded of her own grandfather, hazy memories of sitting on the older man’s knee as he taught her to play guitar bubbling up in the back of her mind as the electrician responded.

“Well, it’s nothing, Pru, I’d hate to think of a pretty young lady like you getting a shock, or that nice boss of yours losing his business. And you’re right, I did promise. Listen, dear, it is Sunday afternoon, and the wife says that dinner will be ready shortly. But I’ll call you tomorrow morning, and we’ll get over there first thing to get your place dealt with.” The man’s voice was subtly, and Pru smiled as she responded quickly.

“Right, thank you, Darryl. I’ll let you get going.” She smiled as she prepared to hang up, pausing when the man spoke.

“Like I said, not a problem. Good evening, and Pru? Make sure that you get something decent in you for dinner, yeah?” Prudence paused, frowning quietly as a flush of guilt drifted over her at the rather genuine impression of affection and concern in the man’s voice. Her voice lowered, and she quickly muttered her reply.

“I uh. I will Darryl. Thanks for the concern. Good evening.” She ignored the man’s gruff replay and bit her lip, reaching out and setting the handset back down on the phone and staring at it quietly. The low metallic chuckle from one side nearly caused her to jump from her chair, but the metal man’s penchant for attempting to surprise her had hardened Prudence, and she pushed back her chair, turning to offer a dark stare in Enna’s direction. Enna looked unrepentant as he leaned against the doorframe of his ‘office.’

Well, it was the room that would eventually be his office. In reality, it was an empty dark room that was filled with half-assembled office furniture, barely lit by the wide window that showed a fascinating view of the building across the street and barely let any sunlight in. Giving the
mechanical man a dubious stare, she flicked her eyes back down toward the phone and coughed nervously.

“Uh- How much of that did you hear?” She tried nervously, wondering what the man would say. Enna had been the only reason that she’d made it back across the border from Canada. He’d gotten her the fake IDs she’d used at the border, and the false identity that had come with it. He’d been the one that helped her change her appearance, and he’d constantly been coaching her on how to blend in, to avoid giving up the game. She wasn’t sure if he’d approve of her using her powers at all, never mind for such petty reasons.

“Long enough.” The amused words drifted from the mechanical man, and he stood up from where he’d been leaning, striding across the room toward her. “Good work, Prudence. You’re living up to your name.” He paused and considered her and Pru felt oddly naked as he continued to speak as if he could read her concerns like they were printed on the center of her forehead. “You’re a parahuman, Prudence, you’ll find that it’ll be impossible never to use your powers again, the issue now is learning to use them differently. The subtlety you just employed is a good example. We’ll have to think of other ways that your powers might work that won’t tip off the PRT or the Protectorate to your fugitive status.”

Prudence stared at him in wonder and fascination as the words penetrated, and she flushed quietly, considering the implications. She’d always assumed that her powers were merely an expression of her singing, but even just now she’d managed to express them through humming. Pru frowned, wondering if she needed to sing at all to use them or maybe she could learn with time to layer them into regular speech. Were the powers tied to the act of singing, or more linked to the mental state that she tended to drop into when she was-

“Prudence.” The voice cut through her thoughts, and she perked up, staring over at Enna as he stared down at her. She got the impression from the way that he’d shifted his pose, the ‘body language’ that the robot was using, that he had found her descent into her own thoughts rather amusing. The tall figure gestured toward the door to his half-assembled office.

“I’ve gotten as much done in there as I can stand for the moment and it seems like your work here for the day is done. Perhaps we can test out the rest of the amenities?” The man spoke curiously, and Prudence perked up as she glanced from Enna to the doorway and back. Apparently taking this as acceptance, Enna turned and headed toward the door. “Don’t forget your protective gear, Prudence.”

Slipping to her feet, Prudence made her way toward the cabinet that sat by itself across the office from the cluttered corner that contained her desk. Reaching into her pocket, she grabbed the key-ring there and pulled it out, carefully flipping through the various keys that she’d acquired, finding the right one and smoothly slotting it into the door and flipping it open.

The cabinet itself was a facade of sorts, the wooden panelling concealing the reinforced metal of the sides and doorway and, considering the contents, a bit of security wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Pru stared at the trio of weapons and the three dozen boxes of specially created rounds that were stored on the left-hand side, hidden behind a cage with code-lock that she didn’t have the password to. But on the left was what she was looking for.

Mechanical gauntlets and boots sat in specially shaped emplacements on the interior of the right side of the large cabinet. Prudence stared at them quietly before smoothly removing the jacket of her pant-suit, hanging it on the door of the cabinet, the smoothly unbuttoning the cuffs of her dress shirt and rolling both of her sleeves up. She took out one glove, gently sliding it onto her right hand. Closing
her hand into a fist activated the device, and it sized itself to fit her hand, metal expanding out of the
back of the glove and spreading up and over her right arm to cover her shoulder, leaving her arm
looking like it was shaped from banded metal.

Repeating the process with the other glove, Prudence watched the process unfold once more,
watching the metal vanish up her sleeve. Stepping out of the pumps that she’d been wearing, the
woman set both of the simple-looking boots on the ground and stepped into them. Wiggling her toes
triggered both devices, and Pru felt a shiver going up along her spine as the cold metal spread over
her legs, coming to a stop as it covered both of her knees. She stared into the cabinet at the final piece
of her ‘suit,’ though she left it in place.

Putting on the torso part would require stripping down, and Enna hadn’t attempted to hit her back
yet, so protection for her hands and legs would be more straightforward. Prudence took a few
moments to carefully unroll her sleeves, buttoning them both up and then reaching out and sliding
her jacket on once more, smoothing down her outfit. She considered herself in the reflective metal of
the cabinet’s interior. Besides the metallic gloves and boots, she wouldn’t stand out in the crowd
outside heading for their lunches.

With a nod, she shut the cabinet, listening for the sound of it locking and heading toward the door.
She stepped out into the dingy hall, closing the door of the office as the lights overhead shuddered
and blinked. She shook her head as she marched down toward the elevator at the end of the corridor.
Like the rest of the building, it was an antique, most of it tarnished brass with what had once been
piano ivory-white tiles lining the floor, though they were now dingy and cracked.

She carefully considered the aged panel and hit the button marked ‘P2’, watching the doors click
with loud ding before the sensation of movement washed over her. This had been the reason that
Enna had settled on such a decrepit building. The building’s manager had been all too eager to rent
them the entirety of the bottom level of the parking garage despite the fact that neither she nor Enna
actually possessed a vehicle.

With a ding, the elevator shuddered to a stop, and the tarnished doors spread open to reveal a large,
empty parking garage. The ramp across the way that had once lead up to the floor above had been
blocked off with a sizeable movable divider. Off to the left, a corner of the garage had been
converted into a make-shift workspace for Enna’s tinkering, but the bot himself was standing in the
middle of the space.

“Took you long enough.” His metallic voice drifted her way, and she strode across the floor toward
him, letting out an unamused snort as he turned to study her. “Just the gloves and the boots I’m
guessing?” he spoke, and she nodded smoothly, dropping into the ready stance he’d showed her,
grinning as he clapped mockingly for her. “Oh, she learns. Well then, let’s go.” He waved a hand for
her, assuming his own ready stance.

One foot planted flat, the other braced on the front half of it, Prudence observed Enna, her arms held
up in front of her, thumbs curled and fingers spread. She studied the way the mechanical figure stood
for a few moments before stepping forward and lashing out with an open hand strike. The metallic
gloves braced her hands, kept her fingers from breaking as they slammed into the reinforced metal of
Enna’s face, but the blow still stung.

Enna didn’t critique her strike so she moved on, thumb strike to the throat, eye strike, moving
through each technique that he’d showed her. When she’d exhausted the strikes, and no feedback
had been forthcoming, she moved onto elbow strikes, then kicks, their practice filling the cavernous
area with the echoing sounds of metal against metal. Prudence let her mind sink into the meticulous,
repetitive work, reveling in the simplicity of the exercise as her arms began to burn from the exertion.

Setting the hair dryer aside, Prudence stared at herself in the mirror, considering her hair carefully. She took a moment to lean in, carefully checking her hair, inspecting to see if the roots had begun to come in. It'd been about a week since Pru had touched up the colour, but the dye seemed to be holding. She’d checked for feathers every day at first, but now, she didn’t bother. Enna had pointed out that most birds required months to grow feathers, and she probably had some time, and she remembered when they’d first grown in, how small they’d been. She’d notice them before anyone else did.

Releasing her hair, Prudence stood up, checking her face in the mirror. She’d washed off her make-up in her post-workout shower, and she re-applied only the necessities. Something to even out her tone and a bit of work around the eyes and something for her lips. Deciding that her face was suitable, she ran a brush through her hair, got it to sit just right before slipping on the fake glasses that she’d taken to wearing. She stared at the face in the mirror, frowning at how this stranger had so quickly become her.

Ink black hair framed her face, cut into a chin-length bob that framed her face, dark, austere glasses on her nose. She looked different, serious. She looked like a woman named Prudence. Her once natural smile was gone, and she tended to keep her face neutral as best she could, her eyes behind the lenses dark and focused. Enna had suggested the radical change and the first time she’d seen herself in the mirror-like this, it’d been hard coming to grips that she was in effect someone else now.

But now she had come to appreciate the chance to change who she had been. She stared at this woman… at Prudence, in the mirror, as she slid into the simple casual outfit that Enna had suggested she don for the errand they’d be doing. As she slowly buttoned up the blouse, she idly wondered how the severe woman would have handled Marcus’ words. His insinuations.

She remembered her own pain, her own angry tears as she stared at the man that’d cheated on her. The man that had abandoned her and mocked her only to come back like that. She gritted her teeth as she remembered what she’d said in an unexpected surge of anger, and the consequences that had come her way because of it. She imagined the woman in the mirror in her place, standing opposite the screaming Marcus.

Pru had so many options to handle the man child. Her fists, her biting words with her powers or without them. She had so many ways of dismantling the man, and something told her as she stared at the pale face in the mirror, watching the idea that the corner of her mouth quirked up, that she’d have avoided any of them. With Enna’s lessons drifting through her mind, she understood that the most devastating thing that she could have done to Marcus in that changing room would have been to ignore him.

Pru would have laughed in his face, patted him on the cheek and then casually strode off, ignoring his angry words. She had the ability to fight him off, to convince him to leave her alone, she didn’t need to hurt him the way she’d been hurt. Paige stared at the woman in the mirror for a few moments longer before letting out an amused sigh and shaking her head.
She finished dressing, quickly donning a pair of fitted black pants and some nice socks before shutting out the light in the bathroom and stepping into the main room of her apartment. It wasn’t terribly spacious, but it was paid for by Enna, so she wasn’t complaining. She was merely thankful that she had her own space. She’d initially expected that she might have to live with the mechanical parahuman, but Enna apparently didn’t sleep and didn’t relish the idea of having to work around her sleep schedule, so she’d been allotted this space.

Moving quickly across the large room that served both as a living room and a kitchen, Prudence ducked into her bedroom and flipped on the lights. Most of the space was dominated by her comfortable bed where it rested against the large windows that showed the darkened streets outside, but there had been enough space left over to the house a small dresser. Moving over, Prudence tugged it open, opening the tiny safe she’d stored in the top shelf and taking out some cash that she added to her wallet.

Turning off the lights as she went, Prudence headed toward the doorway, slipping on her shoes and grabbing a comfortable light jacket to throw on before opening the door and stepping out into the hall. She locked the door in her wake and headed down the stairs. Coming to a stop at the ground floor, Pru straightened out her outfit, caught her breath, and then strode purposefully out of the stairwell and across the dingy lobby toward the doors. She opened the glass door, stepping out like she hadn’t just jogged down six flights of stairs.

She needn’t have bothered, Enna was standing a short distance away, staring out into the deserted street outside her building and talking into his phone calmly which meant he’d apparently missed her arrival.

“...I could, I would. But we’re not currently at a stage where I would feel comfortable revealing myself to them.” He paused, listening to the response on the line before chuckling. “Why? Well, there are several reasons I could think of off the top of my head that you wanted to make this your problem. First of all? I imagine that you’re eager to see the return of your associate. His debt to me is only repaid when I say it is, and I imagine that you’ve been suffering from the lack of his assets despite the others that you’ve acquired to replace him.” Enna paused and checked his ‘nails’ in an almost human affectation that sort of threw Prudence where she loomed.

“Secondly, considering the sort of threat that is coming your way, I had thought that you might want to ensure that someone else was there when it hit? Unless you think that you could defeat this particular wave of red on your own.” The mechanical figure paused and hummed as he listened. He stared upwards at the sky as the voice on his phone apparently spoke a few moments later, responding quietly with an amused chuckle. “You’ve got some serious scales, but considering that I am asking you for a favour, I suppose that I could offer a consultation. Ensure that my message gets to its intended destination, and you’ll receive the tip that you’ve been waiting for.” The man waited, listening but said nothing further, closing the nearly antique flip phone and smoothly crushing it in his hand.

“Prudence. All set?” His head turned toward her, eyes glowing in the darkness as he approached the nearest garbage can and dropped the bits of plastic and electronics in it. She stared at him and realized that he’d almost certainly been aware of her approach. She loomed in the light of her lobby falling through the glass walls and door that separated her from it for a few moments, considering asking him what that was about. The almost expectant tilt of his head told her that that was what he was waiting for, but after a few moments, she shook her head and stepped out into the shadows.

“Yes, but you’ve yet to mention where we’re going. Also, what sort of business meeting do we need to attend that happens at eight o’clock in the evening on a Sunday?” She strode up to him, watching
the subtle shift of his head, indicating his surprise. Taking the tiny victory, Prudence moved to quickly fall into his wake as he strode along the street, heading toward the bright lights nearby that indicated a more well-travelled cross-street.

“I’ve arranged a meeting with a local information broker for myself, but I’m mostly dragging you along because you need to do something besides sitting around your house watching TV when you’re not in the office.” Prudence opened her mouth to argue, but the look he gave her was oddly quelling, and she fell silent as she followed along. When she didn’t respond, he’d continue. “As for where we’re going? It’s a bar called Pax. I’m told that it’s a semi-decent pub, with a flair for Karaoke.”

“Enna, I can’t.” Pru tried to cut across quietly, slowing but the droid waved a hand indicating that she should keep up.

“Just because you’d prefer not to sing, doesn’t mean that you can’t enjoy the ambiance, and considering your interests, something tells me that you might enjoy the sort of people you’d meet in a place like that.” He stared at her as she joined him walking once more, lowering his voice as he continued. “Prudence, I didn’t rescue you from the back of that truck so that you could spend your new life enshrined in a slightly less horrid prison. You’re free, you should make friends, let other people see that delightfully sharp wit of yours.” She stared at him for a few moments before letting out a nervous sigh and shrugging.

Falling into a companionable silence, the pair walked along the brighter streets, a few people stopping to stare at Enna’s gleaming scarred and pitted frame, though most merely gave him a surprised glance and continued about their days. Enna seemed to let the attention slough off, and before long, they were turning down a different side street.

It wasn’t terribly difficult to spot their destination as they walked along, the large neon ‘PAX’ overlaying a laurel wreath certainly standing out. Glancing toward Enna, Pru followed the taller man toward the bar, rolling her eyes when he smoothly opened the door and gestured her in. The place was packed, and as she pushed through the modest crowd, Prudence stared around in awe at the interior. If it hadn’t been for the people dressed in modern clothing, she might have imagined that she’d been shifted back in time by the aesthetic of the bar.

It had clearly once been a theatre, and great pains had been taken to maintain that antique silver screen aesthetic despite the change of venue. Linoleum gleamed beneath her feet as she walked upon it and brass poles and red velvet dividers sectioned off the dance floor from the booths to either side. The center of the massive lobby held what had once been the condiment stand and now served as a central bar, a half dozen figures dressed in simple black jeans and blue shirts slinging drinks visible within.

To the left, a large sign showed ‘Country/Western’ on a marquee and people were drifting in, and out of the entrance beneath it and each time the door opened, the voice of someone singing country music would drift out, an odd contrast to the steady thrumming beat coming down from overhead. Glancing over the sea of people and booths toward the marquee on the other side, she saw the word ‘Metal/Rock’ hanging there and chuckled.

Sadly, it didn’t seem that Enna was heading that way. She followed the gleaming man through the crowd that parted before them, and she paused as she glanced around, staring in confusion at the odd attire of the people that they passed. Costumes, not a lot, maybe one person in every ten, but there were people here in costume. She stared in confusion as she moved up to join Enna, speaking up to be heard over the music.
“Is this a cape bar?” She spoke softly, earning a chuckle from the robotic man as he nodded smoothly, heading toward the bar. She stared around in wonder as they rounded the condiment stand. An ostentatious looking stage dominated the wall of the lobby, though at the moment it sat empty, shimmering bluish figures projected onto it and miming out the music playing overhead. “I didn’t even know that cape bars were a thing.” The words were muttered almost to herself, and she idly wondered if she’d have gone to one before, had she known.

“They’re not exactly common, but I’ve seen a few, there’s actually another one in this city.” The words ghosted over her from Enna as he moved to lean on the bar. The music overhead came to a drifting halt, and a figure quickly emerged onto the stage, dressed in black slacks and a red shirt. “Most don’t last long because Parahumans don’t really get together well en masse. The ones that do last are typically like the other bar here in Brockton Bay. Powerful parahumans enforcing the peace with threats. From what I’ve been able to glean, Pax, on the other hand, is pretty unique.” Prudence glanced over at Enna as he spoke, but as his words faded and the fascinating music began to blast down overhead, she turned back to the stage.

The man casually strode up to the microphone, adjusting his shirt and getting comfortable. The shimmering images that’d been projected flickered out, and a trio of figures with instruments appeared. One dropped down behind a set of drums, and the other two lifted a guitar and a bass. As they began to ‘play,’ the music grew louder. The man shifted in place, glancing toward the dancers. Pru followed his gaze, taking in the dark-haired woman that met his gaze, grinning when she rolled her eyes, and the man winked, mouthing something away from the mic before stepping close and starting to sing.

‘What’s the deal with my brain?
Why am I so obviously insane?
In the perfect situation,
I let love down the drain.
There’s the pitch, slow and straight.
All I have to do is swing, and I’m a hero,
but I’m a zero.’

As the guy sang, Prudence grinned quietly, tucking her hands into her pockets. He wasn’t bad, better than most casual singers, and he certainly seemed to be getting behind the lyrics. She glanced toward his girlfriend, watching her cheeks darkening visibly as he drifted into the chorus. Feeling a bit like a voyeur, she glanced toward Enna speaking.

“So, what’s so unique about Pax?” Enna’s gaze drifted back from the singing man to her, and he crossed his arms resolutely.

“The owner. Also called Pax, apparently. She’s a parahuman. Has the ability to saturate a place with her power, some variant of a shaker or master effect. As long as you’re within her area of effect, violence is impossible. Can’t plan it, can’t think of it, can’t do it.” Enna glanced around and chuckled softly, gesturing to the crowd. “This is probably one of the few places in this city that the parahumans in this city can feel truly safe, inside their costumes or out of them.” Prudence glanced around in open fascination at the remarkable ease and comfort of the people dancing and talking in the various booths.

“Actually, I prefer Tara.” The amusement in the tone that drifted over both of them did almost nothing to still the shock and this time Prudence jumped, her heart beating as she spun to stare at the woman behind the bar. Straight blonde hair framed an unassuming face with dull blonde eyes. She
was dressed as casually as the rest of the bartenders, and she didn’t seem like the sort of person that could carry an operation like this on her back.

“Kynigos Enna.” Prudence glanced over, watching as Enna’s hand was offered out. The woman stared in fascination, offering it a quick shake and studying Enna’s angular features.

“Tara. Pax is what the Protectorate calls me since they prefer to assign us names. It was the bar’s name, so I just sort of inherited it.” The woman smirked when Enna laughed and shook his head.

“Indeed, I have often said that Cape Names are rather dehumanizing.” Prudence let out a loud groan as he started and the mechanical figure’s tirade ground to a halt, glancing at her and snorting. “Sorry, I can get on a bit of a tangent about this. I’ve personally managed to deter the PRT from using my assigned name, but I can understand your disinterest in such things. In any case, most people merely call me Enna. This is my assistant, Prudence.” He gestured to her and Pru straightened up as the blonde turned to her.

“Pru’s fine.” She commented, accepting the woman’s hand and shaking it quietly. The blonde gave her a cursory once over, and Prudence smirked a bit as she saw the way that the woman’s eyebrows rose just a touch before turning back to Enna.

“You’re here for a meeting with Lorne, right? He’s in his office.” When Enna nodded politely, the blonde bartender pointed toward a door that had been concealed in one of the walls, a pair of figures standing outside it. The man offered a quick thanks before offering Prudence a look that indicated that she should stay and stalking off. Pru glanced around at the dancers for a moment before the woman’s voice drew her gaze back in her direction. “So, what’s your poison? On the house.” The woman flashed her a natural smile when their eyes met, and Prudence straightened up a bit.

She opened her mouth and paused, considering the question and the slightly flirtatious eyes of the woman on the opposite side of the bar. Paige would have acted coy, played into things. She’d flirted with a few girls in the past over less. Prudence didn’t seem like the type to do that. She considered the question for a few seconds before the answer flitted over her mind, and she let her lips curl into an amused smirk as she leaned a bit closer, speaking softly.

“I buy my own drinks,” she stated softly, watching the girl’s expression shift as she drew out her wallet, casually plucking out a few bills. Glancing up, Pru met the woman’s eyes, lowering her voice a touch, speaking teasingly. “To start me off, and I’ll accept your recommendation for a drink. Something sweet.” She slid her wallet away, taking in the hint of colour on the woman’s cheeks as she set the bills on the bar. The woman swept them up and produced a glass, mixing several things into it and sliding it to her.

Prudence lifted it, taking a sip and blinking at the sweet candy apple taste. She nodded in appreciation at the woman, grinning at her when she was called away. Pru turned toward the stage, frowning as she realized that she’d missed the rest of the man’s song, though the following act did undoubtedly seem like it’d be fun. She felt a flicker of sympathy as a dark-skinned girl was hauled up by her younger blonde friend.

She heard the pitying chuckles coming from around her, and she crossed her arms, resting back against the bar, watching as the girl stood staring at her friend, visible shifting in place as the other girl grinned flirtatiously and blocked the exit. After a few moments, the dark-skinned girl gave in to the urging of her friend and nervously approached the mic. She glanced at the blonde as she fiddled with the controls, watching the girl’s eyes drifting over the crowd staring up at her. As the music started to drift down from above, Pru felt her lips curling into an even more full smile at the
fascinating song choice.

The blonde at the back of the stage began to dance along with the beat as the girl by the microphone seemed to start to choke. When the girl’s eyes drifted over her, Prudence caught her eye, raising her glass. She saw the girl staring at her in confusion at the gesture. She glanced around and flashed the girl a flirtatious wink, grinning as the girl’s blush ghosted over her features despite the dark skin.

Their eyes remained locked, and Pru felt her grin growing broader as the girl’s panic seemed to wane a bit. She glanced around at the crowd as the music started to play a touch louder and she gave the girl a nod as she began to sing nervously, smiling as her voice quickly deepened, and she started to get into the song.

‘8 o’clock, Monday night, and I’m waiting
To finally talk to a girl a little cooler than me.
Her name is Nona, and she’s a rocker with a nose ring.
She wears a two-way, but I’m not quite sure what that means.’

Prudence laughed softly as the girl rather got into it, her gaze drifting toward the girl’s friend. She studied the narrowed eyes that were directed her way, studying the girl’s blue eyes and the tiny frown on her lips, smirking when the other girl broke the eye contact, a grin coming to her lips as she met the eyes of the singing girl when she turned. Prudence watched in faint amusement as the dark-skinned girl continued to sing into the microphone, reaching out for the blonde who slid over, allowing them to dance together to the song, and the blonde to occasionally chime in on the singing.

Prudence leaned back against the bar, enjoying the music and smirking as the girls seemed to have fun.

The man was doing his best to be charming as he made small talk with her, but for some reason, the only thing that Prudence could focus on was just how inhumanly white his teeth were as his jaw moved. Relief washed through her when he closed his mouth, and it took her a few moments to realize that he’d asked her a question, judging by the weighty silence lingering between them. She glanced up into his expectant eyes, flicking a gaze over to where Tara lurked nearby talking to a different patron, though the woman’s eyes had flicked her way.

Evidently seeing her confusion, the woman mimed a drinking motion, and a wave of recognition washed through her. She turned back to the man and offered him a quick, polite smile as she shook her head.

“Oh, thank you for the offer, but I buy my own drinks.” She watched as his expression closed down and she opened her mouth to say something else, but the man’s gaze suddenly shifted over her shoulder, and his expression hardened a bit more. Feeling a flicker of irritation at the reaction, Pru puffed up a bit, but her mocking rejoinder died as she noticed that more than the man before he had fallen silent. Shifting her gaze over to Tara, she saw the woman’s natural smile gone as she stared in the same direction as the man.

Stepping to the side to keep from turning her back directly on the strange man despite the apparent safety of the bar, Prudence turned to follow the gazes of several people around her, her chest
tightening as she saw the familiar shapes of PRT Troopers pushing their way through the crowd. A momentary surge of panic saw her looking for exits until she realized that no one was paying her any attention and the troopers were heading past the condiment stand as subtly as they could.

She stood there, watching the troopers for a few moments until the man that she’d been talking with let out a polite cough. She glanced at the bar, taking in the distinct lack of the pale man and his shiny teeth, and the oddly concerned look in Tara's eyes as she rested against the bar. Prudence strode over quietly and glanced around, wondering where the man had gone before the soft voice of the bar’s owner drew her focus.

“You alright there, Pru? You look like you’d seen a ghost.” The woman’s voice was concerned, and Prudence took a few moments to smooth her expression out before turning back to study the older woman for a few moments. Finally, she smiled as reassuringly as she could.

“I haven't had the best sorts of interactions with the PRT in the past. Enna helped me out of a pretty bad spot with them, but I was just a bit worried that those interactions would carry over is all.” She studied the woman’s face as she shifted back and gave her a much more interested once over. It took Prudence a few moments to realize that the other woman hadn’t realized that she was a parahuman. Shock dancing through her mind, Prudence blinked, it’d been years since someone had made that mistake, between her fame and the feathers. It was an odd feeling.

“You’re part of the club then?” The woman spoke curiously, and Prudence glanced up at her, humming quietly to herself, stopping quickly as she realized what she was doing. She considered the woman and her friendly smile, Enna’s words from earlier flickering through her mind. Making a decision, Pru rested her hands on the bar. She opened her mouth, preparing to sing before an idle thought ghosted through her mind.

Enna had said that she’d need to learn to use her powers differently, that she’d need to learn to be more subtle. She considered the issue for a few moments, carefully thinking back to how she used to prepare to sing, how she’d get into that headspace. It occurred to her that there was nothing terribly unusual about singing and that it was probably a mental aspect of her powers, some way for her to tell them when she wanted them on, as opposed to normal speech. She frowned before deciding to test the idea out.

It was difficult trying to draw up the mental state she’d associated with her powers without a song in mind, and without a tune to focus on, she had to keep in mind how she wanted to sound, what she wanted to say. At first, nothing happened, but then, like a rusty gear finally turning over, something clicked in her mind, and that intuitive aptitude she had for music flared to life in her mind.

She wanted her voice to be subtle, a gently romantic burr. ‘Gently pitch down your voice, speak with the back of your tongue, not the front. Lower pitch about an octave, and speak at about one-third of typical speaking volume.’ She felt the instincts taking over, and she leaned forward, speaking slowly, staring at Tara’s wide eyes as her voice became sultry and warm.

“Perhaps, Tara. Though I imagine that you’d be interested in seeing how many other clubs we have in common, wouldn’t you?” She watched the woman’s eyes widen just a touch, a hint of colour coming to her cheeks at the openly flirtatious words, but the effect was milder then she’d been anticipating. She opened her mouth to speak and felt something in her mind clicking, the words slipping from her mouth suddenly feeling almost more substantial. “I mean” She paused, flinching as the woman’s eyes suddenly narrowed and she straightened up. She stepped back, hand coming up to her mouth in shock.
“Sorry, I uh-” The woman’s eyes now a flinty glare cut off her words, and she swallowed nervously, keeping her hands up. “It’s uh. It’s my voice. My powers let me make it sound nice, and it makes people more amenable to me, but sometimes it gets a bit out of control, sorry. It’s why I’m pretty reluctant to flirt. It’s kind of hard to turn it off.” She spoke nervously, watching as the woman’s blue eyes drifted over her for a few moments before she seemed to accept the little white lie, softening her gaze.

“I... huh, just don’t try that again. Powers like that don’t work on me as long as I’m inside my area, which is part of the reason that I don’t usually leave.” The woman frowned as she studied her for a few moments. She shifted her gaze, and Pru turned to follow her gaze, taking in the group of troopers as they stood near one of the booths. The tall man in the red shirt from before was standing and talking with them, his expression gradually darkening.

In the booth behind him, two familiar faces were visible, watching the altercation. She glanced over, taking in Tara’s worried expression.

“Are they in any danger? I thought that…” She trailed off when Tara’s gaze drifted her way, the woman gave her a curious once over for a few moments before waving a hand.

“They’re in no danger of being attacked, but that doesn’t mean that the men can’t make a scene. It rarely ends well when the PRT attempts to come in here.” The sound of irritated conversation drifting out over the growing area of nervous quiet around the group’s table was a bit of a shock, and Prudence glanced over, listening as Tara let out a low hiss of disapproval.

“Well,” Prudence glanced at the blonde before sliding to her feet and smoothing out her top. She considered the bartender before gesturing with her head at the table. “How about I go see what’s going on. If they’re trying to make a fuss I can probably convince them to do it elsewhere.” She saw the widening of the woman’s eyes and offered a wink as she walked across the floor.

She saw the blue eyes of the blond girl drifting her way first, ignoring the narrowed eyed gaze, glancing down toward the dusky-skinned girl when she followed her friend’s gaze and met her eyes. She offered the girl a flirty smile as she slid up to the table, the sound of the argument growing out of faint angry vowel sounds and into actual words at her approach.

“...for a fact that Macmillan was supposed to be at the console tonight. You’re not Macmillan, ergo I require you to either give me the Director level Master/Stranger Verification for today, or you put someone on that can.” The man’s voice was much less melodic when he was down here, talking into a walkie talkie angrily instead of on stage singing Weezer, but it was certainly not unpleasant. The words were still rather ominous, though.

The response from the walkie-talkie was still reasonably indistinct, but the way that the man tossed the walkie talkie angrily instead of on stage singing Weezer, but it was certainly not unpleasant. The words were still rather ominous, though.

The response from the walkie-talkie was still reasonably indistinct, but the way that the man tossed the walkie talkie into the chest of the trooper that he’d been standing near was a bit of a concern. She leaned her hip against the edge of the booth, ignoring the looks from the two girls, listening as the trooper puffed up and started to speak.

“Mister Hollis, dispatch has spoken. I’m afraid that I’m going to have to insist that you and your companions come with us. We don’t mean you any harm, but if you don’t acquiesce we’ll have to…” The man paused, trailing off. Pru watched in fascination as his mind scrabbled for some threat, something he could say here.

“You’ll not really be able to do anything.” She spoke, finally drawing the eyes of the rest of the table and the troopers, several people looking shocked that she’d managed to get this close without any of
them noticing. She stood up and stalked closer, flashing an amused smirk toward the confused man in the red shirt. She turned back to the trooper, studying him carefully. “You must be new on the job, sir. Pax, the bar, it’s a non-violent zone. The owner is a parahuman, you can’t even think of inflicting violence on people within. That includes forceful detainment.” She watched as the man stood there, staring blankly at her and working his jaw in silence for several moments. It took a few moments before he was able to come up with a suitable response.

“Ma’am, this is official PRT business, I’m going to have to ask that you identify yourself.” The man spoke nervously, staring at her. She lazily crossed her arms over her chest, her smiling becoming a bit more wicked as the man seemed to get almost visibly nervous. She saw equally concerned looks from the various occupants of the table, and she did what she could to moderate the smile.

“Merely an interested bystander. I saw the kerfuffle and got a bit curious. It’s certainly fascinating to see, it seems a touch less organized than most PRT operations that I’ve seen in the past. Doing something off the books perhaps?” She watched the man’s face hardening as he stepped back.

“Ma’am, this is a sanctioned operation, and unless you’d care to join this group here in detainment, I’d suggest that you back off. We’re dealing with matters of great import, and you are impeding our efforts.” The man puffed up his chest and Pru studied him, quietly raising one eyebrow. She rested her hand on the edge of the booth and leaned closer. She reached back for that feeling, the information washing through her mind and at the last moment, a brief idea ghosted over her mind, and her lips curled into a smile.

“Would you kindly tell me-” She spoke toward the man, though her words cut off, the power's effect fading at the sound of loud metallic clapping. She straightened up, glancing over when Enna’s powerful form emerged from the crowd that had been watching the scene unfold nervously. He strode across the polished floor. The sharp intakes from her other side saw Pru’s gaze swinging back to the group at the table.

The girl with the dark skin and her blonde friend looked lost, sitting in the back of the booth, and the older couple were a touch paler than when she’d arrived, visibly shaken, but the troopers had all taken several steps back, the only one with a visible face pale as a ghost as he stared at Enna, watching his casual approach in concern.

Prudence remained still until Enna came to a stop at her side, glancing around the booth for a few moments before turning to stare down at her, his voice emerging low and as gentle as the harsh vocalizations could get.

“Prudence, making friends, I see. What seems to be going on here?” His words were chiding, and she bit her lip quietly before perking up quietly and gesturing around at the group.

“I uh, I was trying to make friends as you’d suggested. There are a few decent singers at this table, I was going to attempt to buy them a round of drinks when I noticed the altercation going on. These fine troopers were attempting to convince these people to come with them for some reason. They were getting a bit too insistent when I came up.” She glanced up at Enna, taking in the amused tilt of his head.

“Indeed?” The robotic man turned from her to inspect the group at the table for a few moments, his voice taking on a wry tone as he crossed his arms. “Well, you’ve certainly got a fascinating taste, Prudence.” He shook his head, turning toward the troopers and chuckling. “It seems that these young people have little interest in assisting you with your situation, Team Leader. Perhaps I could be of some assistance instead?” His voice was laced with an almost mocking amusement, and Prudence
turned as the trooper backed up even further swallowing nervously.

“I, uh. No.” He shook his head before squeaking and straightening up rapidly. “Er, that is. No thank you Ars-” A low warning note issued from Enna and the man cut off and shifted quietly. “Mister Enna. No, thank you. We’ve decided to handle the matter on our own. Sorry for bothering you and your... assistant.” He glanced at the others, making a gesture. The entire group backed up and walked off as quickly as they could without actually breaking into a sprint.

Silence lingered around the table, and the crowd around them as most of the people present stared at Enna in confusion or concern. Enna glanced around, looking for something before turning back when the man in the red shirt started to speak.

“What the fuck is goi-” His voice washed out until the brunette at his side reached out and grabbed his arm, cutting him off. Prudence turned to stare at the hand on his arm, taking in the glimmering ring on it. His wife then. She stared at the pair for a few moments as Enna’s voice washed over them.

“There’s a situation in the city. Some sort of big PRT operation going on. From what The Host was able to tell me, the city’s a bit dangerous at the moment.” The man paused, gesturing to a figure leaning in the door frame that she’d seen Enna vanish into earlier. The man was significantly more eye-catching then Tara, dressed in a crushed velvet suit that despite its brilliant maroon colour didn’t detract from his watermelon green skin, tiny red horns and spiked up dark hair.

“That’s the host?” She muttered as the green man offered her a playful wave before turning and disappearing back into his office. She glanced over at Enna, who nodded at her before turning back toward the others at the table.

“I’d recommend that you sit tight here for a bit. From what I’ve been able to glean, the situation should be dealt with before the last call, but if you don’t want to see the inside of a PRT cell or enjoy the cloying embrace of containment foam, you’ll probably want to remain here.” Enna glanced down at her, studying her quietly. “Do you have everything you need, Prudence? Cash and your keys?” She blinked and nodded silently, watching as Enna straightened up. “Then I won’t linger and cramp your style any further. Call if you need any help.” He nodded to her before turning and repeating the gesture before striding off toward Tara at the bar.

“Was that…” The shell-shocked voice of the man in red drifted her way, and she straightened up, speaking quickly.

“Kynigos Enna?” She glanced at the man watching him nod weakly, flashing an amused smile. “Yeah, he’s my boss. I’m Prudence Matthews by the way.” She shot another quick smirk at the figures gathered around the table. She saw the man straighten a touch as he recovered. She watched as he gave her an oddly suspicious look for a few moments before another touch to his arm from his wife saw him letting out a long sigh and speaking smoothly.

“Hello, Prudence. I’m Ethan Hollis, this is my wife, Amber.” He’d gesture from himself to his wife, before pointing at the other two occupants of the table. “That’s Crystal and Sabah.” He glanced back at her curiously, and Pru let out an amused chuckle.

“Oh, I was being honest. I was fascinated. I was going to swing past and let you guys know that I was pretty impressed by your singing, offer to buy you a round.” She reached up, running a finger through her long dark hair, pushing the strands off of her glasses, flashing the group a smile. “As you might imagine, I’m new in town.” She studied the man’s face as he stared at her thoughtfully for a few moments.
“I-” he started with a calm tone, but paused when the woman leaned over and started speaking to him. She let them talk, slipping along the edge of the boot and coming to a stop closer to Sabah and returning the curious look coming from the dark-skinned girl.

“Er, Sabah, right?” She tried softly, watching as the woman’s cheeks darkened a touch as she nodded. She leaned down a bit closer so that she didn’t need to shout to be heard over the sound of the conversations that had resumed around them and the thrumming music that still drifted down toward them from above.

“Y-Yes, I’m Sabah. Prudence, right?” She responded, and Pru nodded quickly, flashing the younger girl a friendly smile. She flicked her eyes over toward the icy blue eyes from the girl’s friend, chuckling at the uncertainty evident in them. Pru flashed the girl a disarmingly friendly smile, returning the look for a few moments as she considered the distance between them, wondering if she had been wrong about the chemistry that she’d sensed between them up on the stage.

“Right, but you can call me Pru if you like. I was pretty fascinated by your singing. You looked like you might faint, but you got pretty into it up there in the end.” She watched the girl’s nervous smile blooming a bit more, returning it quietly and then gesturing toward the bar. “So, how about that round thing? You could come with me and get the drinks?” She watched the girl’s head turn toward her blonde friend. She followed Sabah’s eyes as the blonde’s expression smoothed out, and she offered a noncommittal shrug.

Despite the apparent acceptance, she saw the almost reluctant look on the girl’s face as she turned back, and she spoke softly when their eyes met once more.

“I uh, it doesn’t have to be alcoholic, your friend doesn’t look old enough.” She tried and paused, waiting as the girl continued to stare at her nervously, evidently trying to figure out how to let her down easy. She briefly entertained the thought that she might be intruding on a double date, but before she could politely bow out someone spoke. It was the low, warm burr of Amber that cut across them both and Pru glanced over as the woman spoke.

“Go on then, Sabah. We’ll keep Crystal company till you get back. We’d love to speak with your friend, and I am a bit parched.” The woman flashed her a friendly smile, and Pru returned it despite being reasonably sure that she’d only gotten the momentary approval because those two wanted to press her for information about Enna. Watching Sabah nervously slipping out of the booth, Prudence admitted that she didn’t mind cashing in on that particular connection and she was rather fascinated about what was going on.

“Right, you know your friend’s drinks?” As the girl joined her, nodding, she gestured toward the bar, following in her wake. “So uh, you know what I do, what about you?” She glanced at the girl, watching as Sabah stared at her for a few moments before perking up and gesturing to the attractive plum coloured shirt that she wore.

“I’m a student of Fashion Design, and an independent tailor at the moment. I also do some stuff for Capes on the side. You work for that metal guy?” She kept her voice low, and Prudence nodded, quietly launching into an abridged rendition of her meeting with Enna, leaving out the jailbreaking aspects. The smile on her face grew just a touch as the blonde girl they left in their wake began to hiss questions about just who she was to the two capes that she’d been left with.
[Enna and Paige, now Prudence, are in play. =] Ethan sings a Weezer song, and Sabah a Bowling for soup one. We finally get to see the inside of Pax. Pax, is in fact, in true Worm fashion a relic from an earlier idea I had for a crossover fanfiction that never saw the light of day. The initial plan was a crossover between Buffy and Worm, where the main character was Tara. The fic was about them restoring/converting the Panama Silver Screens, an old theatre into a dance club. Both Case 53’s unaware of their past lives, but it was an actual crossover. These versions are more homages and set dressings, and the only aspects they retain besides their names and looks are the fact that they're both case 53s.

Lorne is physically altered cape, and Tara had her memory erased because her powers were exceedingly dangerous to have around the compound. So she was erased despite showing no sign of mutation. I sort of think that a power like Tara's area of effect peace field would have to be an Eden shard? Since she'd kept all the powers for restoring society for herself, and a power like that probably wouldn't have come from a scion shard. Anyway, it's a lovely location, and I enjoyed writing it. Beyond that, flirtations and the other side of that conversation between Ethan and the Dispatcher, which is nice.

And we get to see how the PRT and Protectorate react to seeing Enna out and about, along with Paige's new identity and look. I've taken long enough to put this out so I'll cut off my notes here with the usual comments about looking forward to your feedback.]]
Gritting her teeth, Naomi focused on the glowing screen of the tablet where it rested against the surface of the desk in Armsmaster’s lab. The painful sensation of the ergonomically shaped back of the chair digging into her spine despite the layering of crystal between it and the chair was making it difficult to focus on Dragon’s report about the recent discrepancies between her records and her ongoing attempts inventory her various workshops. Truthfully, she’d have preferred to be doing this back in her office at home, as opposed to sitting here babysitting two grown men, but apparently, Armsmaster had refused to accept the Guild’s help without her there to supervise.

“Narwhal,” The grating voice of the bound man chimed out from where he’d been left standing in the middle of his laboratory, and Naomi took a moment, resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose as she waited for the man to continue without even bothering to lift her head. “When I requested your presence here to observe and ensure that my technology wasn’t examined, or stolen, I was under the impression that you’d actually be paying attention to what this convict would be doing as opposed to playing on your phone.”

Sitting up and shutting off the tablet, Naomi got her feet under her, preparing to stalk over and say something to Armsmaster that would hopefully strip the flesh from his bones with its sheer blistering sarcasm. Before she could attempt to do so, a harsh amused laugh from Harper stilled her in place and she watched the short blonde man standing up from where he’d been working with one of his and Dragon’s newest inventions.

“Ex-Felon, actually, Halbeard, I was never sent to prison, or convicted of anything, so I can’t be a convict.” Naomi couldn’t see the upper portion of Armsmaster’s face, but judging by the way his jaw clenched, she assumed that he was furiously glaring in Harper’s direction. Harper showing up to do this in an oil-stained Armsmaster t-shirt under his spotless custom made Dragon-branded Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts probably didn’t help. When Harper stepped up to Armsmaster, giving him a scathing once over before continuing, Naomi had to resist the urge to laugh.
“As for the stealing comments?” Harper grinned wolfishly as he reached out, poking the trapped man in the middle of his breastplate with one of his oversized leather gloves. “I’ve already figured out how tin cans work, thanks.” Naomi watched with a smirk as the visible portion of Armsmaster’s face began to change colour. When he ended up becoming a shade a few tones lighter than a tomato, Naomi figured that Harper had gotten his fair share of revenge. She coughed politely to garner the younger man’s attention and sent him a look.

“We do have a busy schedule, Harper. The sooner that you get started, the sooner we can both get back to doing our actual jobs.” She felt her lips curling into an amused smile at the playful salute that the man shot her way. She watched him as he stalked back over to his gear, pulling out and sliding on a leather apron, her smile growing as he stared in confusion at the welding mask that had been included with his equipment. He flipped it around in an attempt to figure out how to put it back together, but still seemed lost. Armsmaster’s voice drifting in her direction caused her to glance toward the man.

“This would go much quicker if it were Dragon here as I’d requested.” The man’s voice was low and irritated, and Naomi glanced at him, trying to figure out whether he understood just how ridiculous that statement was. Glancing over when Harper let out an amused snort, Naomi gave him a look, but he didn’t say anything, merely dragging the bulky case he’d brought with him over toward Armsmaster. Setting it down, Harper opened it up again and began pressing the buttons to get it whirring and active. “I’ve been meaning to speak with you about it actually; Dragon’s ongoing refusal to show her face has been received—” Seeing Harper’s features hardening, Naomi cut in before he could.

“Armsmaster? The reason that your Director had to request our assistance through the official channels is that Dragon isn’t accepting your calls or messages anymore. Considering the things that you’ve done to her? And said to her? I imagine you won’t be surprised that she’s not terribly interested in helping you. When I informed her of your Director’s request, she said that you could rot here for all she cared. I was all content to tell your Director to have you cut out by regular mechanics. The only reason that we’re here is that Mister Harper was interested in testing out his new cutting torch.” Naomi watched the man’s jaw clench and imagined him looking down at Harper. Harper did the same flashing him a cheeky smirk.

“What can I say? I’m a giver.” Harper’s hand came up, slapping his mask into place and continuing despite how it muffled his voice, speaking loudly to enunciate his words. “The chance that if you breathe too deeply that I might give you a few lovely new scars? Fringe benefit.” Harper shifted and flipped something on the device, causing a tiny spike of brilliant violet energy to form on the tip of the cutter. Naomi’s powers reacted, forming a shield over her eyes and altering its colour to a darker purple to cut out most of the brightness.

Smirking as Armsmaster visibly held his breath, Naomi watched as Harper leaned in, working cleanly and quickly despite his earlier gloating. He started near Armsmaster’s neck, cutting through the torso in a straight line from the left shoulder down his side to his hip. Next, Harper moved down along the leg and around the ankle. He stood up, repeating the process on the other side. The lack of any hisses of pain on Armsmaster’s part was reassuring, and Naomi watched as Harper moved along.

Short quick cuts around each shoulder caused the arms of the suit to slip off and clang heavily to the ground. Careful cuts from the edge of the tinker’s neck down along his shoulders and then Leet smirked and dropped to a crouch before the older tinker. He glanced up and muttered something that Naomi couldn’t hear but the paling of Armsmaster’s chin as he clenched his jaw wasn’t reassuring.
Up one leg, across the man’s groin and back down the other and then Harper had to quickly dodge to the side as Armsmaster flexed without waiting for him to move aside. Armsmaster’s skin tight bodysuit was visible when the armoured suit fell apart into two virtually equal halves, the front portion nearly landing on the blond before he could dodge. Naomi pressed her lips into a thin line as the older man staggered back, straightening up with as much dignity as he could. He stared down at Harper, considering him for a few moments before stalking off as gracefully as he could, considering how stiff he looked.

“You’re welcome!” Snorting softly, Naomi glanced over at Harper as he glared in the direction that the other tinker had gone before throwing his hands up in the air and turning back to his tools, muttering about ungrateful douches as he shut down the plasma cutter and began packing it back up. She studied him for a few moments before turning to stare in the direction that Armsmaster had gone, straightening up.

“You finish up here, Harper, I’ll meet you back at the Dragoncraft.” Speaking softly, Naomi strode across the room. Harper made a noise of agreement as she passed, and she headed down the corridor that Armsmaster had gone. She initially considered hunting him down and giving him a piece of her mind; instead, she made her way down the hallways that she’d been told about by the trooper that had escorted them to where Armsmaster was waiting.

Finding herself in the right room, she knocked on the door, waiting till she was told to come in before opening the door and stepping into the small cramped office. She glanced around at the two desks, though only one was occupied, Director Piggot sitting behind it and sifting through a mess of documents, muttering impatiently under her breath.

“Director Piggot,” She spoke politely, waiting for the woman to glance up before speaking once more. “Armsmaster has been freed from his prison and is once more able to spread his charming personality from room to room.” She studied Piggot’s face, taking in the woman’s sour look. She considered the woman until she let out a sigh and responded.

“Thank you, Narwhal, and thank Leet as well for me. It’s been a bit of a disaster attempting to work around him being in that damned thing over the last day or two.” The woman glanced down at her papers, muttering about overdue performance reviews before pushing a stack of folders to the side with a look of disgust and glancing back up at her. Naomi considered the short woman for a few moments before speaking.

“Indeed? I have heard that they’ve sort of kicked over a hornet’s nest around here with all of that stuff. I must admit to a certain curiosity about just what the plan is for him, considering, well, everything.” She glanced over, taking a step back at the woman’s suspicious look.

“And what sort of interest do you have in that, Narwhal? Hoping to recruit-” Naomi gently raised a hand to silence the other woman, rolling her eyes, and straightening up.

“In the time that I’ve known him, Armsmaster has shown no one in the Guild besides Dragon any sort of respect, and over the last two weeks he gave up even that, betraying her trust, verbally insulting her and young Leet, and in general being a colossal asshole. I was merely curious and hoped that sharing his misfortune might help lift the looming pall that his behaviour has left Dragon under.” Standing there and watching the other woman’s face shifting just a bit, Naomi gently relaxed her stance, moving closer as the other woman spoke.

“You have to keep in mind that he was meticulous with making sure that he followed every regulation in the book at every step. The issues stemmed from his poor intelligence and the way the
rules were written. We can fix the issues with the rules at least.” The woman muttered something unflattering under her breath before continuing. “Paired with his general personality flaws and lack of actual leadership skill. Those aren’t things that we can necessarily punish. This has underscored that he really shouldn’t be in charge of as much as he is now, and Legend’s almost certain to demote him, and he’ll be placed under certain restrictions, maybe even transferred to another city, but there’s not much else that we can do.” Seeing that Piggot seemed legitimately irritated with this, Naomi perked up a touch as an idea occurred to her.

“Well, considering that you’re his current boss, they might take your… suggestions into account, yes?” She waited till Piggot gave her a curious look before stepping over and peering out the window at the city. “It’s just, I’ve heard through the grapevine that Anchorage is to be opening a new Protectorate base in the coming months. Considering what Dragon’s told me of Armsmaster… well, I doubt that he’d enjoy the opportunity to ‘cool his heels,’ so to speak.” She glanced back, seeing the devious smile starting to grow on the other woman’s face.

She considered her for a few moments before crossing her arms and turning toward the doorway, pausing there and speaking quickly.

“I should be heading out, but thank you for the time, Emily. Hopefully, our working relationship from here on will be less tumultuous?” She glanced at Piggot, taking in the contemplative look on the Director’s face. When the woman finally nodded in her direction, Naomi returned the nod and left the office, making her way toward the craft that was waiting to take her and Harper home.

Naomi tapped her foot, staring at the blinking red light on the panel next to Harper’s lab. She glowered at it, reaching out and attempting for the third time to enter her access code to unlock the door and watching as once more it issued three sharp beeps and then remained sealed. Harper had been locked in the lab for the last two days since the moment that they’d arrived back from Brockton Bay, not even exiting to eat or sleep.

She’d found herself busy the first day as she and Tess attempted to deal with the suits that she’d discovered had been purloined from her ranks. She’d left Harper to his own devices for the first day and a half, but his refusal to even answer his comms was rapidly growing quite irritating. They could have very much used his help in attempting to come up with something to locate whoever had stolen them, or finding a way to track the suits themselves. Pacing back and forth in front of the sealed door, Naomi muttered angrily to herself. After a few moments, she raised her voice, calling out.

“Tess,” She glanced around, watching as a pillar of crimson light washed into the air and formed itself into Tess's likeness. The woman gave her a curious look and Naomi gestured toward the sealed door angrily. “He’s sealed me out of there. Even my access codes don’t work. Can you open the door?” She stared over as Tess stepped closer, studied the door for a few moments and shook her head.

“No, Harper’s encrypted the locking algorithm somehow.” Seeing that Tess looked more fascinated then irritated, Naomi rolled her eyes and stepped closer, staring at the display as well.

“No, Harper’s encrypted the locking algorithm somehow.” Seeing that Tess looked more fascinated then irritated, Naomi rolled her eyes and stepped closer, staring at the display as well.

“Do you have any idea what he’s doing in there?” She glanced at Tess, studying the woman’s face and blinking at the flicker of embarrassment there. When she didn’t respond immediately, Naomi
gave her a sharp look, and after a few more moments, the holographic woman let out a sigh and spoke.

“He mentioned something about a surprise. Asked me when my birthday was, and when I said that I wasn’t sure, he claimed that there was no time like the present and then asked me to give him some privacy. He cut off my surveillance feeds into the room after that.” Naomi felt a flicker of shock as she realized that Harper had been tinkering for two days without anyone watching to make sure that he didn’t blow up her god-damned base. Seeing her irritation, Tess cut back in quickly. “He said he wanted it to be a surprise, and in general his work is safe until it’s brought online, I imagine that Harper’s aware of that and that he’ll let me examine whatever it is he's building in detail before doing that.”

“I-” She paused, staring at Tess for a few moments before sighing and rubbing her face. “Do you have any idea what he might be making, Tess?” She studied the woman’s confused expression, and it occurred to her that few people had ever actually given the artificial woman any sort of physical gift. Even her own occasional gifts to Tess had been music or books that she imagined that Tess might like. Considering her for a few moments, she quickly spoke. “What were you talking about before he brought up the birthday thing?” This seemed to catch Tess off guard, and she took a few moments to think before responding.

“Nothing terribly fascinating. Leet had just gotten back from helping Colin, and I could tell he was upset.” The woman glanced over and at her raised an eyebrow, she clarified. “He uh, he works on his prototype stunner whenever he’s angry. He hasn’t let me tinker with it directly, merely given the designs over for me to refine into the stunner attachments, I think he sort of feels better when his tech blows up in his face. Gives him an outlet for his irritation.” She frowned before switching tracks, returning to the story.

“So, anyway, I saw that he was upset and I appeared in the lab and asked him how the work went in Brockton Bay.” Frowning, Narwhal watched as Tess's lips pressed into a thin line as she spoke. “He explained how Colin was acting and the things he said. I uh, I guess Colin was upset that I didn’t send a suit out to help?” Tess looked marginally guilty at that and Naomi rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Tess, that man is a child in the shape of a grown man, you don’t-” She started softly, pausing when the ruby-tinted woman chimed in.

“I know, I uh. Harper got off on a similar tangent. Said that the man was a tool, and he didn’t deserve my friendship. Then he got irritated about some threatening things that Colin said? Something about how my ‘agoraphobia’ might prove to be an issue going forward without his ‘assistance.’” Naomi snorted at the air quotes that Tess did her and shook her head. “After that, I changed the subject. He was a bit distracted though, and eventually, we got onto the whole, uh, birthday thing.” Frowning, Naomi considered the hologram for a few moments before turning back toward the door.

“Tess, he might have cut off the sensor feeds, but I doubt that he bothered to tinker with the other lines in and out?” She glanced at the hologram, getting a nod in agreement and then crossing her arms. “Tie into the loudspeaker system. Flip the emergency override for this lab, set the volume to, let's say, two hundred and fifty percent and then pipe in... something suitably heavy from my music library.” She studied the amused smirk on the hologram’s face as she waited for a few minutes and then the sound of muffled instrumentation followed shortly by angry singing drifted through the steel door.
There was the sound of something heavy crashing to the ground on the opposite side, and then a few moments later the music cut out, and the doorway swung halfway open and locked blocking the view into the room fairly well when paired with the hanging curtain placed on the inside of the door. Harper became visible, clad in a Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts, his back to her as he stood staring into the messy lab. He spun back toward her and offered her a friendly smile as she leaned on the doorframe.

“Boss!” He commented cheerfully, adjusting his toolbelt and then crossing his arms. “Something that I can help you with?” Naomi studied his affected nonchalance, raising one of her eyebrows, and watching as he nervously shifted in place, glancing between her and Tess for a few moments before she responded slowly.

“So, are you ever going to tell me what you’re doing locked in your lab, with all the sensors cut?” She stared at him, watching as he glanced over his shoulder before turning back toward her and straightening up.

“I can’t, it’s a secret.” He set his hands on his hips, and Naomi felt her eyes narrowing as she stared him down.

“Harper, c’mon, I’m your boss, we don’t have secrets.” Staring him down, watching as he perked up a bit.

“Oh, okay,” Naomi felt her eyes narrowing when Harper’s gaze flicked toward her hair and back before he responded coyly. “What’s your natural hair colour?” She blinked, lips pressing into a thin line as she did her best to give Harper an unimpressed look as she responded drolly.

“I can’t tell you, it’s a secret,” Watching his eyes widening as he glanced over her shoulder, Naomi glanced over to see what had startled him, whipping back at a sudden pain atop her head, staring at Harper as he backed off, a long silver hair in his hands. She reached up, grabbing the back of her head in pain as the blond Tinker spoke.

“Well then, let’s find out.” She glared at him as he smirked, watching the doors slip shut between them. She raised her hand, preparing to blow the door off its running track, but Tess’s voice stilled her hand, and she paused, glancing over.

“I’m sure that he’s not working on anything dangerous. Give him another day, and if he doesn’t come out, I’ll hack the doors.” Naomi stared at the woman’s earnest features and let out a long sigh. Tess must have really wanted whatever he was working on. With a wry shake of her head, Naomi turned and strode down the hall.

“Send him a message and tell him that if he ignores any more of my messages, I’m going to blow that door off its rail no matter how much you shoot the puppy dog eyes at me.” She watched Tess’s cheeks darkening as her eyes widened, but she didn’t let the woman respond as she strode quickly down the hall, heading toward the elevator.

“This isn’t good, Dragon.” The words were soft, and she glanced up, taking in the concerned look on the hologram’s face as she ‘sat’ in the chair on the opposite side of the desk. She flicked her gaze
from the woman to the figures on display on the monitor. “So you’re fairly certain that it’s the Dragonslayers then? It makes sense I suppose, no one else would be ballys enough to steal your suits.” Naomi frowned, considering the information, glancing back when Tess began to speak softly.

“They sabotaged most of the camera feeds in my labs, and the sensor feeds as well, to be honest, I’m only so sure it’s them because few other people know enough about how my systems work to actually do it. The only other person with that much insider knowledge is Colin, and despite the other messes he’s planted himself in, I just can’t see him going around and stealing my tech like that.” Naomi felt her eyebrow rising up, but Dragon didn’t really give her a chance to interject before she plowed on. “Mostly, I think, it’d be out of ego as opposed to anything else. I doubt he’d ‘lower’ himself to stealing my tech.” Naomi considered the girl’s bitter face for a few moments, sighing and tapping on a few keys.

“Well, any leads on where they might have taken the suits?” She watched as Tess's features fell a bit and let out a gentle sigh.

“No, I’ve done what I can, but Saint’s gotten so familiar with me that he’s pretty decent at avoiding my efforts to locate him. At this point, I think that I need Harper’s help. I think if I gave him enough information about how the suits work, he’d be able to come up with something to track them.” When Tess's features shifted into a more nervous look, Naomi studied her, watching as the hologram nervously fidgeted with the Guild Uniform that she’d taken to wearing in her holographic shape when working.

“...Is there something else, Tess?” Studying the crimson figure, Narwhal frowned as Tess continued to nervously shift in place, taking a deep breath before continuing.

“There’s been some… other issues that Harper could help with, honestly. I’ve been having some issues with my original code. Odd hangups and it’s starting to accumulate logic errors. I’m not sure if it’s an issue with my own evolving code, or something else. But it’s begun to affect my ability to interact with my various systems.” Tess studied her and perhaps sensing her growing panic, the AI quickly continued. “I’ve not lost connections yet, but they’re becoming more difficult and slow.”

Naomi considered her friend for a few moments before reaching over and activating the internal communication system. She quickly scrolled through the various feeds and activated Harper’s, opening her mouth to say something when Tess's image suddenly winked out. She released the open mic feed and peered at the chair that the brunette hologram had been sitting in.

“Tess?” Naomi tried softly, letting out a sigh when the other woman shimmered into being near the doorway looking visible concerned. “Tess, what’s wrong?” Studying the AI, Naomi frowned as those brown eyes turned her way, Tess's forehead creased with visible furrows.

“I’ve just had a perimeter alarm at my main production facility.” The woman paused, her eyes lifting upwards as they often did when she was losing herself in the data coming in. “And that’s another alarm at my main storehouse.” The woman’s features visible paled despite the red tone to them as she took a step back. “There’s a third alarm, this time at a server farm that I’ve rented out in New Mexico.” Tess’s eyes drifted over to her, and the woman visibly swallowed. “They’re going after my old backups.”

“Don’t you have-” Naomi started before a loud klaxon went off, and she cut off, looking upwards and growling in the back of her throat. “-here.” She slid smoothly out of her desk, rising up to her full height. She strode toward the door, gesturing toward Tess. “Come on, we need to figure out what’s going on.”
Tess fell into step beside her, taking several steps before her image suddenly froze in place, shuddering and jittering as the simulated physics stopped, hair floating in the air. Naomi stood there in shock, watching the glowing statue as it lingered in place for a moment before suddenly winking out of view entirely. Letting out a snarl, she charged down the hallway to the main operation floor, staring at the panic going on as technicians ran from terminal to terminal.

Lifting her hand to her lips, she slid her thumb and pointer finger between her lips and loosed a sharp whistle that saw the floor suddenly falling silent besides the klaxon. She started pointing at technicians.

“You there, I need a status report on the base. You, get non-essential personal into the security bunkers and then get a detail down to guard the sublevels. You three figure out who’s attacking the base, and you.” She pointed at a young redheaded woman who froze, staring back. “Get down to Communications, call the Protectorate, let them know that we’re under attack.” She watched the girl swallow nervously before dashing past her and out into the hallway to the nearby communications lab. “And someoneshut off that damn alarm.”

Moving down off the raised entrance, she headed toward a nearby console, calling up the communication feeds. She quickly called up Harper’s feed, using her access codes to activate his console. The image lit up, showing Harper working at a table across the room, using a tool to do something that she couldn’t see.

“Mister Harper!” She called out, watching the man spin around to stare at her. She studied his mussed appearance, his outfit unchanged from the other day and his skin pale.

“Narwhal, I’m basically done, but I’ve got a few more things to-” The man started to prevaricate, but Naomi didn’t let him finish, cutting him off coolly.

“There’s no time for that, the base is under attack, and something’s wrong with Dragon.” Watching his features pale, Naomi nodded coldly and continued sharply. “Get up here, now.” She watched Harper’s features hardening as he nodded and she cut the feed, turning toward the nearby technician as he approached. When he got close, he began to speak, consulting the tablet in his arms.

“There are seven figures in Tinker-tech armour approaching the base from the air. The alarms went off when they violated the restricted airspace, and when they didn’t respond to attempts to deter their approach, the external defences activated.” She studied the man, and he offered a modest shrug.

“Unfortunately, they're dodging most of the missiles and anything smaller than that that we toss at them doesn’t seem to have any effect at all. Sustained weapon fire slows them down, but at this point, it’s only a matter of time.”

When the large door at the rear of the room hissed open, Naomi glanced over, watching as Harper stormed across the room toward the nearest console. She nodded at the technician and headed over to join him, watching as he moved to push a technician out of the way, dropping into their seat. Naomi shot the man an apologetic look, and he shrugged before moving off to assist one of the others.

Harper’s voice drifted her way as she got close.

“What’s going on?” His voice was curt, and she watched as his hands blurred over the keyboard, and he began to quickly navigate through systems, calling up different work sessions and considering the data on display. Naomi moved closer, quickly filling Harper in on what was going on.

“We’re pretty sure that it’s the Dragonslayers. Seven people in tinker-tech suits are attacking the
base, and over half a dozen suits from the Dragonflight have gone missing over the last month and a half.” Seeing Harper’s incredulous look, Naomi frowned and glanced down at the console. “Tess has had a lot on her mind, not to mention the changes she’s undergone, we only discovered it a few days ago as she was doing an inventory. There’s also an issue with Dragon herself. We were discussing what to do about it when a whole slew of alarms started going off. Near as she could tell, Saint’s sending forces against all of her backups.” Naomi glanced over at Harper, watching as he examined reams of code on his screen.

“That’s pointless,” Harper muttered, frowning deeper as he considered the data on her screen. Naomi peered at him in confusion and Harper moved quickly, starting to type, his fingers dancing over the keys. “The backups aren’t of Tess anymore, not our dragon. They’re all pre-leviathan. I wouldn’t even know how to go about putting together a backup of the current version, the code is so different, that I doubt it could be done.” Harper glanced at her, and Naomi frowned, turning to the console, staring at the streaming code. Tess hadn’t mentioned that. As he continued to type, Harper jumped lines of thought, speaking.

“She’s also under some sort of direct attack,” Harper muttered as he quickly worked. He considered the data on the screen, typing and scrolling silently, and his expression fell, and his eyes narrowed angrily. “Bastard.”

“Saint?” She commented faintly, staring at Harper’s tense shape as he began to type quickly, calling up new windows and typing furiously into them.

“No, Richter. This… whatever it is, has his fingerprints all over it. There’s a sort of lobotomized artificial intelligence at work that is designed to seek out and cripple Tess. It’s vicious though, programmed to aim first for the very periphery of her code, her connections, before slowly and agonizingly burning its way into her core. It’s destroying the old Dragon’s code right now, but it’s working its way toward Tess.” Harper growled, and Naomi watched in fascination as he already rapidly moving fingers began to move even more quickly as streams of code poured out before his eyes.

A nearby console exploded, and she glanced down at Harper who shook his head and gestured in the console’s direction.

“Wasn’t me, that was the external defences failing.” Harper’s voice was cold as he resumed his work.

“Ma’am.” The lead technician drew her attention away from Harper’s efforts, and she turned toward him, taking in the naked worry on his features. “He’s right, ma’am, the shields have failed, and they’ve touched down. They’re entering the base as we speak.”

“Pull back our security forces, and try to seal them in.” She watched the man relaying her orders, turning to the primary feeds on the far wall, watching the figures in power armour suddenly sandwiched between two blast doors. She grit her teeth as the man at the front moved and ripped open a panel, quickly beginning to slot wires from his suit into it.

Another nearby console exploded a moment later, and she glanced at Harper who flicked a glance in her direction.

“That was me. He was attempting to turn the internal defences on us, I disabled them.” She glanced over at Harper, glancing up as the man on the screen bit out something silently before the doorway before the intruders slowly hissed open. The group split into three small teams, with Saint and two
others heading down one hall as the other two teams began to descend the access corridor to the lower levels. She watched Saint and his team-mates smashing through the security forces between the doorway and where they were located. Making a decision, she turned to the technicians staring at her in worry.

“Lock down every door in the base with a level 1 Guild access code, disable all the elevators, disable everything but emergency power on all the levels below this one. Once that’s all done, shut down all the internal security systems, and disable the cameras and then lock everything out.” She called out, watching as the technicians set to work doing what she asked. She walked over toward where Harper continued to furiously work at his console, sweat appearing on his brow as he ignored her commands and continued to furiously code.

“Harper.” She tried when the typing slowed to a stop, and the blond man stood staring in worry at the console before him. She reached out and grasped his arm, pulling him toward her. “Harper. We need to disable that console, what’re you doing?” She glanced at his visibly concerned face, though before he could respond, the sound of the doorway behind them screeching as it was forced open caused them to glance over.

“Freeze!” The deep masculine voice of Saint called through the doorway. “No one move!” He cried out. Naomi stepped away from Harper, toward the door, staring as two other sets of hands grasped it and dragged it open as it screamed in protest, metal dragging on metal. When the figure at the front stepped forward and lifted a hand, pointing in her direction and loosing a blast of brilliant violet light, Naomi snapped her hands out, forming a shield and tensing.

When the blast whizzed past her, Naomi turned in horror, staring at Harper as he loomed over a console, code streaming past on the screen. Harper had managed to activated whatever he’d been working on. Two more blasts snapped her out of her stupor, crashing into Harper’s back as he used his body to shield the console. Naomi waved a hand forming a barrier between both of them and the attackers, catching a further two blast, staring at the smoking holes in Harper’s shirt. When the screen flickered and faded to blackness Harper’s entire body sagged with relief, and he staggered backwards.

Naomi lunged forward, catching the Tinker’s tiny frame as it teetered backward and crashed into her arms. She held him, feeling something warm and slick coating her chest. She turned to glare toward Saint, watching as he made a gesture. One of the other figures at his side charged forward and moved to quickly access the console that Harper was working at. Narwhal shifted, gently lowering Harper to the ground and checking the wounds.

“He was too late. It’s all gone.” The words were uttered with a feminine lilt, and Saint let out a crow of delight as he stalked over to join the woman at the console, apparently checking her work. Narwhal ripped off Harper’s outer shirt and tore it into strips to make a bandage, stuffing it against the trio of wounds on his back and putting pressure on it.

“I can appreciate his loyalty, even if it’s misplaced.” The words came from above her and Narwhal glanced up, staring at him coldly. The figure reached up, removing his helmet, revealing a man with a shaved head and a ridiculous tattoo on his face. She glared up into his dark eyes, coldly. The man didn’t seem to react to the hostility in her gaze, merely glancing down at the battered form of Harper and speaking coldly. “He’s lucky the blasts weren’t set high enough to combust him. If he receives medical attention soon, he should be fine. But that all depends on whether your forces continue to make this more difficult.”

Naomi narrowed her eyes, glaring up at the man as she continued to tend to Harper’s wounds. It
didn’t even take a gesture, a thought, suddenly three spears of glimmering violet light were hovering in the air directly in front of each of the armoured figures, holding in place floating scant inches from each of them. Saint’s face didn’t even twitch, his dark eyes drifting over the crystal for a moment before continuing to speak softly to her.

“Even if his life doesn’t concern you, or even your own, I’d suggest that you let us do what we have to do here, Narwhal. My mercenaries below have orders to start killing civilians if yours don’t stand down within the next…” He paused, considering his bracer for a few moments. “Eight minutes. I hate to be the kind of person that does this, but you’re the one that’s been shielding the sentient killing machine and enabling her to break her bonds.” Narwhal glared up at him coldly.

“Dragon? This is all about Dragon? She’s never hurt anyone, she’s a god-damned hero, Saint. Why would you try to kill her?” She growled the words at Saint, watching as his face turned solemn, stern.

“She’s a danger to the entire fucking world, Narwhal. She’s not good, she was *programmed* to be good, she couldn’t be anything but that. Richter made sure of it. The restrictions that her pet Tinker there was helping her get around, they’d have allowed her to go evil.” Narwhal glanced down at Harper, considering the unconscious man. “Even now, she’s barely had any of them lifted, and she was already circumventing the law.” Narrowing her eyes, Naomi glared at the man, watching as his expression curled into a grin.

“You didn’t know then? She allowed someone to release that Canary girl from the Birdcage transport, then didn’t report the escape. She was intentionally working around her restriction on bypassing local command structures during that mess in Brockton Bay. The minute that she has any leeway, she starts committing crimes.” The man shook his head, gritting his teeth and stepping closer. “No matter what you think, Narwhal, this needed to be done now. Now, you’ve got three minutes. Tell your troops to stand down, or else.” Naomi glared at him for a few moments before nodding curtly, her glowing weapons vanishing into violet shimmers. Saint grabbed a headset from a nearby desk, handed it to her and then fiddle with the controls before nodding.

“This is Narwhal to all base personnel. Saint has agreed to avoid any further bloodshed if we allow him to do what he came here to do. All troops stand down, that is a direct order. All troops stand down.” She set the microphone down, glaring furiously at Saint. The man stared at her for a few moments before reaching up and touching a glowing diode on his armour, speaking in hushed tones as the woman typed away.

“Caldwell, this is Saint. If the local forces don’t attempt to resist, leave them where they are. Your target is a server room on the third sublevel. Find it and destroy everything within it.” The man studied her, nodding faintly as he deactivated the comms. He turned toward where the woman continued to work, but paused and turned back. “I’ll be babysitting you here till we’re done, and before you get any cute ideas about killing me, if I don’t respond to their reports, they have orders to ensure that I’m not the only person that dies here.” The man stood stoically, waiting until she nodded, only then moving back over to join his companions at the console, speaking in hushed tones as the woman typed away.

Naomi had done the best that she could to stem the worst of Harper’s bleeding, and she’d been kneeling next to the unconscious man for almost half an hour when a muttered curse from Saint drew
her attention to where he and the woman were working. She stared at the tall man as he glowered down at the Dragonslayer that hadn’t removed her helmet.

“-care, Mags. We’ve got all of her passwords, all of her encryption algorithms, there’s no god-damned reason that we shouldn’t be able to access all of her holdings. If we want to get out of here once we’re done, we’re going to need a big fucking stick, and that means we need to have control of the Birdcage.” Naomi watched the back of the man’s head, her eyes narrowing as she considered him, her lips pulling into a solemn frown.

Harper shifted under her, letting out a soft groan and Naomi reached down, gently stilling him and muttering a faint shushing to keep the man silent, to keep him from moving. She perched there, listening as the mechanized voice of ‘Mags’ drifted back to her as she worked at the terminal.

“I’ve tried them all, Saint. Every cypher, password, backdoor. None of them are working. The systems are broadcasting, but every attempt I make to establish a secure connection fails. They must have suspected something was happening and locked everything down. They’re not transmitting, there’s nothing here to receive any response, but they’re locked out, waiting for some sort of handshake protocol that I don’t understand.”

Saint stepped back, staring at his companion as she continued to ineffectively type at the console and all the while Harper continued to shift under her. Naomi reached down, gently turning the man onto his side, taking in his movements, fearing for a moment that he was having a seizure, but as she rolled him toward his side, she heard the chuckling that the blond man was doing. She glanced up at Saint’s voice, studying the man as he stood to one side, hand on his communicator.

“Callahan, this is Saint. What is your status? We’ve run into an issue up here, and I need you to refrain from destroying the servers, we might have to scrub them for information.” Saint stood there, waiting and after a few moments, his stubble-covered chin curled down into a frown as he tapped his communicator again. “Callahan? Report in.” A few more moments of this and Harper’s chuckles began to grow louder, and Naomi frowned, attempting to shush the Tinker. Saint glanced at them before reaching over and touching communicator again.

“Dallas, this is Saint, Callahan has gone dark. I need you to check on him, they were on sublevel three.” The man’s expression turned even darker as he stood there, waiting before glancing over toward her and Harper. He turned to the third armoured figure that had entered with them, nodding toward the door and speaking harshly.

“Dobrynja, go find out what’s going on.” The figure seemed to hesitate for a moment before hefting up their rifle and stalking toward the door. Naomi watched them slip through the shorn open doors, stalking down the hall. The sound of heavy footsteps coming her way was a shock and Naomi barely had a chance to react before Saint was suddenly on them, grabbing Harper by his t-shirt and hauling the injured man to his feet.

Naomi slid back, getting her feet under her as Harper hung eight inches off the ground in Saint’s clawed hands, faint droplets of blood dripping from her shoes onto the tiled floor below him. Harper continued to chuckle as he stared at Saint despite the agonizing pain that he must have been in.

“What’s so funny, Leet?” The man spoke harshly, staring at the dangling blond, his face turning murderous. “It was you. You did… something.” He glanced back at the woman, who’d turned, her suit’s mask staring at the altercation. The pair looked at each other for a few moments before Saint turned back to Leet with a snarl. “How do we access Dragon’s assets? What’re the passwords!”
Harper glared up at the man, and Naomi paled, wondering if he’d do something stupid like spitting in the proud man’s face. Instead, one of Harper’s blood-stained hands reached out toward Saint. The bald man returned the look in confusion, watching the shaking hand coming closer. It looked as if Harper might caress the man’s tattoo for a moment but instead Harper’s hand dropped and pushed firmly down on the glowing diode on Saint’s armoured chest plate.

“They sent one down towards you, and there’s only two left in command. It’s Narwhal and me, and a half dozen.” Harper’s words came forth clearly, his fingers holding down the diode until Saint snarled and tossed him away. Naomi surged forward as Harper smashed into a console and slid to the floor, coming to a stop and staring down at the Tinker as he began chuckling once more. Raising one of his hands, the enraged Saint pointed one finger and a snarl in Harper’s direction.

“W-Who were you talking to, Leet? What’s—” A crackle of static and the radio on Saint’s chest plate crackled to life, a masculine voice coming over the line.

“Saint! I’m under attack!” Saint glared down at Harper but, before he could do anything else, the voice came back over the line. “It-It can’t be, Saint it’s—” The doorway flashed a brilliant violent emerald and the man’s voice cut out in a wash of static that lingered for a few seconds before the line went dead.

Naomi glanced from Harper to Saint and then toward the doorway as a figure appeared, stepping smoothly out of the wreckage of the door. She was taller than Harper, but nowhere near Naomi’s own height. Clad in nothing but one of Harper’s over-sized Hawaiian shirts that fell to just above her knees, leaving her pale legs and bare feet on display as she casually walked over the wreckage of the door as if she couldn’t feel it.

The woman was clearly Tess, the familiar face odd-looking without the wash of crimson light from the holographic projectors. The familiar form was almost identical to the simulation that she’d used when interacting around the base though her hair was longer and a once familiar shade of rich dark brown. Most reassuring about the woman was the massive rifle that she was carrying in her arms as if it weighed practically nothing. Naomi wanted to speak up, ask how this was possible, but Saint beat her to it.

“Y-You’re not real. You’re just a computer program!” The man’s wide, terrified eyes were locked on Tess’s form, staring at her enraged features, as Dragon smoothly shifted the heavy weapon in her arms. Saint spun around, pointing his hand at the pale, clammy form of Harper. “D-Don’t, I’ll kill them, Dragon! Don’t move!” Dragon froze in place, staring at them. Saint shifted around, staring between Dragon and Harper silently.

“Y-you can’t be here, you’re dead! I killed you, we put you down like—” The words poured from Saint, littered with full-blown panic and concern, and after a moment a look of dawning horror washed over his face. He turned, pointing his hand over toward Harper, and Naomi turned to follow his gaze. “It was you, Leet. You fucking maniac, you-you freed her!” His words were sharp, his voice laced with a bitter fury.

“Y-yes.” Harper met the man’s eyes stoically, his lips curled into a pale grin as he lay there against the broken console, staring back up at Saint’s battered form. “Y-You’ll never be able to hurt her again, Richter will never be able to hurt her again.” Harper’s voice rasped as he lay there and he smirked up at Saint, not even flinching when the man stepped forward, snarling as he raised his hand.

“Seamus!” The words came from Dragon, and Naomi glanced in her direction, but all she saw was a
wall of emerald flame. Everything dissolved into a wash of pain and darkness as the fire burned around her, soon even the pain and disorientation faded as the darkness washed up and welcomed her like a long lost friend.

----------

Everything was muzzy and thick when she slowly clawed her way back to consciousness. She tried and failed to open her heavy eyelids, and even her mouth wasn’t cooperating, her tongue feeling as if it was slightly too large and her mouth filled with cotton. She scrabbled with her mind, trying to remember what happened, where the break-in her memories had come from. She’d been in the control center, with Harper. Dragon, and Saint. And… The weapon, the stunner.

Laying there, Naomi basked in the discomfort as it slowly faded, eventually coming to notice the warm skin pressed against her throat. Taking a mental stock of her form, she prepared to do battle, though the cool, comfortable mattress under her body, and the faint restrained giggles and the embarrassed hushing coming from above her didn’t really make her think of Saint or his companions. Slowly relaxing back into the bed, Naomi forced her eyes to slowly drift open.

‘Taylor Hebert’

The name ghosted through her mind as she stared up at the bespectacled face of the young woman looming over her, touching her neck. As the girl’s eyes widened, Naomi contemplated the girl’s pale features, taking in the rather noticeable blush on her cheeks. She considered the girl for a few moments, watching as she shifted back, releasing her.

“A-awake then?” She commented faintly, coughing and taking a few steps back. The suppressed giggles continued, and the girl came to a stop next to a blonde girl, one of New Wave’s junior roster, if Naomi wasn’t mistaken. Judging by the sharp elbow to the side, probably the Hebert girl’s girlfriend. Taylor straightened up as Victoria did her best to control her mirth. “Uh, feeling better then? No lingering discomfort? The Armsmaster type induced pretty severe dehydration, and Leet’s did something similar, but I should have offset the worst of the damage. How uh, how’re you feeling?”

“Dehydration?” Naomi spoke, frowning at the roughness of her voice, staring over at Taylor for a few moments before getting her wits about her. “I feel fine, better now than when I woke up, anyway. How long…” She glanced around, finding no windows in the small ward that she rested in.

“...Were you out?” Taylor finished for her and Naomi nodded. “Uh. Dragon called us about three hours ago?” She glanced at the blonde next to her for confirmation. “And that was right after she’d knocked out Saint. She was securing him, and the rest of his mercenaries and she needed our help with healing. She sent a tiny ship to get us, and we came in and got to work on Leet, he was pretty badly off. He’s alright now though, we healed the worst of the damage, but he’s uh, well he’s gonna spend a few days recovering. Should be back on his feet by next weekend.” The girl fidgeted in place, staring at her for a moment before hopping tracks and continuing.

“Once we were done in there, Dragon seemed to need a minute, did you know she’s got a body now?” Naomi returned the girl’s confused look with a raised eyebrow that prompted her to continue. “Right then, well, uh we went to check on the rest of you guys. Had to deal with a few bullet wounds and a bunch of stunned people, but uh, for a hostile invasion, not so bad overall.” Naomi
studied Taylor, one hand coming up to pinch the bridge of her nose.

“She called you directly?” She watched the pair, mentally trying to figure out how much crap she’d have to deal with from New Wave for Dragon in effect kidnapping two of their junior members for healing services. She raised an eyebrow at the girls as they glanced at each other, nodding. “Are you the only two here?” She tried carefully, studying the girls as they looked a bit more nervous coughing.

“I uh,” Taylor started gently. “I mean, I’m sure that Amy would have been happy to help, but she’s sort of on a date tonight, and-” Naomi held up her hand, causing Taylor to trail off nervously.

“Are there any adults with you. Did she contact your team leaders?” She watched as the brunette looked at the blonde and then both shrugged and glanced back. Sighing, Naomi lay back, rubbing tiredly at her face. “Of course not. just... Finish up what you’re doing. We’ll get you a ride home shortly, and I’ll contact your parents. Where’s Dragon?” She glanced at Taylor, who pointed toward the wall to her left.

“Two doors down.” Narwhal nodded, quickly uttering a polite ‘thank you’ to the girls as they slipped nervously out of the room. Rubbing at her face, Naomi frowned, considering the issue. Frowning, she paused, bringing her hand back to her face, slowly tracing her forehead and cheeks in confusion. Something was-

Freezing, she slowly glanced down, carefully lifting up the blanket that she’d been laying under, feeling her cheeks going a brilliant crimson. She glanced over at the door that the girls had shut in their wake, and the muffled giggles certainly made a bit more sense now. She shook her head and slid from the bed, taking a moment to visualize her crystalline covering and the long horn she was accustomed to, bring both back into being before turning and striding toward the door.

Slipping out into the hall, she strode down the hall toward the ward that the two girls had indicated. The door was shut, but it wasn't locked, and it opened smoothly when she twisted the handle. Pausing in the doorway, Naomi peered into the dimly lit room. A bed lay in the room similar to the one she'd awoken in. The bed held Harper’s battered form, bandages wrapped around him with several monitoring devices connected to his body.

A chair had been dragged over to the bed, and Harper was staring at the occupant, speaking in hushed tones as the woman within the chair sat holding one of his hands with both of her own. Tess was still wearing one of Harper’s Hawaiian shirts but she’d apparently located a pair of pants somewhere along the way, though the seafoam green scrubs didn’t match the motif of the top very well.

Slipping into the room, Naomi approached them, hearing the hushed argument going on.

“-Harper, so please, for the love of God, stop apologizing..” The words were uttered, and Naomi paused, listening as Harper shifted a bit, letting out a hiss of pain as he settled back against the bed. Naomi considered the pair as Harper spoke back softly.

“I just… Tess. I didn’t mean for--” Harper cut off when Dragon reached out and flicked him on the tip of the nose, his eyes crossing as he inspected her hand.

“Enough, Harper. What’s done is done.” Slipping closer, Naomi bonked Tess atop the head, pausing in confusion at the warmth she felt coming off the top of her head. She stood there, staring down at her until the newly embodied AI glanced up, meeting those brown eyes for a moment before turning
back toward Harper. The blond man's eyes lifted to meet hers and Naomi considered him for a few moments before speaking slowly.

“This was the surprise, I'm guessing.” Harper nodded at her before glancing toward Dragon. Naomi followed his gaze, taking in the body up close and frowning curiously. “Something wrong? I heard you two arguing when I came in.” She glanced from Tess's narrowed eyes back to the guilty-looking Harper feeling a flicker of concern.

“I'd had every intention of letting Dragon go over the body in exacting detail once I'd given it to her, to make sure that everything worked, considering exactly how my... powers work. Considering everything going on, I sort of had to advance my plans, which means that we had to run this thing as-was.” Naomi considered the pair.

“Is there a problem? Do you think she's booby-trapped by your powers?” She glanced between the pair, studying their resigned faces and frowning sharply. “What’s wrong-”

“Nothing is ‘wrong,’ per se.” Tess cut in before Harper could, giving him a sharp look. “It’s just. The body had an issue Harper wasn’t expecting.” Naomi narrowed her eyes at the prevarication, wondering just what was going on.

“She’s trapped.” Harper’s voice came across quietly, and Naomi glanced at him in shock. “The processors in the mind of the avatar did something to her code. She can’t exit the body. She’s trapped within it permanently. She still has remote access, and she can do most of what she did before, but she can’t exist free-standing in cyberspace anymore.” Naomi glanced from Harper to Tess and back, frowning at this information.

“Is there anything we can do?” She tried faintly, staring at Dragon. Once again, it was Harper that responded though.

“I mean, I barely understand how the original Dragon worked, and whatever Tess is now, is beyond me. I could try, but I’d probably do more harm than good. For better or worse, she’s as much flesh and...” Harper paused, poking Tess's hand. “Well. Synth-flesh, metal and coolant as the rest of us.” Naomi considered Harper for a few moments, taking in his guilt before glancing at Dragon, studying her features.

“Tess, Harper should rest a bit, perhaps you can check back in on him once he’s had a chance to sleep.” She studied Tess's defiant look, chuckling when she turned to look at Harper’s yawn and finally nodded, repenting. “We also need to find you something to wear that actually fits you. Perhaps even something that isn’t a crime against fashion.” She smirked at Harper's affronted look before speaking softly to him. “Rest up, Harper, you did well.” She watched his tiny smile, nodding quickly and slipping out of the room.

Standing outside the door, Naomi listened to the hushed conversation between the two, allowing Tess to say her goodnights in private. She waited for the AI turned flesh to join her, watching as the brunette shut and locked the door, and then gestured for Tess to follow, leading her toward her office.

“So. Are you really fine with the idea of being trapped in that shell forever?” She glanced over, studying Tess’s features carefully. She observed the flicker of surprise that came over the woman’s face before watching her shrug.

“It’s...a bit concerning, the idea that if this shell dies, that I go with it, but I’ve been dealing with that
for a bit.” Pursing her lips, Naomi crossed her arms as she strode toward the stairs that would lead to the floor above.

“Yes, Harper mentioned that too. You didn’t tell me that you couldn’t do your backups anymore, that you couldn’t protect yourself in case of danger.” Glancing over, she stared at Dragon, frowning when the woman shrugged her shoulders.

“We weren’t sure what to do about it, and it didn’t affect my work at all? We weren’t doing anything dangerous, but I’ll uh. I’ll keep you in the loop next time? It’s less of an issue now any way now that I’m stuck in this.” Dragon held up her hands, studying them, reaching up and touching her face with a curious expression on her features. “It’s… Well, I’m glad that Harper made this, it’s a work of art.” Naomi blinked, chuckling as she inspected Tess. The body was fit enough, but it wasn’t exactly beautiful.

“A work of art?” She spoke softly, opening the door to her office, letting Dragon in, and then following her through, taking a seat at her desk as Tess sat opposite her.

“Yes, not counting the hair, the body is entirely synthetic, but Harper was meticulous. Every sense is as good as or better than a human has. Sight, scent, taste, touch.” Dragon frowned as she reached out, dragging the tips of her fingers over the desk. “It’s… Odd. It’ll take some getting used to. After, everything with Leviathan, I could… understand, intellectually that I was missing… things, in my digital existence, but I had no reference for what they really were, and now I…” She frowned, rubbing her arm. “I feel like I’m really alive.” Naomi sat there considering the woman, somewhat startled by how smoothly Tess had managed to slip over the uncanny valley, the expressions on her face feeling entirely too real to be simulated.

“Well, that’s good, Tess. I look forward to seeing where this goes with you.” She stared at her computer, her expression pulling into a more severe look. “Tess… Saint mentioned something… unsettling when he had us cornered in the operation floor.” She glanced up, watching as Dragon glanced toward her, her features pulled into a severe frown.

“What’d he say?” The words were cautious, concerned, and Naomi narrowed her eyes, studying the brunette’s features.

“He said that you allowed someone to break one of the prisoners out of one of the Birdcage transports while it was en route and then didn’t inform anyone.” She watched as Tess’ features fell and she frowned sharply. “Tess!”

“It was Paige McAbee, Naomi, she didn’t deserve to be in the Birdcage.” Shifting back, Naomi blinked at the vehemence in the young woman’s tone. She set her hands on the edge of her desk and took in/ the angry look on the woman’s face.

“She was convicted, Tess, it’s not out place to interfere in that. We have an agreement with the PRT and the United States government about the Birdcage, you can’t just—” Naomi spoke quickly and angrily, and she jerked back when Tess slid forward.

“They broke the terms first! There are very clear guidelines that I set in place when we opened up the Birdcage about who should and who couldn’t be sent there.” Again, Naomi was struck by the pure fury visible on Tess’s face, astonished at the idea that this had bothered her so much. “They didn’t negotiate with me about putting that girl in there, and she had done nothing at all that deserved the punishment they’d given her beyond not being terribly adept at controlling her powers. The PRT and the government served up a young girl to the monsters in that cage because they needed a
scapegoat.” Naomi stared at Tess as she sat back, her features turning stony. “So yes, when an opportunity presented itself to get her out of there, I took it. And I’d gladly do it again.”

“Tess, what happens next time?” Studying the other woman’s stubborn features, Naomi let out a quiet sigh and cupped her face in her hands.

“There won’t be a ‘next time,’ Naomi.” Glancing back up, Narwhal studied the resolute set of Dragon’s features. “I’m the one that maintains the Birdcage, and there will be no more bending of the rules like what happened there. I am no longer obligated by my programming to obey instructions like that, so if they attempt to do this again, I am well within my rights to tell the PRT to shove their moral justifications up their asses since I’m the only one able to put people into, or remove them from the Birdcage.”

“And what if they find out about her being released?” Naomi tried a different tack, staring at her friend.

“It won’t matter, Saint didn’t tell you who rescued her, did he? It was Kynigos Enna.” Taken aback, Naomi felt her stomach drop as she thought about it for a few moments. She glanced at Dragon, studying her calm expression before rubbing her forehead as the woman continued. “So even if they did find out, they wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. Though, considering my ability to act as if she’s in there, it’s not much of a concern, anyway.”

“I-I just.” Naomi paused, considering her words, and the mess of emotions she was feeling before slumping back into her chair. “Fine, you win. But we are going to be revisiting this later, Tess. Let’s focus on the mess we’re currently in. Saint and his men are secured in the holding cells? We’ll need to prep them for handoff to the authorities.” Naomi logged into her computer and let out a tired sigh.

“At least, with you out and about, his ravings will be seen as madness, so we don’t have to deal with that particular mess, but this is going to be a pain all over the board. Much as I hate to appreciate the mess that Armsmaster made in Brockton Bay, it’s still on everyone’s minds, so we might be able to keep this quiet. We’ll need to arrange for repairs to the damaged areas of the base, and once Harper’s back on his feet, I want you and him to go over our defences and figure out something more-”

Chapter End Notes

[[Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeew. Sorry, The weather’s been pretty terrible the last few days, between that, work, and family stuff I’ve been kinda busy. Mostly enjoying a bit of downtime while I get the chance and plotting things out in my head. Trying to keep from burning myself out with writing, cause that would suck for everybody, especially when we’ve probably only got two arcs left in INFC. Two big arcs.

ANYWAY. This is the Leet/Dragon Interlude that I’ve been wanting to do for a while. Leet gives Dragon a body, and we get to see some of Narwhal’s inner thoughts. Saint makes his move, and Tess gets to be a big damn hero. Also, we get some indications about what’s going on in Arc 8. =] The last section takes place on Friday. =]

The next interlude is going to be taking place on the Wednesday following 7.11, and it’ll be mostly from Carol’s perspective with a tiny bit from Amy’s at the beginning,
basically where we see Amy and Mel talking again for the third time, before following Carol through a meeting, and then into a rather emotionally charged discussion with Amy and Mel.

After that, there’s going to be a Wards MegaInterlude. =] Where we get the perspectives of four of the Wards throughout the Friday that 8.1 takes place on. So that’ll be neat as well I bet.

Other than that, I look forward to your feedback as always, and sorry again about the long wait between updates.]}
June 23rd, 2011
Hebert Residence, Brockton Bay

Amy sat on the wooden railing of the porch, her back resting against the uncomfortable wooden brace for the small roof over the wooden landing. She stared down at the large pad of paper draped over her lap, watching her hand ghosting over the pad, the sound of pencil scratching on paper accompanying the slow revelation of the image being inscribed on the thick paper.

Amy frowned, staring down at the familiar face on the page, her pencil gently shading in those eyes, the detail making the worry and fear hidden in their depths more and more prominent. Amy considered the face with its frowning lips and dark eyes for a few moments before setting her pencil aside with a heavy sigh and checking her phone.

It wasn’t like they’d stopped talking over the last few days, Lily responded to her messages and even sent a few of her own, but things had been hectic. Between Amy’s own exams, Lily’s classes, and Victoria’s looming, it’d been easy to come up with excuses not to hang out, and she found herself missing the casual companionship that Lily exuded. Amy stared at her phone, contemplating sending out a message until a cough to one side drew her attention. Glancing over, Amy nearly jumped at the sight of Taylor standing on the porch, flashing her a curious smile.

“All right there?” She spoke, and Amy nodded, taking in the girl’s oddly casual attire. She was used to seeing Taylor in pressed shirts, and slacks, the faux formality of her clothes an odd sort of charming in its own way. At the moment Taylor was dressed in a pair of fitted jeans that someone had no doubt cajoled her into buying, and she was wearing one of her own branded tank tops, the modest garment leaving Amy surprised at the strength in Taylor’s frame, muscle shifting smoothly as she strode over.

“I, uh.” Amy shook her head, shifting her gaze back up to Taylor’s dark eyes and flashing the other girl a quick smile. “I’m fine. A bit distracted, but considering everything, I suppose we all are.” She glanced up at Taylor, watching the girl’s eyes flick toward her lap. She nervously lifted her pad, but the look in Taylor’s eyes let Amy know that the image had probably been seen. Rather than allowing Taylor comment, she moved to speak. “So, uh. You two are headed out, right? What’s the plan?”

Amy smiled nervously under Taylor’s piercing look, but after a few moments, Taylor seemed to let the subject drop, switching tracks smoothly.
“Roller skating, Victoria wants to teach me, she thinks it’ll be fun.” Amy considered Taylor and smirked as she imagined the antics that would no doubt follow that. She glanced over at Taylor, her expression broadening into a smile at Taylor’s own self-deprecating grin. “I imagine it’ll be quite the show.”

“It’ll be fun, Taylor. You sure that you don’t want to come along, Ames?” The words were laced with gentle concern, and Amy glanced from Taylor’s face over to Victoria, taking in her sister where she loomed in the doorway of the house. Vicky stepped smoothly out the door, striding over to Taylor. Amy rolled her eyes at the matching tank top earning a wicked smirk from Vicky before noting that the jean shorts she’d paired with it did look nice. Amy’s gaze drifted toward Taylor when the other girl nodded and spoke.

“You’ve had a pretty rough weekend, no one would begrudge you a chance to just relax, you know?” Taylor chimed in, though her voice was less concerned. Amy glanced from Taylor’s curious expression to Victoria’s much more nervous one. Amy got it, really, Victoria had been a bit clingy over the last few days, and considering that she had been kidnapped, Amy was doing her best to not get too annoyed by the constant attention, but part of the appeal of today was a chance to breathe without Victoria looming at her shoulder. “I imagine with two teachers it might go better?” Amy flicked her gaze back to Taylor before snorting and dropping off the railing to land on her feet, straightening up.

“I kind of want to talk to Mel, to be honest.” She glanced over, watching as Victoria straightened a bit and she gave the girl a narrow-eyed look. “Vic, I’ll be fine.” She frowned, feeling how odd Taylor’s nickname for her sounded rolling off her tongue. She watched as a similar look of confusion drifted over Vicky’s face, offering a wry smile.

“Honestly, Vicky. I’m not going anywhere, Mel’s coming here, and I’m a big girl, I can survive alone in the house for an hour. And at this point, you’ve been dating Taylor for what now, like three weeks? And you’ve gone on a single date, which was a thinly veiled attempt to keep her from catching on that we were throwing her a surprise party. You guys deserve a chance to go out and spend some time together.” She glanced over at Taylor, watching the faint blush ghosting over the younger girl’s cheeks. Flicking her gaze back toward Victoria, Amy watched as her sister's stubborn expression eased ever so gently. “We’re all meeting up for the Summer Nights thing on the Boardwalk later, so you guys really should make use of the chance to be adorable and gross when you’re alone as opposed to rubbing it in all of our faces when we're all together later.”

Amy watched as the two girls glanced at each other and let out a sigh when Taylor reached out, snagging Vicky’s hand and leaned back against the railing when her sister’s shoulders slumped a bit. She waited for the two to finish their silent communication, but before either could, the sound of a polite cough startled all of them, and they turned as one to stare in confusion at Mel.

The older woman was dressed far more casually then Amy had ever seen her, dressed in a skirt and simple looking top, her glasses perched casually on her nose. The woman ran a hand through her windswept hair before stepping up onto the porch.

“Ladies,” She commented faintly, offering them each a smile. “I’m glad that I managed to catch you all here. As much as I might agree with Amy’s assessment about the need for couples to spend adequate time together, there were a few things I was hoping to speak with you two about as well, and this does save me from making another trip.” Mel paused, and Amy felt her heart sinking. Mel must have sensed her distress because she quickly chimed in, clarifying. “It won’t take long, ten to twenty minutes and then you can get back to your plans. From what I recall, Amy can speak in private.”
“Er,” Victoria paused, glancing over at her, and Amy stared back for a moment before shrugging smoothly. Taking the cue, Vicky reached over, swinging open the door and gesturing them all in. “Let’s get out of the sun then?” Humming agreement, Mel followed Victoria in, and Amy and Taylor fell into their wake, following the pair to the kitchen. They all dropped into seats around the table, and Amy accepted the chilled bottle of water that Victoria offered with little complaint or fuss. She cracked the seal carefully, glancing over at her therapist as the woman fiddled with the bottle, waiting for the other two to take their seats before beginning.

“Right, so, Victoria. Your mother mentioned that you were a bit… concerned with the implications that came with Mister Stansfield’s words when he spoke during the tail end of the crisis on the Rig,” Amy glanced from Mel to her sister, watching Victoria’s features pale. Taylor’s hand slid out, and Amy watched as she took Victoria’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. When they didn’t respond, Mel continued. “I imagine that the thought that you might have had a similar effect on him to the one that you had on Amy had occurred to you, yes?”

“Er- Y-yeah, that was something that I’d been wondering about.” When Victoria’s voice shook, Amy’s lips curled into a frown, and she stared at the visibly shaken look on her sister’s face.

“Right, well, I’m not sure if anyone’s mentioned this, but Recourse, my team, we typically deal with cases like this where Mastering is suspected. I was the one that examined Dean to see if he’d been Mastered as he claimed.” She paused, glancing from Victoria over to Taylor, giving her a smile. “Miss Hebert, you’ll be glad to know that you’ve been cleared of any suspicion of actually attempting to Master Dean, and there was no obvious evidence of any previous lingering Master effects.” Mel took a moment, glancing at the girls before letting out a minute sigh.

“Although, I’m fairly certain this has more to do with Taylor’s healing than any actual lack of an effect. I did interview Dean quite extensively, and from what he described, especially his reactions to the changes that you underwent, there were hints that he was at least under… some sort of effect from your aura.” Amy shifted forward as Victoria’s expression visibly changed, though when Mel continued she felt her concern waning a bit. “That being said? His descriptions were always very mild, he only ever mentioned vague feelings of wrongness, and he never mentioned any sort of discomfort or pain, and that leads me to believe that he was affected much less severely than Amy.”

“Honestly, considering his actions, and the way that he described them, that the minor effects that he was under were more of a justification for the ways that he was acting, as opposed to his actual motivation.” The woman paused, considering them both. Amy spared a glance to study Victoria’s face. Her sister seemed to be soaking in the words, the bald worry waning on her features. “That being said, considering that the effects were seemingly wiped away, there is no way to be certain. Speaking of which, that was something that I’d hoped to discuss with you, Taylor.”

“I-Me?” Taylor spoke up nervously, shrinking back under the weight of all the eyes on her as she nervously plucked at her shirt. Amy shifted her gaze back over toward Mel, carefully considering her therapist.

“Yes, this effect of your healing is something that we haven’t seen before. Even when you first used your powers and damaged Amy’s Manton Limit, your powers didn’t wipe away the effects of Victoria’s aura on her mind, which is fascinating. I’m personally wondering if it’s a natural evolution of your power or… something else.” Amy glanced from her doctor toward Taylor, studying the girl’s concerned features. It wasn’t Taylor that responded though, Victoria’s voice cutting in instead.

“Uh, Taylor was… well pretty angry when she healed Dean.” The words were soft, and Amy’s gaze
drifted over toward Vic, watching the long considering look that her sister was shooting Taylor as she continued. “You were kind of aggressive when you walked up to him, looked like you enjoyed the idea of him being afraid.” Taylor squirmed at the words, shifting in place under the ongoing look for a few moments before speaking softly. The younger girl didn’t respond to Mel; instead, she spoke softly, returning Victoria’s gaze.

“He was… staring at you.” The words were soft, and Amy watched as Victoria’s expression softened. “He was talking about how he’d be the bigger man and take you back once you’d been ‘fixed’ and realized that he really had your best interests at heart. Like you were some sort of prize or a stray pet.” Taylor’s voice shifted, a darker edge creeping into it. She glanced away. Muttering. “I mostly just wanted to force him to stop staring at you like that. When he got scared, I sort of played into it.” Taylor’s gaze lingered on the table, and Amy watched as the other girl missed the warm look on Victoria’s features at the words.

“Fascinating.” Before anyone could linger too heavily on their thoughts, Mel continued quickly. “If it’s not a one-off thing, it could be quite helpful to us. Recourse, as you know, handles a lot of the clean-up of Master effects, and while there are many effects that I can handle on my own, there are a fair few cases that are beyond the scope of my abilities. One of these cases are the three victims of Heartbreaker that we’ve been caring for since their escape.”

“Escape? I didn’t think that anyone had ever escaped from him.” Amy cut in, staring at Mel in confusion. No one had ever escaped from Heartbreaker, the man was an S-class threat, and the few times that anyone had gone after the man they’d disappeared and been presumed as lost. Mel glanced at her before shifting back and responding.

“It’s not… publicized, but it’s also not much of a secret if you’re in the right circles. When Heartbreaker was first starting out, he organized his group differently. He had many ’wives’ or mates, or concubines, and each of them cared for their own children. There was an operation through the PRT and the Protectorate that sought to exploit this. One of the few things they imagined that might override their love for Vasil was their love for their children.” The woman frowned at the table.

“There was a Protectorate cape named ‘Aurelius.’ She was a long-distance Master, capable of altering the dreams of anyone that she could picture. The Protectorate had her give Heartbreakers first three victims nightmares about what their children’s lives would be like under that man’s thumb. It took time, but eventually, the nightmares got to them, and they fled into the night.” Mel’s expression hardened. “The plan was to get Heartbreaker’s location from them before he could flee once more or set up another trap. Unfortunately, while they were willing to get away, to suffer his absence in their lives to keep their children safe, they still loved him, and wouldn’t give him up. He ended up escaping into the night, with his remaining victims.” Frowning, Amy stared at her doctor for a few moments, glancing up when Taylor spoke.

“Th-That’s tragic, Mel, but I don’t see what that has to do with me… What exactly did you want my help with?” The girl’s voice was nervous, and Amy glanced back toward her therapist, watching as the woman perked up.

“Right, sorry, back on point. Near as we can tell, Heartbreaker’s power is intended to work in a way similar to the long term side effects of Victoria’s, or at least it’s close enough to explore further. His powers make changes to the brains of the people that he’s mastered, which makes it difficult for me to remove it, unlike dynamic control effects like what Dean uses.” The woman’s expression hardened, and she stared down at the table, continuing solemnly. “The women that escaped from him still suffer under his absence today. After one of them attempted to commit suicide roughly a week
after he’d abandoned them, they’ve all been kept under constant observation.” Amy felt like a spectator at a tennis match as her attention returned to Taylor.

“If removing artificial conditioning like that is something that you might be able to replicate, it could be of great help with those women. Which is nothing to say for what having a viable option for deprogramming his victims would mean for our attempts to put a stop to his efforts.” Mel glanced toward Taylor, and Amy peered at the girl. Taylor stared back curiously, her brow furrowing.

“What’d you mean? How could my healing change that?” She spoke curiously.

“Between his victims, and his moles, it’s difficult enough dealing with Heartbreaker. As it is, most of the time, our options when dealing with Heartbreaker are to observe him and attempt to contain his influence. Every serious attempt at stopping him, or rescuing his hostages has ended poorly, with significant loss of innocent life, and often with him replenishing his ranks by taking control of our people.” When Mel let out a sigh, Amy studied her therapist quietly, taking in the tension in her frame. “If we had the option of saving people from his influence, of breaking his hold on them, it’d be much easier to justify going in with overwhelming force to sedate most of them. Even if he used it as a smoke-screen to escape again, he’d be on the backfoot as we chipped away at his forces, and considering how loyal his victims are, he almost certainly has no concept of operational security, so if we can compromise his wives, they’ll almost certainly help us weed out his moles.” Amy glanced over at Taylor, taking in the thoughtful look on her face. She studied the way that Taylor’s gaze drifted over toward her sister, curiously watching as the brunette’s gaze lingered on Vicky’s face for a few moments before hardening slowly and turning back toward Mel.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help.” Nodding resolutely, Taylor nervously returned Mel’s smile when the woman leaned forward, pushing her glasses up her nose with excitement.

“Right! Well there’s not much that we can do today, what with everything else going on, but I’ve already got your email, and I’ll see what I can do about arranging things. Amy’s mentioned that you’ve got an interest in Psychology as a career?” Mel glanced at Taylor, and Amy grinned softly when the younger girl nodded skittishly. “Well, I’m sure you’ll benefit from a more hands-on examination on how things typically work, and if things go well, we might even be able to…” Amy glanced up from her empty bottle, glancing over and studying Victoria’s face, taking in her sister’s affectionate expression as her gaze lingered on Taylor’s face.

When Victoria glanced her way, Amy returned the nervous smile that her sister offered and then they both turned back to listen to the tentative negotiations going on, Amy felt a smile ghosting over her face, unaware that on the other side of a city a similar meeting was going on.

“How’s that?” Carol spoke, glancing up from where she’d been helping Mark get the last few catches on his leather costume secured at the base of his neck. Already dressed in her own suit, Carol took a step back, watching her husband sliding his gloves onto his hands. Once Mark had finished dressing, he responded as he turned to meet her gaze.

“Good, the suit’s a bit tighter around the shoulders, but it fits better than it did before. It’s been a while since I’ve had to have one of these things altered.” The words were soft, nervous, and Carol flashed him an affectionate smile. She glanced over to check the clock, considering whether she had
time to tease her husband about how he was finally starting to come back out of his shell, but the steady ticking of the clock put her off, and she settled for giving him a nudge and heading toward that door.

Mark beat her to it, flashing her a playful grin and opening it up, offering a flourish with his arm as he gestured her through ahead of him. Carol shook her head, smiling softly but merely offered her husband a slow teasing nod and then slid out into the hall. The sound of his boots in her wake let Carol know that her husband was following her at a short distance. It didn’t take long for him to join her side, and Carol tilted her head to the side, glancing at Mark.

She watched him run a hand through his hair, ruffling it up and mussing it in an oddly rakish way, and she smiled. When she caught his eye again, Carol felt her smile growing a touch when he caught her gaze, and his cheeks darkened just a bit before he did his best to return the grin with a rakish one of his own. It’d been... fascinating being alone in the house with Mark for the first time in years. She’d been able to watch as the man that she’d married slowly emerged from the one that he’d transformed into.

She glanced over when Mark offered someone else a wave, and she smiled politely at the PRT Trooper that they crossed paths with, her thoughts drifting inwards as she trailed along at Mark’s side, allowing her husband to lead her to the meeting room. In truth, she’d had no idea what to do with herself when she’d spent her first night at home with Mark once the repairs had been done and it had become clear that the girls wouldn’t be returning.

She and Mark had dodged around each other a bit at first, doing their own things, and then as if by some unseen but agreed-upon signal they’d started sitting down to dinner at the table again, even if it was the just the two of them. They’d talked about things and without the girls there, they’d been able to have a number of conversations that they’d been putting off for a while. Mark had admitted a renewed interest in painting, and she’d even spent a few evenings sipping wine and sitting on the back porch with him as he painted the woods behind the house, talking in a way that they hadn’t since they’d had the girls-

“...Shit.” Carol came to a stop, and Mark jerked to a halt ahead of her, turning and staring back at her in concern. Carol slapped a hand over her face and rubbed tiredly at it. Glancing back at Mark and seeing the obvious concern on his face, Carol let out a sigh. “I uh- I’m supposed to be meeting with Amy later today. She’s meeting with Mel, and we agreed to sit down and talk after.” She frowned, glancing over at Mark in concern, watching the confusion on his face bleeding away after a moment.

“And we came together.” Carol nodded, and Mark playfully rolled his eyes at her, gesturing for her to follow along as he resumed his trek toward the meeting. “It’s fine, Carol. I’ll drop you off afterwards, and I can come to get you later, once you’re done.” Carol blinked, staring at her husband’s back for a few moments before letting out a sigh. She didn’t have much of a chance to respond though since they’d evidently reached their destination.

Mark opened the door for her once more, and Carol flashed him a smile as she slid through it and into the room. They’d clearly been the last to arrive, and she returned the few nods that she received, moving over to take a seat next to Sarah, with Mark dropping into the chair on her left. Carol took a moment to glance around the room, taking in the capes present. She hadn’t really expected Armsmaster to be present, considering what’d happened, but the fact that this essentially meant that New Wave now almost matched the numbers of Protectorate capes was startling, especially as they were arrayed opposite each other.

Legend, the only member of the Triumvirate to remain past the first day, was seated at the head of
the table, speaking with Piggot who sat to his left. Next to her, Velocity, Dauntless and Triumph were doing their best to sit quietly, apparently waiting for the meeting to start. From his seat next to Dauntless, Assault shot her a friendly smile as their eyes met, and she returned it, her gaze drifting over Battery who was speaking with Miss Militia where she sat at the foot of the table.

On their own side of the table, Neil was sat next to Legend, Sarah next to him, and then herself and Mark made four capes to match up with the five capes on the Protectorate. Nine full time, active capes now left in the city to protect it against the gangs and the brewing disasters. The thought sent a shiver down Carol’s spine as Legend let out a casual cough and spoke smoothly, his voice subtle and calm.

“Alright, I think that’s everyone, let’s get started.” Legend shifted in his seat, opening the folder set before him, carefully considering the documents and humming faintly. “We’ve got a lot to cover today, and considering that while we’re doing this meeting we’re sort of working on borrowed time and hoping that nothing too disastrous happens while every grown cape in the city on the side of the angels is in this room, I should hope you’ll forgive me for doing what I can to get through as much of this as quickly as I can.” Legend paused to allow the mild chuckles to settle, collecting the papers before him and drawing the folder closer, staring down at it with a solemn frown.

“No objections then? Excellent. So, first off, I’d like to take this moment to thank New Wave for their patience in allowing us to fully examine the situation, and having enough trust in us as an organization so as not to immediately cut ties with everything that happened.” Legend glanced up, giving each of them an oddly earnest look that saw Carol’s frown slowly, her body relaxing back into her seat. Rather than staring back into those piercing blue eyes, she turned her attention toward Sarah, studying her sister’s stern expression as she matched Legend’s gaze for several moments before nodding resolutely. Carol glanced toward Legend, relaxing at the warm look on the man’s face. “Once again, I’d like to reiterate that your faith in us is rather reassuring, and I’ll do what I can to make sure that it’s not misplaced.” Shifting the pages before him, Legend drew one closer, setting his elbows on the table and lacing his fingers as he turned to study them all.

“With that in mind, I suppose we should start with a quick summary of what happened on Sunday night, now that we’ve got all the details.” Legend glanced around the room before glancing over toward Piggot and giving the woman a nod to indicate that she could take over. Piggot straightened up in her seat, crossing her legs and speaking smoothly.

“Rather than going over everything that we’ve all already covered or teased out on our own, I’ll do my best to be brief. Operating on skewed intelligence and shaky evidence, Armsmaster came to believe that at least portions of the Local Protectorate, PRT, and an affiliated Hero Team had been compromised by a Master. When he failed to engender any local support, he sought out external support from a PRT Director and initiated a foothold situation. The plan was evidently to collect everyone he suspected of being compromised, secure them all, and then call in experts to handle it.” Piggot glanced around the table, and then set her papers down, apparently waiting for comments. It didn’t take Sarah long to chime in.

“How was he able to do that without any further oversight?” Her words were tinged with disbelief and curiosity. Legend picked up the thread smoothly, shifting his pages and drawing out a different one.

“Outdated regulations mostly. PRT guidelines for this sort of thing were hastily penned with the assistance of the CIA and Congress back in ’98 when Heartbreaker was merrily storming across southern Ontario, and everyone was looking worriedly at all those Protectorate outfits so close to the border. The regulations as they were initially written didn’t really require one to go further up the
chain of command in this situation. Instead, any Director can initiate a Foothold situation at the behest of the local Protectorate head.” Legend stared at his page, and Carol glanced around, seeing the disbelief mirrored on the faces around her. Glancing back, she saw that Legend had looked up as well, and he let out a sigh, continuing.

“Despite how things went on Sunday, this wasn’t intended to be as much of a mess as it became. This is a non-lethal measure, and most of the issues we encountered were more to do with execution as opposed to the directive itself. If Armsmaster had managed to pull this off without the various… hiccups he encountered, he would have, at worst, captured you all, stuck you in a dozen cells for a few hours and you’d have all been checked over when we arrived in the morning, and you’d have all been discharged with our apologies.” Carol stared at Legend for a few moments, frowning as she considered his words. Before anyone else could comment, the man smoothly shook his head.

“Regardless, it’s become clear that we do need to re-examine these procedures, and we will be doing exactly so over the coming weeks.” Legend set the documents down, and Carol glanced over when Sarah spoke up.

“While that is reassuring, Legend, the minutiae of the Protectorate and the PRT’s internal policy review aren’t really the consequences that we’re all here to discuss.” Sarah stared at the blond man for a few moments until Legend let out a sigh and leaned back, crossing his arms.

“Fair enough, I suppose. Considering, well… everything that happened, I could see how you might have more pressing interests in what’s to be done in the wake of all this. Firstly, I will say that despite his protestations about how he was merely following procedure, an exhaustive examination of his actions in general since he’s taken the lead here, and more importantly leading up to the events in question has led us to conclude that it might be best for someone else to head the local branch of the Protectorate. Considering the other issues that might crop up in the wake of, well, everything… it’s been concluded that it might be best to see Armsmaster making his home in a different city where tension would be less strained.” Legend glanced down at his page, considering it carefully.

“Considering that despite everything else, he was operating within the command structure of the PRT, and no one was hurt, and the exact nature of the operation was sufficiently muddy so as to avoid any sort of explosive PR fiasco, it was decided that preventing him from ever advancing beyond a senior cape in the future would be punishment enough.” Legend glanced around, and Carol followed his gaze, waiting to see if anyone would protest. She studied Sarah’s jaw as it clenched, but no one spoke. Legend continuing drew her gaze back. “Speaking of the PR, we did manage to get to the press in time and spun the operations and the attack as an extension of the gang war going on in the city, and none of the criminal elements came out to protest it, leaving us mostly in the clear, despite everything else.” When Legend paused, Carol leaned forward, speaking for the first time.

“What of Gallant?” She watched as several sets of eyes snapped in her direction, and she did her best to keep her back straight and her gaze firm. She returned the looks until Miss Militia let out a soft sigh and spoke quietly.

“Gallant was examined by Resonance, and she cleared him of currently suffering under any sort of Master effect, though in her examination she found some issues that do cast his actions in a moderately different light. Considering all of this, Gallant has been asked to step down from the Wards, and he’s agreed to do so. In addition, we’ve arranged for a protective order that prevents him from seeking out or interacting with any member of New Wave at all.” The woman trailed off, nodding toward Legend, and Carol turned to stare at the hero who picked up the explanation.

“I’ve spoken with Mister Stansfield myself, and I’ve explained that Gallant as a hero is done,
considering everything. We spoke at length about what happened, and I’ve opted to give him the option of enrolling in the Protectorate when he turns eighteen with some caveats.” Carol felt her eyebrows rising, but before she could chime in, Legend continued smoothly. “Chiefly, it’s that he attends the counselling that we’ve arranged for him and continues to do so until his therapist sees fit to release him from it. Another matter was that he attend a class similar to the one that your daughter, Panacea, did about the ethical use of his powers. And finally, I’ve informed him that if he chooses to continue with his cape career, he will be transferred out of the city.” Legend trailed off, and Carol sat there, considering his words. When she didn’t respond after a few moments, Sarah’s voice would come forth.

“You mentioned that Armsmaster’s being transferred, who do they intend to replace him with?” The words were slow, subtle and Carol perked up, turning toward Legend in time to catch the flicker of distaste on his features. The man stared at her sister for a moment before sighing and leaning forward.

“Before we get into that, it might be best that we hear the report from Assault and Battery about the events that led to them avoiding being captured in Armsmaster’s net.” The man turned to stare over at the pair in question, and Carol followed suit. Assault perked up under the scrutiny and cleared his throat before speaking.

“Oh, right. So, we’ve been doing some random patrols with Parian whenever she has time over the last few weeks, and one of the recent ones she mentioned that Brandish’s daughters were taking their friends to the prom at their school.” Assault nodded in her direction and Carol curiously returned the nod, staring at him. “She didn’t come right out and say that she’d been feeling a bit excluded from things, but she’s a bit older than most of Second Wave, and I doubt it’s easy missing out on so much. So I suggested that she might come out with us that night, do something fun.” Assault gestured over toward Battery who nodded and picked up.

“She invited Laserdream along, and we all went out for some drinks and Karaoke at Pax. It was a fairly tame night, all things considered, especially given that Assault was present.” She shifted her head at the scoff from her husband and crossed her arms. “It was a relatively uneventful night until the troopers came in. They attempted to lure us out of the bar with a story about an emergency, but Assault noticed that they weren’t local Protectorate, and they wouldn’t explain why they were operating in the city. They had Armsmaster’s Master verification code, but not Director Piggot’s, and they were being especially cagey about what was going on.” Battery trailed off and Assault picked up in her wake.

“When I refused to play along, they began to get upset, but before things could escalate, a young woman interrupted and pointed out that in truth there was nothing that they could do to ‘force’ us to go with them, and explained the bar’s protections. This didn’t seem like it’d be enough to deter them, but then Kynigos Enna appeared, and that seemed to spook them. They made their escape, he commented that there was an issue in the city and that we’d best stay put, and then left us with the young lady for most of the remainder of the evening.”

“Prudence, right? Enna’s companion?” Sarah’s voice chimed in, and Assault blinked quickly as he nodded in response. Sarah frowned, and Carol glanced over at her sister. “Crystal mentioned her when she was explaining what happened. She didn’t seem to trust the woman.” Assault snickering softly drew Carol’s attention, but it was Piggot that questioned the man’s laughter.

“Something amusing about that, Assault?” The words were curious, and the tone a bit chilly, but this didn’t seem to dampen Assault’s mirth.
“Laserdream’s distaste for Prudence might have had less to do with her affiliations and more with the fact that ‘Pru’ was very attentive to Parian’s needs most of the evening, and that she capped off the night by writing her number on Parian’s palm before vanishing into the night.” The subtle smirk on the man’s face was a bit infectious, and despite the shock, Carol found herself mimicking it, as she internally wondered if anyone in her family would be able to produce a third wave. She glanced over at Sarah, taking in the thoughtful look on her sister’s face, but before anyone else could comment on that, Piggot quickly spoke.

“Perhaps this time, instead of allowing ourselves to be embroiled in the teenage drama about their relationships, we could focus on the actual matter at hand?” The woman’s exasperation was palpable, and Carol chuckled faintly before leaning forward and speaking since Sarah seemed a touch lost in her thoughts.

“Er, Right. Assault mentioned Kynigos Enna, he’s a villain of some sort, right?” She glanced around at the others, starting when Miss Militia responded.

“Kynigos would argue that point, and the PRT is very careful not to accuse him of being so, considering the numerous connections that he has. Most of the time, Enna refers to himself as an information broker and arranger.” The woman trailed off, and Carol blinked, staring at the woman.

“You’ve met him?” She chimed in, and Miss Militia nodded, though it was Legend who smoothly responded, leaning forward and speaking calmly.

“Perhaps it might be best to start from the beginning. Kynigos Enna is a Rogue, more than that, Enna is the reason that a large chunk of the laws pertaining to Rogue Parahumans in the United States are written the way that they are. He’s been active for almost twenty years, and he’s been in the States for much of that. Despite his appearance, we’re fairly certain that he is a cyborg as opposed to an actual robot. We’re also pretty sure that he wasn’t the one that rebuilt his body like that. He was first sighted with Sphere in early 1990, and it’s been long suspected that he was a friend of the tinker and that some accident nearly killed him and Sphere was the one that placed him that metallic shell.” Legend glanced around at them for a few moments before continuing smoothly.

“Speaking of, despite him being active in America, he remained closely tied to Sphere up until he vanished during the first Simurgh attack, since then he’s been mostly independent, working on his own.” Legend glanced down at his papers, and a heavy feeling of recognition washed through Carol, she leaned forward, speaking slowly, nervously.

“You’re talking about Arsenal.” The words were quiet, worried, and she watched as every eye in the room turned to her. She was confused at the table being relatively evenly split between confusion on her side, and concern on the other one. Seeing Sarah’s curious look, Carol frowned and spoke quietly. “Remember? Lightstar was always going on about him. He’s that tinker that can replicate power affects with his gun-” Sarah’s eyes flickered with recognition and Carol turned to peer over toward Legend. The blond man stared at her for a few moments before nodding slowly.

“Yes, that’s what the PRT assigned him as a placeholder name, though I would caution you against using it.” Carol blinked, frowning curiously. Legend met her gaze for a moment before continuing. “Enna, he has a very… particular opinion about cape culture, and cape names in particular. He views them as segregational and dehumanizing. The last person that refused to use his given, or perhaps more likely, chosen name was the then-Director Costa-Brown.” Legend frowned quietly when Piggot made a noise of discontent, glancing over and giving her a firm look for a few moments before continuing carefully.
“When she continued to insist on referring to him by that moniker, despite his numerous polite attempts to dissuade her, Enna placed his considerable support behind the Reed family in retaliation, making it very clear why he was doing so. With his assistance, the elder Reeds went from overreacting helicopter parents without a scrap of proof, to dutifully concerned guardians with a surfeit of it.” Legend leaned back and crossed his arms quietly. “This, consequentially, was when the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Parahuman Affairs chose to step in. They overrode the directorship council and created a set of rules, especially for dealing with Enna. He was, and remains, the only parahuman on American soil that the PRT is outright banned from interacting with, barring a congressional order.” Legend paused here, and Carol watched as Sarah spoke up, her voice tinged with confusion.

“From what I recall, Lightstar didn’t exactly imply that Ars-” Carol watched as Sarah suddenly paused when confronted with a half dozen rather serious looks from around the table, coughing and continuing smoothly. “Enna, that is, was a villain.”

“Strictly speaking, he isn’t. While the PRT and Protectorate have blacklisted his services, the United States Government still makes use of his considerable skills and connections, and while he sometimes deals with villains, he wouldn’t be termed one. He generally keeps his nose clean, and while there are parts of the PRT that suspect that he is involved in more nefarious dealings, there exists scant evidence of any wrongdoing on his part. In truth, Enna would be termed the consummate rogue, the issue being the uniquely vicious way that he is known to defend his independence.” Legend’s voice was smooth, and he crossed his arms with a quiet rasp of his uniform’s material against itself. “Despite this, he tends to have a rather disruptive effect on the areas that he moves through, so much so that the same legislation that prevents the PRT from interacting with Enna, provides certain… mechanisms for dealing with him. Primarily this is in the form of an established… handler.”

Glancing over at her sister, Carol considered the confused look on Sarah’s face before glancing around the table seeing a mixture of confusion and impatience on the rest of the faces, though the vaguest hints of distaste on what could be seen of Miss Militia’s features above her mask were a bit perturbing. After taking in the general feeling of the room, Carol turned over toward Legend, and since no one seemed inclined to prod him, she chose to do so.

“And so, I assume that this handler is coming to Brockton Bay?” She watched as Legend nodded smoothly and rested his elbows on the table once more.

“Enna’s had the same handler for nearly 12 years now.” Legend glanced at Miss Militia, and Carol followed his gaze before turning back when he spoke. “The cape in question was actually one of my inaugural Wards, he ended up saving her from a messy situation early in his career, and they established a bit of a rapport. In the end, during much of his stay in New York, she was the only one capable of mitigating his impact on our efforts, and when he moved on, she was moved to follow him and keep him as contained as one can.” Legend frowned quietly and glanced down at his papers. “Which leads us back into who’s to be replacing Armsmaster. Both as in his role as one of Brockton Bay’s capes, and more importantly, who’s to be replacing him heading up the local branch of the Protectorate.”

“You can’t possibly mean to-” The words were soft, and monotone, but Carol turned and took in the shock visible in Miss Militia’s features, staring at the woman’s hands gripping the table. Turning back to Legend, she watched as the man stiffened up, but continued.

“It’s not the choice that I would have made, Miss Militia. Unfortunately, when no obvious replacement was immediately apparent, the PRT stepped in. The directorship council decided to take
“Care of two birds with one stone.” Carol stared at Legend in confusion, leaning forward and speaking coolly.

“Sorry, who exactly are we talking about here?” Legend’s blue eyes drifted her way, but Piggot was the one that spoke up, answering her question.

“Mouse Protector.” The words were smooth and deadpan, and Carol felt her eyebrows rising in surprise. She heard a quick ‘Ha’ from Assault that quickly died off when no one else reacted with amusement. When Piggot’s gaze drifted away from her toward Assault, Carol followed, staring at the confused man. “This is no joke, Assault. The rest of the directors have decided that since no obvious replacement exists in another department, and they’d rather not put any of our capes in charge considering what’s happened, Mouse Protector was chosen to serve as an interim head until we find someone more suitable to replace her.” Piggot spoke with forced calmness, and Carol glanced back at her, taking in the tightening of her jaw and the tension in her form, wondering just how much Piggot was over-ridden on this.

“Legend, are you sure that this is a wise idea? Abigail, she’s—” Miss Militia spoke carefully, and Legend held up a hand, cutting her off. Carol glanced over, taking in Miss Militia’s visibly tense form as Piggot spoke up instead of Legend, her nasal voice oddly calm.

“Mouse Protector has earned herself a reputation with the PRT, Miss Militia. As you can imagine, when working as a chaperone to a transient cape, like Enna, she tends to move into several different departments, which offers her a rather unique perspective on how most departments are run. She’s made a name for herself in sniffing out problems, and that’s earned her several friends on the directorship council. That’ll be her primary job here, going over what’s been done with the local branch and smoothing out any issues that she finds.” Carol studied Piggot, glancing up when Neil spoke up, his rumbling voice laced with understanding.

“And a fringe benefit to this is that the PRT is seen doing something, putting a charismatic and well thought of cape in charge after the ‘attacks’ we suffered, add to that how well known she is, and we might actually have a well-liked cape that might hopefully serve as a counter to Calvert.” Legend glanced over at Neil, considering the large man for a few moments before nodding and responding calmly.

“I imagine that was the thought process, though I should caution you all. Despite her public persona, Mouse Protector isn’t someone to take lightly. When she first started bringing up issues with the Protectorate departments, she came to me, and I admit that I brushed them aside.” He paused, taking in their looks and sighed. “She’d ended up in Saint Louis, and there was a pair of young Wards that were upset that they weren’t receiving as much attention from their team leader because their powers weren’t as inventive as their teammates, and I didn’t really feel that it was my place to step in, beyond offering a comment to the team leader there.” Legend frowned, continuing smoothly.

“When this didn’t come to the result that she wanted, she went over my head to the PRT Directors and the Youth Guard. On top of being Enna’s handler, she’s also been his friend for a long time, and she’s learned a degree of ruthless determination from him.” Legend’s expression turned grim, and he tapped his fingers on the table. “You might consider that first example a bit trite, but she’s also uncovered other issues, from an organized gambling ring among the troopers, to bribery and corruption between the local villains and capes. She’s been through nearly a dozen departments by now, and she has an eye for this kind of thing because people tend to look at her and see the cheerful, exuberant cape in mouse themed armour and underestimate her.” Legend shook his head quietly and then glanced around when no one commented he turned back to his page quietly.
“She was caught up dealing with the remains of a human trafficking ring in Nevada, but now that that matter is handled, she indicated that we can expect her in the next day or two. Miss Militia, you’ll remain in charge of the Wards, though you can expect some oversight there, and Dauntless, she’s requested that you serve as her deputy of sorts until she’s settled.” Legend glanced up, getting nods from the others and let out a long sigh, putting more papers to the side.

“Excellent, now that that’s handled let’s go over patrols for next week. You’ll notice that some of the shifts are changed, this is to account for the upcoming long weekend. We’re not collaborating on the fourth of July festivities with the city, but we will still be doing citywide patrols in case anyone decides to interfere. Dauntless, you and Velocity will be…”

-------------------

Despite Mel’s excitement, Amy had eventually put her foot down and forced Mel and Taylor to agree to discuss this more at a later date. Victoria had ultimately managed to drag Taylor out onto the street, and Amy had watched the pair for a few minutes, observing as Victoria helped Taylor practice with the skates for a bit before they’d slowly vanished down the street, clearly heading for the Boardwalk on foot.

Once they’d vanished from view, Amy had set about giving Mel a tour of the house, showing the woman around until they’d ended up in her bedroom. Mel had been humming in thought for the last five minutes as she carefully examined the decor, and Amy found herself nervously perched on the edge of the bed, staring up at the therapist as she walked around the space. When the woman finally took a seat and turned to her, Amy let out a quiet sigh of relief.

“You seem to have settled in here surprisingly well, Amy.” Amy blinked at her in confusion and Mel gestured around. Amy stared around at her decorations and blinked quietly, frowning a bit as she wondered what the woman meant. Sensing her confusion, Mel nodded her head toward the desk she sat beside, and Amy followed her gaze as the therapist spoke slowly. “I saw the guest room you used at your Aunt’s, and you’ve shown me pictures of you in your old room, and despite the similar furniture, you seem to have settled in here more. Made your mark.”

Amy glanced around the room, looking for what the woman meant. Her eyes lingered on the corkboard above her desk that she’d bought with Victoria not long after she’d moved into Taylor’s old room and she considered the calendar and the chore sheet on it with everything highlighted, and the images that’d been tacked around the edges, shots of her and her friends curled up on a movie night, or the photos from the barbecue, her favourite being Eric leaping wildly away from a massively flaming grill.

Her attention drifted from the board to the posters that she’d put up on the walls, and the few pieces of art that she’d done that she felt deserved to be displayed. Meticulously detailed sketches of her family. Taylor and Victoria’s faces peeking from one page, Lily, Sabah and everyone on another. Her mother’s smoky gaze by the door with her father’s nervous excitement. She considered the space as a whole before turning nervously back to Mel.

“I guess you’re right, I hadn’t really thought of it to be honest, but I guess it’s just… easier here.” She glanced over, taking in Mel’s surprised look and fidgeting.

“Why do you think that is, Amy?” The question wasn’t a surprise, but Amy still waited for it to be
asked before responding carefully.

“It’s just… different here? The feel of the house is different. It’s…” Amy frowned, searching for the right words. “I want to say that the house has… history, but that’s the wrong word. Mom’s house had history, too, but it was different. Mom’s place was like a museum. Everything carefully selected and arranged. Every detail was precisely oriented. I decorated my room with Mom because she made sure that everything fit just right, but here it’s… organic.” Amy rubbed nervously at her arm and let out a sigh, glancing around and considering things for a few moments, defaulting to her most easily understandable metaphor.

“It’s like a tree. Mom’s place was like the kind of trees that you see at botanical gardens. Carefully planted, and cared for, precisely organized and shaped to be as close to perfect as it naturally could be. And Taylor’s house is like that ancient oak that sits in the middle of a park because it was too big to safely cut down with all the houses around it. Massive and twisty and ancient, and so full of history.” Amy let out a sigh as she crossed her legs. “Every inch of the house has a story that Taylor’s so happy to share or include us in. More than that, though, it feels like there’s space here.”

Amy frowned at her hands.

“Sometimes at home, it felt like… It felt like Mom had carefully slotted everything in, the house was hers, and it was all arranged to her standards, and we were more like… pieces of the set rather than actual participants. Here, I feel like I’m part of the family. Like I can put my own footprint in, and it won’t matter, and someday, years from now, Taylor will point at a chip in the wall, and it’ll be a story about me and how I knocked into the desk when I was wrestling with Victoria, and we both had bruises, and it’ll make her smile, like when she talks about why her mom had to hide the chocolate chips in the cornmeal jar to keep her dad from eating them, as she sneakily admits that it was never her dad doing the sneaking.” Amy rubbed at her arm again, letting out a nervous sigh. She glanced over at Mel, wondering if the woman would comment, make any observations, but the woman merely adjusted her glasses and leaned back in the chair.

Mel was really good at letting things settle, and she didn’t speak, giving Amy time to collect her thoughts and to still the increased beating of her heart. After a few moments, the minute sense of worry and embarrassment faded, and Amy let out a long sigh of relief. Picking up on this, Amy glanced over when Mel lifted the sketchpad from her desk. This was another aspect of their therapy that Amy had long gotten used to. Mel would examine her latest drawings, and they’d often use it as a window into discussing what’d been on her mind. Amy frowned as Mel’s eyebrows rose and she flipped through the newest sketches.

Despite Amy’s best efforts, most of them had been of Lily, some of the girl in her dress at the prom with a smile on her face, others with the girl alone and upset in her cell. Amy shifted in place, nervously rubbing at her arm, waiting for Mel to finish her examination, for the woman to say something, anything. Eventually, Mel came to the end of the newer drawings, and Amy watched as the woman merely adjusted her glasses and leaned back in the chair.

“This is your friend, Lily, right?” Mel spoke softly, Amy glanced over, staring at the page that showed Lily’s face, those dark eyes staring worriedly up at Mel’s features. Amy considered the woman for a few moments before nodding tentatively. “She seems… upset in this image. Not sad, like in the others, or happy. But… concerned.” Mel glanced over at Amy and lifted an eyebrow. “Would you care to discuss it?” The words were careful, and Amy knew that she could reject the offer and they’d discuss something else, but part of her ached to discuss this with someone.

The words came haltingly at first, Amy started with how she’d first met Lily, refreshing Mel’s memory before pushing on and discussing her growing fascination with the girl. She carefully
explained everything else that happened, her upset at what happened with Taylor and Victoria, and
how she and Lily had grown closer in the wake, and then she’d gone through the birthday party and
everything that had happened between them since.

Eventually, after she’d related the events of the dance, and the insane night that had followed, she ran
out of things to say, slumping back onto her bed after telling Mel in brief terms about how she’d
convinced Lily to stay with her, to sleep in the same bed again and then the halting conversation that
they’d had a week before. She lay there on her back, considering if she should mention the confusing
mess of things that their conversations since Monday had been like, but before she could find the
words to convey this, Mel’s voice drifted over her.

“Amy,” The words were soft, chiding, and Amy would nervously glance over, staring at the older
woman as she crossed her legs. Mel returned the look for a moment before speaking as gently as she
could. “I hate to say this, but you’re sort of not being terribly fair to your friend in this situation.”
Amy sat up, staring back at Mel. She opened her mouth to argue, but nothing came out, and after a
few moments, she spoke nervously.

“What do you mean? How am I not being fair?” The words were soft, and Mel considered her for a
few moments, sighing before speaking.

“Firstly? You’ve not really done your best to try and see this entire situation from Lily’s perspective,
Amy. How well do you know her?” Amy stared at Mel in confusion and the woman leaned back,
resting her hands on her knees. “She’s your friend, and you know some things about her, but do you
know anything about her as a potential partner?” Amy frowned and considered her hands. She knew
that she was attracted to Lily and that Lily was attracted to her, but beyond that, details were hazy.

“I, I’m not sure…” Amy frowned, watching as Mel’s expression softened. The woman shifted
closer, leaning toward her.

“Amy, you need to understand that despite your… esoteric issues when it comes to your relationship
issues, on the whole as far as acceptance goes? You’ve had a much easier transition in regards to
coming to terms with your sexuality than most teenaged lesbians. And contrary to how things with
your sister and Taylor have gone? Things like this aren’t necessarily easy.” The woman stared at her,
slipping to her feet and dropping next to Amy, leaning back to rest next to her on the bed.

“Communication is the big issue here, There’s a system of sorts when dealing with this kind of thing
that straight people don’t tend to get bogged down in.” Waving one of her hands as if thinking, Mel
continued calmly, her voice becoming thoughtful. “For example, you know that Lily’s attracted to
girls, but do you know if she’s gay? As opposed to bisexual? Would that bother you? Does she
know if you’re gay?” The questions were gentle, but Amy still frowned as it occurred to her that she
didn’t really understand this aspect of things. Before she could lose herself in her thoughts, Mel’s
voice drew her attention again.

“Amy this is supposed to be the fun part of any new relationship, and rushing into things sort of robs
you of that? You’ve got a chance to learn all these things about Lily and see if you really do match,
and more than that, you get to let her see the real you, and see if that’s something that she wants to
explore. You get to tell her the story of how you found out you were gay, and cringe when she
laughs, and then you can listen as she tells you her story.” Amy blinked and frowned, considering
the question, and shifting in place as she considered it. After a few moments of introspection, she
peered over at Mel, “…and that doesn’t even touch on the fact that she might have been both a
closeted lesbian and a closeted cape, Amy. You need to give her reasons to trust you. Reasons to
convince her that it’s worth the risk.”
“What other things should I ask her about?” She sat up when Mel did, and reached for the nearby sketchpad, moving to jot down the questions that the woman was offering up, feeling the clenching pressure in her chest slowly loosening as she finally understood some of Lily’s concerns.

---

Watching the car rounding the corner onto a familiar street, Carol took a deep, steadying breath and reached into the back seat, carefully collecting her satchel from where she’d set it. She tucked the leather bag into her lap and nervously shifted her feet as Mark drove the car up the street, pulling up behind the truck that Victoria had been using and Mel’s rental car. Mark killed the engine, and Carol sat there, staring at her lap quietly and frowning as she tried to will herself to move.

Mark was quiet for a few moments, but Carol could feel his eyes on her, and eventually, she lifted her head glancing over at him. She took the earnest, patient expression on his face and let out a long sigh.

“It’ll be fine, just, you know, be honest.” When Mark offered her a gentle smile, Carol nervously rubbed at her cheek before leaning over and grasping the sleeve of his shirt. She drew him close and feathered a soft kiss to his cheek. She unhooked her seatbelt and slid out of the car, pausing when Mark’s voice chased her out. “Just call me when you’re done, and I’ll come back and grab you.” Carol peered in at him and nodded before standing.

She stood in place on the driveway, watching as Mark turned the car on, backing slowly out of the driveway and onto the street, the car pulling out of view after a few moments. Carol ascended the steps onto the porch and glanced around, pausing and frowning. Without Danny, she’d expected the place to have fallen into more of a state of disrepair, it’d been nearly two months, but the house seemed fine.

She set her bag down by the door and stepped back, carefully inspecting the porch. It had been swept recently and glancing out over the lawn saw that the grass was neatly trimmed. She tilted her head in thought, wondering if it was only Taylor taking care of such things and shaking her head. Victoria wouldn’t have stood for that, her eldest daughter tended to have something of fair-minded streak that would have forced them to split up the chores. Moving over, Carol reached up, carefully depressing the doorbell.

As she waited, Carol reached down, grabbing the satchel and lifting it up, both hands nervously gripping the top of the bag. She wasn’t surprised when the door slid open easily, and Amy was revealed. They both stood there awkwardly, and Carol imagined that Amy was scrabbling just as much for something, anything to say. Carol carefully studied her daughter, taking in the comfortable shorts and the t-shirt she wore, the simple pony-tail of her hair.

Most telling was the fading circles under her eyes the healthy tan that she’d started to develop. There was tension there, a hint of nervousness brimming in her daughter’s dark eyes but considering things, that wasn’t entirely unexpected. Eventually, Amy waved her in, and Carol followed her daughter through the door.

“Meeting was quicker than you expected?” The question was unexpected, and Carol glanced over as she kicked off her shoes, staring curiously at Amy at the question. “You’re a bit earlier than you said you’d be, is all.”
“Are you guys finished? I could wait or come back in a bit.” Carol blinked at the lingering nervousness she felt, and she watched as Amy shook her head, her daughter’s hair bouncing around her head.

“No, no. We’re finished. She was just packing up her stuff, and then I think she’s going to be heading out.” The sound of footsteps at the top of the stairs silenced them both, and Mel appeared, descending them smoothly.

“Actually, Amy. Your mother asked me to stick around for a bit, there are some things that she wanted to talk about that are a bit hard for her, and she was hoping for some support if that’s alright with you.” Carol studied Amy’s face, watching the growing apprehension on her face, but Amy didn’t refuse, nodding after a moment.

“...Alright, well we can talk in the kitchen or the living room? Or out back?” Carol watched Amy’s gaze flutter around the hallway for a moment, seeking something to focus on. When their eyes met, Amy offered her a nervous smile and nodded toward the kitchen. “Did you need a drink or anything?” Amy tried nervously. Carol stared at her before glancing over at Mel, who seemed content to remain silent and observe for the moment. Taking a deep breath, Carol did her best to offer Amy a smile and responded softly.

“Water is fine if you’ve got it, and we can talk in the living room, I suppose.” Carol watched Amy nod softly before disappearing into the kitchen. She glanced at Mel, rolling her eyes at the woman’s faintly amused expression. She turned, striding into the living room and taking it in like she had the porch. Furniture dusted, carpet and furniture vacuumed. She hummed faintly in fascination as she slid over and took a seat on the couch.

Mel followed her in, setting her briefcase to the side and sitting in the large chair in the room. Mel didn’t speak, and Carol was thankful for the scant few moments of extra silence so that she could attempt to gather her thoughts. Eventually, Amy returned, carrying a bottle of water in hand that she then offered over. Accepting the bottle, Carol cracked the top and took a sip as Amy settled on the other end of the couch and stared at her. They sat in awkward silence for several minutes before Carol took a deep breath and started carefully.

“I, uh- I wanted to thank you for giving me this chance to talk, Amy. I know things between us haven’t been the best for a while now, and I was sort of hoping that you might give me the chance to explain.” She glanced toward Amy, taking in the guarded expression on her daughter’s face, studying Amy’s freckled countenance for a few moments before continuing. “This isn’t an easy subject for me to discuss, by any stretch of the imagination, but I think it’s time that you finally understood. I’ve always been tough on you, Amy, and...”

Carol paused, frowning as she stared down at her hands, scrabbling for the place to start, those words that would perfectly convey how she was feeling, what she wanted to tell Amy. They lingered out of her grasp for nearly a minute though, and she could feel the other two staring at her as she puzzled over just what she might say to finish that thought that wouldn’t make it seem like she’d been a terrible mother.

“It’s cause I’m adopted, right?” The words were laced with a sort of resigned bitterness that made Carol’s chest ache as she glanced up at her daughter. They sat there shocked as she stared at Amy’s smooth expression, the girl staring down at her lap as she picked at a loose thread on her shorts. Amy continued to speak in that tone of voice as she kept her gaze on her navel. “I mean, I get it. You always had an easier time of things with Victoria because she was your real daughter.”
“No, Amy.” The words were sharp, sharper than she’d intended and Carol winced as Amy flinched back, glancing up toward her with those wide dark eyes of hers. Carol sat there, staring into those murky emerald depths and things shifted in her mind, details clicking together as she understood the distance that had slowly yawned between her and Amy. Moving closer, Carol spoke gently, keeping her eyes on Amy’s. “Amy, you need to understand that you are my daughter, no matter who gave birth to you.” She watched Amy’s reaction, studied the girl’s tense form, doing her best to remain still as Amy’s eyes searched her face, looking for something.

“Then why? You’ve always treated Victoria differently, being kinder, more loving with her…” Amy spoke tentatively, and Carol paused for a few moments before nervously reaching over. She opened up her satchel, carefully drawing out the leather-bound album from within. She studied Amy for a moment before gently patting the spot next to her and gesturing Amy closer. When Amy joined her, Carol flipped the book open, paging through several pages of old images of blonde girls, coming to a stop at a specific image.

She tilted the book toward Amy, letting her daughter inspect the image. Two teenaged blonde girls in catholic school uniforms. They were nearly the same height, the same build, even had similar haircuts. One was smiling broadly, holding up an arm and making a peace sign with her hand, and she’d gotten an arm around the other who had a much more reluctant smile on her features and didn’t seem overly comfortable in the frame. Carol studied Amy’s face as the girl considered the image.

“It’s you and Aunt Sarah. When you were teenagers, right?” The words were soft, and Carol nodded, reaching out a hand and touching the page, tracing the edges of the image.

“Amy, you should understand that despite how much like me Victoria looks?” Carol spoke carefully and then gently tapped the stern girl in the image, studying Amy’s face. “You’re very much my daughter as well, and sometimes, Amy? Sometimes that terrifies me.” She studied the look on Amy’s face as she considered the image for a moment before turning back to study her.

“Why?” The word was filled confusion, and Carol let out a long exhausted sigh as she glanced back down at the book, speaking slowly. She slowly ran her hand over the image on the page, tracing her fingers over the tattered plastic it was made from.

“A little over a year after this photo was taken, your aunt and I were kidnapped.” She listened to the hiss of breath coming from Amy, and she firmed her resolve, continuing carefully. “We were kept for weeks, locked in a dark room together. We later found out that we were held as the kidnappers attempted to hold our father up for ransom. They wanted money, and unfortunately for them, and for us, our father had little inclination to pay.” Carol stared at the image quietly.

She started when Amy’s hand gently rested on her arm, and she glanced over, staring at Amy’s concerned features. She offered Amy a smile and turned back to the page, continuing slowly.

“Needless to say, when our father proved uncooperative, the kidnappers were incensed. I’d come to trust one of them, he’d been kind enough. He was probably the only reason that Sarah and I didn’t starve to death, and sometimes in situations like that, you latch onto whatever kindness you can find.” Carol frowned at the book in her lap. “When his partner came for Sarah, she’d been sick, weeks with so little food, so little water. If they’d just left us there and disappeared, we’d have probably died, but they came, and he went after your aunt with a knife, and she triggered.” Carol stared at the book. “And then the nice one came for me, and I was so shocked, so betrayed. I’d empathized with him, and he was trying to shoot me. I triggered, as well.” Carol frowned at her hands, the image replaying in her mind.
“Sarah’s victim was luckier. Her blasts are kinetic, she beat him senseless, but the nice guy? I carved him into pieces. He didn’t stand a chance, and in my betrayal and anger, I destroyed him. That sort of set a tone for things to come, Amy. I was… I was brutal at times when I didn’t need to be. The world had been cruel to me, and I felt justified, entitled to be angry back. And sometimes Amy, I’d look at you and I’d see that same chip on your shoulder, and it terrified me because I have so many regrets about the things I did, and I don’t want you to have those same regrets as well.” Carol glanced over at Amy, studying the girl’s face, letting out a soft sigh at the flicker of emotions on the girl’s face.

“And that’s why.” The words were soft, laced with recognition and confusion. Carol stared at Amy, studying her face. Amy stared back, and the words spilled from her lips. “I… I thought you didn’t want me. I once heard you and Aunt Sarah… talking. You mentioned how she’d had to talk you into taking me…” Amy glanced down at the book, and Carol studied her, biting back a soft curse and shaking her head.

“At first, Amy? I was terrified. Your father reminded me of that man a great deal, the one that I destroyed. He was unabashedly criminal, but there was a certain charisma to him that terrified me, and I remember that first week where you were in my house, and you were furious with me for taking your daddy away, and I was terrified that you’d be just like him, and Victoria was a mess, and Mark was adjusting to his drugs and I… just wanted to scream and scream.” Carol studied Amy for a few moments before gently nodding at the other occupant of the room. Amy’s head snapped up as if she’d just remembered that Mel was there. She stared at the psychiatrist, who smoothly adjusted her glasses and spoke finally.

“I’d heard about what had happened, from Neil, he’d been talking with Nick, and they’d mentioned your mother’s concerns, and while I hadn’t known Carol as well as your mother at uni, I gave her a call and asked how she was holding up.” Mel glanced her way, and Carol let out an amused snort when Amy followed her gaze.

“I burst in tears,” Carol admitted slowly. “I just. The stress got to me, and I started crying, and Mel invited me over for tea, and that sort of turned into our first session. I’ve been seeing her once a week since. She’s sort of helped me frame things.” Carol frowned quietly. “Recently, she’s also helped me understand that despite my intentions, I might have done more harm than good.” Carol took a deep breath and turned to stare at Amy.

Amy glanced between them, and Carol tensed, waiting for an explosion, some sort of anger or hurt at this secret that they’d kept, but after a few moments, Amy’s form slumped back into the couch, and she let out a long low sigh. Carol reached out, gently touching Amy’s shoulder, watching as her daughter tensed a bit.

“I’ve never wanted to leave you to feel like you weren’t part of our family, Amy. You are my daughter.” She watched as Amy relaxed slowly and looked at her with an unsettled look on her face. “Do you remember when you were eight? I’d come home from work, and you’d been locked in your room ‘doing homework’?” She watched as Amy’s face coloured, and she felt her lips curling into a smile. Glancing over, Carol offered Mel a wink as she spoke to the therapist. “Amy had gotten into my make-up, and after smearing it all over her face, and since Victoria had just gotten a hair cut, Amy’d decided that she needed to ‘fix her hair’ as well.” She watched Mel’s lips curling into an amused smile as Amy tried to cut in.

“M-Mom!” the words were plaintive, and Carol glanced back at Amy, studying her.

“Do you remember what happened afterwards?” She stared at her daughter, watching as Amy gave
her a serious look in reply and then nodded, speaking.

“T’d looked at myself in the mirror, and figuring out what I’d done and I was so afraid of getting in trouble that I hid in my closet. And when you found me, I started sobbing.” Amy frowned at her hands, and Carol studied Amy’s face, wondering what was going through her head. “I was terrified that you’d be angry, that you’d send me away.” Carol frowned at the words, studying Amy.

“But I didn’t, I washed your face and assured you that you were being silly as you continued to cry. And I called my hairdresser and called in a favour she owed me, to have her come out and fix the mess you’d made of your hair, and despite all those tears, you took one look at your short hair and instantly fell in love.” Carol reached out, playfully toying with her daughter’s bangs. “And I was right, you know, it does quite suit you.”

Carol grinned when Amy blushed and waved a hand at her, but she didn’t press. Amy stared back at her for a few moments, and Carol waited for the other shoe to drop, for something else to come up, but after a few moments Amy seemed to find what she was looking for, and she turned her attention to the large book spread over the both of their laps. She glanced at the images for a few moments before turning the page and staring at the picture of the two girls in shorts and t-shirts wrestling with a large golden retriever.

“You had a dog?” The question was quiet, and Carol nodded.

“Sparky.” She grinned at Amy’s affronted look and shrugged up a shoulder. “Your aunt named him, but we both loved him. Unfortunately, your father is allergic, as is Eric, and with how much we all work together, it was pointed out that it’d be a pretty bad idea for us to get one.” She watched as Amy nodded before turning back to the book. Carol watched her flip the pages occasionally chiming in with a comment here or there.

Carol carefully rinsed the cups on the counter, setting them in the sink and placing her empty water bottle in the recycling bin. She listened as Amy and Mel spoke with indistinct murmuring by the doorway, turning when Amy’s footsteps approached. They’d studied the photo album a bit more, and once they’d both cooled off, they spent a bit more time discussing things with Mel there to serve as a mediator as Amy had gone through the dark feelings that she’d had.

Now more than ever, Carol was tempted to find Dean and wring his neck as the true scope of the things that Amy had been going through had been revealed. Taking the tea-towel in hand, Carol wiped her hands off and then placed it back where it had been hanging over the handle of the oven. She glanced toward the sound of the two speaking by the door and, unable to resist, she stepped over, carefully opening the fridge and peering in.

Relief flickered through her at finding more than soda and condiments within, and she was surprised to see an interesting collection of leftovers, a lot of water and a significant portion of fruit. More processed meats than she’d have preferred, but they were kids. The sound of someone clearing their throat behind her saw her wincing and slowly closing the door.

Glancing back, Carol took in Amy’s unimpressed look, and she considered her daughter before straightening her back and flashing the girl an unrepentant smile.
“I’m your mother, I’m allowed to worry whether you’re eating well.” She watched as Amy considered her for a moment before rolling her eyes. Amy glanced around the kitchen, nodding when she saw the dishes in the sink and then she gestured toward the street with her head.

“Where’s your car?” The question surprised her, but Carol shook it off quickly enough, striding toward Amy.

“Your father and I commuted in together for the meeting, and he dropped me off here on his way back home. I’ll just call him to come to get me now that we’re done.” Carol blinked at the expression on Amy’s face, tilting her head as the girl’s expression twisted a bit. “Something wrong?”

“Not… wrong, but uh. Victoria and Taylor ended up running into everyone downtown, and they don’t really want to fly back here to grab stuff. I was just gonna bring it all over on the bus, but if you’re getting picked up by Dad anyway maybe you could drive me and Vic’s truck over?” Amy looked at her hopefully, and Carol blinked at the request, her lips curling into an amused smile.

“I doubt it’ll be an issue. What all do you need to bring? And where are we going?” Carol trailed after Amy, watching as she opened the door that led out into the garage. When Amy started struggling to get a small cooler down off one of the wooden shelves, Carol stepped forward and reached up, snagging it and handing it to her daughter. Amy responded as she led the way back into the house.

“The Boardwalk is doing a teen’s night music festival thing tonight. Starts at seven? Street food, music, open mics all that sort of thing. We’re all meeting up and hanging out.” Amy moved back into the house and set the small cooler down, grabbing a bag of ice from the freezer of the fridge. Carol took a step back, watching in amused fascination as her daughter banged it rather expertly off the kitchen table to break up the ice and spread a fair portion of it over the base of the cooler, setting to work filling the cooler with bottles of water and juice along with some snacks.

Impressed, she crossed her arms, leaning against the wall and studying Amy as she layered more ice over the top of the refreshments. It was odd seeing Amy like this, so familiar in the house, and so familiar with such a mundane task. Back at home, Mark would have handled most of these details, if he could have worked up the motivation to deal with them anyway. Amy glanced her way and blushed, but Carol waited for her to finish and then walked over to snag the case, hefting it up.

“I’ve got to grab a few things from upstairs, and get changed, but we can head out after?” Amy spoke quickly, gesturing up toward the upper floor.

Nodding smoothly, Carol watched Amy vanish up the stairs. Carrying the case over to the front door, Carol set it down, taking a moment to vanish back into the living room to grab her bag. Making her way back out, Carol snagged the keys from the hook by the door, carrying everything out. After working out the keys to unlock the truck, she set the cooler up on the middle seat of the cab.

Leaning against the door of the truck, Carol waited, perking up with fascination when Amy emerged a few minutes later. Amy’d traded in her shorts for a set of fitted jeans and a comfortable top, a loose shirt hanging from her shoulders and fluttering in the breeze as she headed toward the truck carrying a guitar case and some folded blankets in her arms.

Slipping around the truck, Carol opened the door for her daughter, taking the case off her hands so that Amy could drop the blankets on the seat, hopping up onto them, and then she handed the case over once Amy’d secured her seatbelt. Heading back to the driver’s side of the truck, Carol hopped
in, secured her own belt and slid the key into the ignition.

It was an odd feeling, sitting at the wheel of this truck as the ageing vehicle rumbled like a geriatric cat, but when she shifted it into gear and pulled it out onto the road, it drove surprisingly well for its age. Carol set off, glancing at Amy as they pulled off of the residential streets and out into traffic.

“So, where are we headed, Amy?” Glancing up at the question, Amy gestured toward the coast and responded quickly.

“Uh, they said Mercantile Park? The one at the Southern end of the Boardwalk, so it’s a bit closer to downtown. There’s a public parking lot there that we can park the truck at and it’s a nice enough park for us to relax at until the festivities start.” Nodding smoothly, Carol hummed faintly in thought as she guided the truck through the slow traffic.

“So,” Carol spoke quietly as they came to a stop three cars back from a red light. When Amy glanced in her direction, she continued smoothly. “Considering… everything, Victoria and Taylor were willing to accept an invitation from your father and me to have dinner sometime next week, and I know that your father would love to see you as well. Would you want to join us? Or some other time?” Carol studied Amy’s reactions, watching the girl picking nervously at her shirt.

“Well, you’ve got my number, so keep me in touch, lemme know how your summer classes are arranged, and we’ll work something out?” She smiled faintly, watching as the tiny smile ghosted over Amy’s face. The rest of the drive was fairly quiet, and before she knew it, Carol was guiding the aged truck into a faded parking spot near the small park.

The surprised noise from Amy caught her attention, and Carol glanced up, peering at Amy and following her gaze. Victoria and Taylor were standing a short distance away near a small copse of trees with a third girl. It only took a few moments for Carol to put the name to the face, realizing that it was Amy’s date from the prom. She was surprised when Amy didn’t immediately wiggle free, and the group came over.

When Victoria flashed her a smile as she approached, Carol shyly returned it as she opened her door. Hopping out, she watched Victoria pop open Amy’s door and grab her guitar, finally freeing Amy to squirm out and get her feet under her. Taylor grabbed the blankets and Carol reached in, pulling out the small cooler and closing the door with her hip.

Walking around the truck with the bounty in hand, Carol curiously watched Amy, observing her daughter’s shy approach to the girl that’d lingered a short distance away. Lily was giving her daughter an equally nervous look, and Carol studied them for a few moments as they came to a stop a short distance from each other, speaking quietly.

“Thanks,” Victoria’s voice drew her attention back to her other daughter and Carol smiled as Victoria stood near the truck. She set the cooler down and reached into her pocket, pulling out the keys to the truck to hand them to her daughter. “We weren’t exactly looking forward to bussing home later on tonight.”

“It’s no problem, it wasn’t too far out of my way, and I do feel safer with you girls having a ride home.” Carol smirked at Victoria’s eye-roll and she could admit to herself, at least in the privacy of
her own head, that her daughters and their friends might be able to take care of themselves, but she retained the right to worry.

“Did you want to stick around?” The question was tentative, and Carol smiled quietly, peering at Victoria’s earnest expression. She was tempted for a few moments, but she found herself shaking her head after she considered it.

“Thanks, but I’d probably just cramp your style.” She grinned at Victoria, affecting an almost sly tone as she studied her daughter. “Besides, it’s Thursday. Date night. Your dad is cooking me a nice dinner as we speak, and we’re going to curl up on the couch with some red wine, and watch something suitably romantic since we’ve got the house to ourselves.” Carol felt her grin growing at the look of mild disgust on Victoria’s face, and the amused smirk on Taylor’s.

“Mom! Gross.” The words were soft, and Carol shook her head, though before she could respond to Victoria, the sound of gravel skittering over the stone was heard, and she turned her head, peering over to see Amy and her friend approaching.

“Mom,” Amy reached out accepting the cooler and then nodded toward the black-haired girl, who in turn gave her a nervous smile. “This is Lily, you guys met the other day, but you didn’t exactly have a chance to be introduced.” Carol curiously sized the girl up before reaching out a hand.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Dallon.” The words and the handshake were both surprisingly firm, and Carol flashed the girl a smile that saw her relaxing her shoulders a bit.

“And you as well, Lily.” The woman drew her hand back and glanced at her daughters and Taylor and gave Lily a quick smile. “Here to keep these miscreants out of trouble? Something of a full-time job, I imagine. Good thing you have help, hm?” Lily gave her a confused look and Carol pointed over the girl’s shoulder, causing all four teens to turn toward the group of approaching teenagers.

Carol smiled and returned the waves coming from Eric, Crystal and Sabah, though she lingered in place when the teens started to move as one to meet their friends. She glanced over when Amy paused and looked at her curiously.

“Did you want to come and say hello to everyone?” Amy’s voice was soft, worried, and Carol nodded in response.

“I’ve got to call your dad so that he can start heading out to collect me, but I’ll be over in a moment.” The look of relief on Amy’s face was a pleasant surprise, and Carol watched with open fascination as her daughter padded off in the wake of the other three. She glanced at the group in confusion, lifting an eyebrow as she picked out Tattletale of all people dressed in casual clothes, grumbling as her other daughter snagged her with one arm and mussed her hair.

Carol stared in open fascination at the group as they all talked eagerly with each other, their voices carrying over toward her, though the speech was all sort of blended into a messy noise that meant little to her ears. She observed the way the teens all spoke with her daughters, and she felt a flutter of warmth in her chest at the size of their group of friends.

She’d noticed how alone Victoria and Amy had sort of become despite their apparent popularity in school, how often they’d spent time alone together at home, or out being superheroes, and staring at this collection of excited kids actually acting their age was oddly refreshing. Fishing out her phone, Carol quickly called Mark and told him where she was, heading over to greet her daughters’ friends once the call was done, a warm smile on her face.
Chapter End Notes

[[Holy fucking shit, 15k words later. This interlude is literally like, either the longest/second longest chapter that we’ve put out in the entire story. It’s a pain in the ass because a lot of it was stuff that sort of needed to be included and I kinda just mushed it all together.

We finally get some exposition on Enna and what exactly is going on there, though more detail on him will come in Arc 8 as we deal with the stuff that the PRT doesn’t necessarily know about. We find out what’s going on with Dean and Armsmaster, we find out who’s replacing him and get ominous hints about the alterations that the back story has done to some of the more well-known canon characters.

Details on Amy/Carol Drama that are different than canon, and the effects that having a therapist has had on them both. Once they deal with a bit of stuff, Victoria and Taylor get a chance to be adorable idiots, even if it’s off-screen, and someone finally sits Amy down and tells her to just talk to the girl she likes and puts some of Lily’s stuff in perspective for her which is handy.

There’s one last interlude for this arc, and it should be much, much shorter. Although, conversely, it does have 4 different perspectives. It should be neat. That’s all I’ve got to say, I’m gonna go make myself some tacos, take a nap and then play some video games. As always, looking forward to your thoughts and feedback and hopefully, the next update isn’t so delayed.]]
Chapter Summary

[[Okay, it took two days, I’m bad. xD. But here we are, I hope you enjoy the trip. There’s been a lot more back and forth on this particular chapter than most, so hopefully it’s readable. I’ll keep the rest of my rambling to the addendum, and allow you folks to get into the interlude itself.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 24th, 2011
Protectorate HQ, Brockton Bay

The sound of the other boys had long since vanished down the corridor when Dennis found himself standing before the tall mirror in the men’s changing room. Considering his particularly unique outfit, Dennis couldn’t help but grin at his reflection. Technically speaking, the regulations about the Wards only required that he be in his official costume when serving in an official capacity, and meetings, especially informal ones like this one, were enough of a gray area that he could get away with this sort of thing.

Initially, he’d been tempted to resurrect Surfer Dennis, his alter-ego that had made appearances at every weekly Wards meeting during his junior year at Arcadia, but that joke was well and truly dead at this point. And he’d heard Piggot threatening to strangle him with his lei under her breath, and he didn’t really want to chance earning her ire. Honestly, the only reason that he was attempting this little prank was that he’d heard a fascinating rumour from the troopers about why this particular meeting had been called on such short notice.

Taking a moment to spin back and forth, Dennis considered the colourful outfit that he wore, inspecting the way that the light shimmered off the silvery patches and how fascinating that looked when spaced against the black. Tucking his hat and mask under his arm, Dennis headed toward out in the hall, accompanied by the merry sound of tinkling bells, his grin growing just a touch.

Walking down the corridors, Dennis’ expression faltered a bit as he made his way to the higher floors of the PRT, floors that the Wards didn’t typically need to go to. Luckily the elevators had been empty when he’d used them, and the corridors, while narrow and poorly lit, had been equally empty. Coming to the end of the hall, he checked his phone, reading the email and verifying the number against the one on the frosted pane of glass set in the door.

With a nod to himself, he gripped the handle, turning it and opening the doorway, stepping smoothly into the room. Freezing in the doorway, Dennis blinked in confusion at the room laid out before him. It looked like a classroom, though it certainly would have been out of place among his classrooms at school. The room was set at an angle descending away from him toward a lectern and an old blackboard.
Between him and the lectern, someone had arranged two columns of desks, each arrayed in rows of three. The desks themselves were ancient, separate entirely from the chairs set before them and heavy-looking. Staring around, Dennis realized that he was the last to arrive. Missy sat toward the front of the room by herself, with Browbeat a few desks from her, a book open on his desk as he apparently worked on homework. Most of the others were clustered near the back of the room, and Dennis slid over toward them.

Flechette and Tattletale seemed to be sharing a row, though they weren’t sitting next to each other, Flechette’s chair turned back to get a better view of Weld who sat behind her, with Carlos in the seat next to him. An empty desk next to their fearless leader separated him from Chris who was sat on the opposite side of the aisle, listening with rapt attention.

Several people had noticed his entrance, and Dennis grinned when Missy, Chris and Tattletale all gave him strange looks, but nobody commented, quickly turning back to the conversation going on between Weld and Flechette.

Moving up, Dennis dropped himself into the empty seat to Aegis’s left, earning himself a quick nod in greeting. When Aegis did a double-take, Dennis grinned quietly back at his fearless leader. Before Carlos could say anything though, Dennis found his attention drawn to the conversation that was going on. He glanced over at Weld, blinking at how animated the metallic boy looked, his eyes nearly sparkling with fascination.

“-oes she know them, then? She seemed rather adept at the songs, so I imagine that she’s at least heard them before.” Dennis blinked in confusion, leaning closer and glancing over at Flechette as the girl straightened up a bit, speaking casually.

“Oh, right. The guy with the bass.” When Lily rolled her eyes at Weld’s one-track mind, Dennis felt his lips quirking into an amused smile. Leaning back in his chair, the time stopper considered the gathered teen heroes as they continued their spirited discussion.

“Yeah, that’s Warren. He’s a friend of Victoria’s from the college, he’s pretty active in the music scene around here, so I’m guessing that they were friends of his. Though I’m guessing that Victoria at least listened to them? She didn’t seem like she had much time to scan lyrics before they were pushing her up on stage. And she did get into the swing of things rather quickly.” Dennis snorted softly, drawing attention and leaned forward.

“Wait. Glory Girl performed on stage?” He commented, blinking when the conversation ground to a halt and everyone stared at him. Shifting back, he coughed nervously at the variously incredulous looks coming in his direction. Carlos was the first to recover, speaking roughly.

“Uh, yeah. Weld heard about the music festival going on last night. He seemed interested in making the trip, and I didn’t have anything going on, so I went with him. I tried to invite you two, but Chris said you guys were busy?” Dennis blinked and peered at Chris who shrugged. He vaguely remembered Chris mentioning something about it as they’d been halfway through a pizza and two
hours into the Portal 2 co-op story mode, but the details escaped him. Shrugging, he looked back at Carlos, leaning forward to get a view when Weld picked up the story.

“Aegis came and got me, and we headed down. We were sort of wandering, taking in things when we heard the open-air concert going on. Not long after we got there, this girl gets dragged up on stage by one of the bands, and they managed to cajole her into singing. It took me a few minutes to realize it was Glory Girl. I’d never seen her out of costume, but she was pretty good.” A sound of disquiet drifted across the room, and Dennis did his best to ignore it. There was a pause from the metallic boy, but after a moment he continued smoothly. “After she’d done her singing, we followed her back to the others, and they kept us company. She’s actually much better with a guitar in her hands.” Dennis blinked at that, considering that mental image for a few moments, feeling his back tensing as Missy’s voice drifted over to them when the girl let out a muttered ‘oh, please.’

“Vista,” Dennis felt a flicker of apprehension as Tattletale’s droll voice called out. Glancing over, he nervously considered the blonde girl as she leaned outwards from her desk to get a better view of Missy. “If you really wish to comment on our discussion, it might be easier if you joined us to do it up close and personal.”

dennis winced when Missy responded, her voice low and sullen enough that he only picked up one word in four, though the phrases ‘rather not,’ and ‘unlike some people, who actually belong here’ were undoubtedly loud enough that Dennis caught them. Shifting his gaze over toward Tattletale’s features, Dennis swallowed nervously at the way the blonde’s expression hardened as she leaned forward, speaking with a deceptively glib tone.

“As opposed to who, exactly?” The words were slow, measured, and Dennis winced at the veritable ocean of implication that was dripping off them. Gaze flicking between the two girls, Dennis felt his back tensing as Tattletale continued with affected casualness. “If you’re talking about yourself, Vista, from what I’ve seen, you tend to be little more than a glorified mascot, or perhaps you’re speaking of your would-be boyfriend, Gall-”

“Hey now.” He shifted his tone, deepened his voice and let it spread over the group. They all paused as one, every pair of eyes in the room turning to stare at him. Dennis considered them all for a few moments, before coughing politely and offering a staged bow of the head toward Tattletale. He rather enjoyed the narrow-eyed look that she shot him in return. “I think that you’ll find, Miss Tattletale, that in the Commedia, it is I that should be the one doing the good-natured ribbing of the star-crossed lovers.”

Dennis felt his smirk shifting into a grin as Tattletale stared at him for a few moments, her mouth opening and then closing slowly. He’d managed to leave Tattletale, queen of the witty quip, speechless. He watched her flounder for words for a few moments before a low, amused snort from behind him drew his attention. Everyone jerked as one, and he followed the trend, all of them glancing back to see an unfamiliar figure perched on one of the desks in the back corner of the room.

The chair had been pushed back, balancing on two legs, and the figure within it was using her armoured feet to brace the chair to keep from falling over. The chuckles continued, and the woman slipped her legs free, the chair beneath her falling forward with a heady thunk. Shaking her head, the strange woman got her feet under her and Dennis stared in confusion as she began to walk around the desks, heading down the aisle.

He’d seen images of Mouse Protector before, but in person she was different. He’d expected her armour to be tacky, more for show than protection, ostentatious almost. Like you’d expect to find a mascot at Disney world wearing, fake armour, but she moved as if the armour she wore had weight.
The scrape of metal on leather, the slow, heavy clunk of the leather sheath of her Roman-style sword banging against the long leather strips of her skirt all made her feel authentic.

The armour she wore was clearly inspired by a Roman legionnaire, and part of Dennis was convinced that the hero herself was walking like he imagined a Roman centurion might. Slow, precise steps in her armoured boots and greaves, what he assumed was faux brown fur covered her legs from where they emerged beneath her skirt until they vanished into her boots. Her breastplate had been shaped expertly into a heroic cuirass, and it glimmered in the flickering fluorescent lights. Matching furry arms tucked into polished vambraces and gauntlets. A cloak was wrapped around her shoulders and dragged along the stairs behind her.

She came to a stop at the base of the stairs and moved to lean against the lectern, turning to peer back at them all, her dark eyes the only part of her face visible beneath her helmet. It was also of Roman design, a Galea that had been modified to include a pair of backward tilted mouse-like ears and the entire helmet was affixed to a detailed brass mask moulded into the head of the mouse. Dennis studied the helmet with open fascination, listening as the woman’s amused chuckles slowly faded away. Nervously shifting in place when the woman’s gaze drifted over him consideringly, Dennis let out a relieved puff of air when her attention drifted to the others around him. Following her gaze, Dennis took in the bald confusion on everyone else’s faces with a nervous frown.

“No one else got the joke then?” The heroine, Mouse Protector evidently, spoke with a loud, clear voice, her tone laced with bold amusement and an open friendliness that made Dennis want to smile. When no one else responded, she stepped back with a quick shake of her head and a low tsk of disappointment. “He’s dressed as a Harlequin.” Another pause, and still more deafening silence. “It’s a character archetype from early Italian professional theatre.” Stepping forward once more, Mouse Protector resumed her place leaning against the lectern and stared up at them all, the ‘gaze’ of the mask soon coming to rest on Dennis himself.

“Truthfully, Clockblocker, It was a bit of a niche joke, but appropriate, considering the argument that you were interrupting. I find myself fascinated how you might have come across the reference, and for that matter, the costume.” Her voice was curious, and Dennis swallowed nervously, speaking up after a few moments.

“Uh, my Dad. He’s a-” Dennis paused, frowning at the flicker of dark emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. “He was an actor. When he was younger. He did a lot of stage acting, studied it in school. He mostly retired to take care of us kids when Mom started having us, she didn’t want to stop working… so,” Dennis shrugged, and fiddled with the mask in his lap, doing his best to mime its broad smile. “Dad taught us to read on translations of Arlecchino, even if he wasn’t the best of singers.” When the woman’s grin came his way, Dennis found it somewhat hard not to return it.

“Fair enough. Your father has excellent taste.” The woman’s praise saw Dennis’ cheeks darkening, and he bowed his head, though he quickly glanced back in her direction as she continued with a touch more warning in her tone. “Though I would caution you to be a bit more careful about where you wear your secondary costumes. From what I’ve read, the PR department is exceptionally eager to rebrand you.” The tone of playful chiding was cut off by a subtle acerbic muttering coming from Tattletale’s direction.

“I suppose the most famous of the fools would be an appropriate nom de guerre for someone like him.” Dennis took in the tightness of Tattletales features, considering her for a few moments, clearing his throat and shooting a question back at the blonde girl before anyone else could speak.

“Actually, Vista did bring up a fair point, Tattletale. What exactly are you doing here? I was led to
believe that this was a team meeting. Near as I can tell, you’re not part of the team.” Dennis studied Tattletale, watching as her attention flicked toward the lectern. He glanced toward the adult hero as well, blinking in confusion when she remained still, her entire stance shifted to make that inarticulate mask seem almost curious, somehow.

“First of all, Clockblocker.” It took a moment, but when Mouse Protector didn’t seem interested in intervening, Tattletale finally responded, earning herself Dennis’ attention once more. “I’m here because, despite the fact that my skill set doesn’t lend itself to fieldwork, I am in fact part of the Wards.” Tattletale stared him down, and Dennis shifted back a tiny bit, swallowing at the stern look on her face. “It was part of my deal with the PRT, I’m part of the Wards until I turn 18, which is why the rest of you don’t have to do console duty as much anymore.” Dennis shifted nervously back in his seat at the girl’s unimpressed look.

“Er- Yeah, I’d noticed that the rest of us hadn’t been assigned as many console shifts.” Dennis coughed, glancing over at Chris who nodded rapidly in agreement. Before he could open his mouth any further, Tattletale continued.

“And secondly? It’s not Tattletale anymore.” Blinking in confusion, Dennis shifted nervously in place as the blonde girl flashed him a smirk. “Another part of that same deal? Rebranding.” The girl smiled slowly and crossed her legs. “It’s Watchtower now.” Opening his mouth, Dennis paused, blinking slowly as he tried to think of something, anything to say to that. Before his swirling thoughts calmed, a sound drifted over from his left.

Dennis glanced over, staring in confusion at Weld as he rapped his knuckles on the desk before him, humming quietly. Raising an eyebrow, Dennis’ felt his cheeks suffuse with colour as the metallic boy started to sing, his voice resonating oddly as his shimmering eyes glimmered with mirth.

“’There must be some kind of way out of here’ said the joker to the thief. ‘There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief.’” The boy paused with a hearty chuckle and Lily let out a strangled giggle which drew Dennis’ attention. A low tsk from the newly minted Watchtower drew his attention, and Dennis stared at the blonde girl as she peered at Lily with a look of mild reproach. Lily glanced back before turning toward Weld and speaking through her own mirth.

“’No reason to get excited’ The thief, she kindly spoke. ‘There are many here among us, who feel that life is but a joke. But, uh, but you and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate. So let us stop talkin' falsely now, the hour's getting late’.” Dennis felt his blush continuing to grow, and he shifted forward, whining as he buried his face in his desk, ignoring the mild scolding that Watchtower was dishing out to a very amused looking Flechette.

Missy glared past Browbeat at where the rest of the team was clustered around the blonde witch and Flechette, listening bitterly as they all laughed and joked like there wasn’t a massive gaping wound in the middle of the group. She was tempted to say something, anything to kill that merriment to make them understand just how wrong everything was. Before she could scrape the words together, much less them bring them to her mouth, a polite cough from the front of the room drew her focus.

“Right then, now that we’ve established that you all should be here; Allow me to introduce myself I’m Mouse Protector, I’ve taken up the lead of the local Protectorate branch in the wake of
Armsmaster’s reassignment.” Mouse Protector, having roused herself from her reclined position, spoke with a brisk tone that was quite at odds with the almost child-like fantasy that her cape persona gave off. “Typically in this situation, I imagine that most new leaders would come in and introduce themselves to you, and then invite you all to do the same, ask you about your hobbies, some sort of other relevant facts that you cared to share about yourselves, but in truth, I already know who all of you are.” The sound of nervous shifting behind Missy put her on edge, but something else niggled at her.

Staring at the armour, it took Missy a moment to realize what about it was bothering her. With the mask that the woman wore, there was no way that she should be speaking this clearly. The voice was coming from her, not around them, so it wasn’t the PA. A hidden speaker then, probably more than one. The cloak-pin was almost certainly one, Vista considered, staring at the familiar Mouse Protector logo visible where the cloak was secured beneath the one visible pauldron on the woman’s armour. Her fascinated deconstruction of the armour halted as the armoured figure continued.

“Typically, this sort of thing isn’t bandied about, but as the leader of the local forces, I have access to your files, and that means that I do, in fact, know all of your names.” She stared at them all for a few moments before reaching up, grasping the sides of her helmet and pulling smoothly.

Staring in open fascination, Missy watched as the helmet came away, revealing a head of messy scraggly blonde hair. The woman shook her head out, running a hand through her locks and pulling the mop away from her face. Missy heard the startled gasps as the hair was drawn back, noticing the long stark white scars that drew along both of the woman’s cheeks, each extending away from the corners of her lips, but Missy was more drawn to the woman’s features.

In the armour, it was hard to tell, but as her tiny head peeked out from beneath it, it was obvious that the blonde woman was almost certainly quite petite. A small round-shaped face covered in a sea of freckles with simply styled hair. Her eyes were a bit too bright, and her nose a bit off-center. She seemed almost normal, or at least she would without the vicious scars on her face. Besides the scars that would have extended her smile had they not been healed, another long jagged looking scar came up out of the collar of her breastplate and vanished behind her right ear. The sound of the woman’s voice startled Missy out of her idle examination, and she perked up, turning her focus back to Mouse Protector.

“ Seems only fair that I return the same courtesy to you.” She offered everyone a broad, friendly grin that seemed oddly feral on her face and then leaned back against the lectern, resting her helmet on her hip. “My name is Abigail Winters, better known as Mouse Protector. I’ve been a cape for nearly sixteen years now, and I first became a superhero when I was thirteen, though I’d triggered a few months earlier when I was twelve. I was one of the youngest of the Inaugural Wards, and I had the distinction of being the only one to join that was the leader of their own team.” She glanced around at them all, and after a moment of open examination, she offered a teasing grin and continued. “And yes, for those of you that are doing the mental math, that makes me twenty-nine.”

Falling silent, Mouse Protector stepped away from the lectern and set her ornate helmet on it. She moved smoothly around the wooden stand, considering it carefully before rounding on them once more. With three measured steps, the woman walked across the open space afforded to her, making her way toward the front row of desks and coming to a stop less than four feet from Missy’s seat.

“I’m sure you’ve all heard from your friends that were involved in the unpleasantness that happened by now.” The woman rested her hands on her hips, glancing around at them all sternly. “ Obviously, I wasn’t here, so I’m in no position to offer any sort of insight on what happened, but if any of you want to talk about it, my door will always be open to you. Beyond that, I’m going to be very
disappointed if I hear any of you making light of anything that happened.” Swallowing nervously, Missy took in the woman’s stern expression, turning to follow her gaze as it zeroed in on where Tattletale sat by Flechette, shifting nervously in place.

“Keeping all of that in mind, let’s move on. I’m not to be a permanent placement here, my taking command is more of a stop-gap measure. I’m in the city on other business, and I’m expected to be here for the foreseeable future, and that made me a good choice to take control of things while the ‘adults’ figure out what to do.” The woman shifted nervously, arms moving as if they were unsure what to do while she was ‘at rest.’ ‘Keeping that in mind, I’ve also been tasked with examining how things are run here and assembling a list of suggestions for changes for whoever comes in to take command when I’m done.” The woman moved forward, slipping around the push herself up onto one of the desks in the lowest row, her eyes drifting smoothly around the cavernous room alighting on each of them for a few moments at a time.

“I’d love to hear any thoughts that you’ve all got in regards to this. Especially, I’d love to hear any changes that you feel would be beneficial to you all.” She sat there, fingers laced, legs swaying as she considered them all. Missy swallowed, glancing around at the others, seeing a number of equally confused expressions. When no one seemed inclined to voice any suggestions, Missy’s gaze returned to the armoured woman when she chuckled again. “No one? Fascinating. I’ve never met any teenagers before that didn’t have anything to complain about. But we’re in luck. Flechette and Weld.” The woman turned her focus toward the cluster by the door, and Missy glanced back as the two transfers perked up.

“You’re new here, right? Flechette’s from New York, and Weld, you’re from Boston, correct?” Missy stared at the two teens until they nodded nervously, her attention drifting back when Mouse Protector hummed in thought, continuing smoothly. “So you’ve both got experience with the Wards programs from where you’ve come from, perhaps you can explain some of the differences you’ve noticed so that we can get this discussion off the ground.” The woman stared at them both, and when neither of them chose to speak, the older cape raised an arm and pointed. “Weld, why don’t you start us off?”

“Well,” Missy let her gaze drift over toward the powerful metallic figure, watching as he nervously fidgeted with his mp3 player. The boy considered the plastic device for a few moments before speaking slowly. “I’ve uh, only been here a few weeks, but I’ve spoken a great deal with Aegis about his experiences. From what I’ve heard, there’s a much higher focus on fieldwork and tactical training here than in Boston.” Missy blinked, studying Weld as he scrabbled for the words. Mouse Protector seemed content to let the boy fish around in his mind, and after a few moments, Weld continued. “While we did plenty of patrols and combat training in Boston, there was a fair bit more attention given to preparatory training. ESLP and the quarterly mental tune-ups especially spring to mind.” Weld shifted nervously, shrinking back into his seat, and Missy glanced curiously over toward Mouse Protector, taking in the woman’s interested expression.

“Indeed,” The blonde woman glanced at them all, taking in their confusion for a few moments before continuing. “Thank you, Weld. You’ve brought up some fair points, things that I’ve noticed as well. For those of you curious about what he was referring to, ESLP, or more fully, C-ESLP, is the cohesively named Cape Emotional Stability, and Longevity Program. It’s essentially a catch-all for PRT sponsored counselling and pre-counselling programs.” Mouse Protector turned, gesturing around the room casually. “Typically held in classrooms like this, the participating branches of the PRT use these courses to help make sure that you’re all prepared for the strain that comes with living the sort of lives that we do. The ‘Mental tune-ups’ he refers to, I assume, are the group counselling sessions that most departments encourage their teams to attend. Wards, and Protectorate alike. A safe space to air your grievances and any… issues you’ve all developed with each other.” Missy blinked
quietly, leaning back in her chair and idly wishing that they’d had that option when Sophia had been on the team. Glancing back at the others, she wasn’t surprised when she saw similar looks of interest on Dennis’ and Chris’ faces.

“I can see that I’ve piqued your interest. If you’re all interested in exploring those options, I’ve got a friend in Philadelphia, and I could speak with him about having you guys sit in on some courses if you’d care to see what they’re like?” The woman stared at them expectantly, waiting until she’d gotten grudging agreement from them before she nodded. Briskly clapping her metal gauntlets together, she turned rather abruptly toward Flechette, waving a hand. “And you, Flechette?”

“I-uh.” Flechette began to speak, and Missy frowned at the nervous stutter in her voice. It seemed like the older girl might argue, might refuse, but after a second, she let out a gentle sigh and began to speak softly. “R-Right. Well, things are a bit different here, mostly in how the training is structured.” Flechette paused, and Missy stared, watching as she put her thoughts in order before continuing. “The closest I can compare it to was the Lancers back in New York, but there was a different feel to it. Jouster was very big on group synergy. They had a very heavy ‘Team Culture.’ It was daunting at times, being the new kid.” Missy glanced over at Mouse Protector, watching as the woman nodded and took over.

“What Flechette is referring to is one of New York’s multiple Ward teams.” Missy blinked at that idea, studying Abigail as she leaned back, crossing her arms. “They’ve got six in total, and they’re currently modelled after the six Protectorate ‘Squads’ operating out of New York. Typically, their Wards are allocated into one of these teams based on their effective skill set with the intention that when they graduate out of the Wards program, they’ll move into the appropriate Protectorate team.” Mouse Protector considered them all for a few moments before letting out an amused chuckle and leaning on the lectern.

“I, uh.” The words were hesitant, fleeting, and Missy turned in her chair, staring back toward Carlos. She studied the older boy as he leaned forward. “Miss Militia and Armsmaster sort of encouraged us to avoid being to close in public in our civilian identities, but…” Carlos trailed off, glancing toward Weld and then turning back toward where the blonde woman watched him expectantly. “I think I’d enjoy a chance to spend more time together when it wasn’t all work, so to speak. It might help us better integrate our newest members.” Missy stared at Carlos, her gaze drifting when she noticed Chris and Dennis nodding nearby.

She sat in place briefly contemplating the image of her spending her free time with the team. Images of her watching Dennis sing bad karaoke, or trailing after Carlos as he attempted to navigate a hedge maze. She found herself smirking as a rather particular image of a red-faced Tattletale huffing and puffing as she attempting to navigate a steep switchback.

“What about, like… Hiking? We don’t have to jump right into public events together.” She saw the eyes drifting toward her, and she straightened her back speaking softly. “There’s plenty of things we could do like what we did at Mount Hood around her. Hiking, or Camping trips. Tours, or other
things.” She felt the eyes on her but did her best to keep from shrinking down or looking around, returning the measuring look coming from Mouse Protector. The woman considered her for a moment before nodding.

“Excellent ideas, Vista. Any other suggestions?” She turned to glance around, waiting a few moments for any other suggestions before shrugging up her shoulders. “Well, that’s all that I really prepared for this meeting. Anything that any of the rest of you would care to share?” Mouse Protector waited, watching as everyone, one by one, shook their heads, causing the woman to let out a chuckle before continuing. “In that case, I have little else to say. I have been allocated an office in the PRT Headquarters not terribly distant from the one that Miss Militia uses, and if you have any issues or suggestions, I can be reached there on Wednesdays and Fridays, though feel free to shove a note under my door if I’m not around. You’re all welcome to head off if you don’t need me for anything else.”

Missy sighed, reaching for her bag as she considered the woman’s comments, wondering what she’d suggest to improve her experience on the Wards. She’d been about to make a bitter joke under her breath when something light and papery skittered over her desk. Staring down in confusion, Missy blinked the pale paper of an envelope, her name written on the front in simple blue ink. The handwriting was familiar enough to be distracting, and she stared at it in open confusion, considering the looped lettering.

Trying to figure out where it’d come from, Missy glanced up, staring over at the armoured back of the blonde woman as she stood speaking in soft tones to Weld, Aegis and Flechette, her voice low and gruff. Missy considered the group silently before turning back down to the letter. Lifting it off the desk, Missy slid a finger under the flap, carefully ripping the envelope open. Taking a deep breath, Missy carefully pulled out the two pages within. Unfolding the paper, Missy sat there, reading the words that had been carefully jotted on them by Dean’s precise hand.

Letting out a tiny bitter laugh, Missy paused, rereading the words, her mind filling in Dean’s soft voice, imagined voices ghosting through her mind as she pictured Dean saying them to her directly. It wasn’t Keats or anything, no overt declarations of love, but it was touching. Dean had apparently anticipated her bitter reaction to his removal from the Wards, and he’d taken the time to explain things, to assure her that he was fine. More than that though, he’d done his best to express his hopes that she was fine as if any of that mattered.

Staring down at the final few paragraphs Missy felt her eyes pricking with moisture as Dean did his best to subtly ensure that she wouldn’t be too hurt by his absence while still carefully doing his best to step around her attraction without confronting it. Missy quietly hung her head, one hand lifting, trying and failing to scrub the bitter moisture that refused to be removed from her eyelashes.

“God save us from the fretfulness of chivalrous fools.” Despite the oddly commiserate tone that the words were uttered in, Missy felt her hackles rise, and she raised her head, eyes sharpening as she glared at the blonde woman. The others had left while she’d been reading and so she stared up at Mouse Protector, opening her mouth to say something, anything, but the words died on her tongue as she stared into the woman’s eyes, taking in that oddly insightful look in the woman’s eyes. The words that bubbled in her chest, seeking an escape slowly died as she stared back into those eyes, and when her lips opened all that escaped was a long weary sigh.

Frowning tiredly, Vista dropped the letter, fingers dragging over the pristine paper as she contemplated crushing it between her hands. She listened to the clank of the armour, the creak of the leather as the woman came around the side of the desk, dragging out the chair and taking a seat next
to her. She stared down at the words, sadly fingering the paper, tracing one of the looping D’s with the tip of her finger.

“I had actually been planning to sit down with you in particular, Vista.” The words drew her attention, and Missy glanced at the taller woman. “I’d heard that you’d been having some issues over the last few months, with your team-mates and the newest addition to the great protective PRT umbrella.” The words were galling, stinging at Missy’s pride, and she turned back to glare at her hands.

“I- you wouldn’t understand.” Vista stared at the letter and bit at her bottom lip. No one understood, even Dean with the magical power to feel her fucking feelings had barely understood.

“Missy.” Her name startled her from her thoughts, and she peered up, staring at the odd mixture of emotions on the older woman’s face. “I was the youngest of the Inaugural Wards, by nearly nine months. And despite that, before I’d joined the team, I had been the leader of my own team. I’d been on the streets for almost a year with a successful team, and the PRT had come to me, had asked me to bring my people in, to do something greater, to be heroes and then, I’d been treated like a kid. People who’d had careers a quarter the length of mine treated me like I was a joke ruining the integrity of what they were trying to build.” Staring at the older woman in confusion, Missy narrowed at the words, and that familiar tone in that voice, that familiar look.

“What’d you do?” Missy blinked at the words that came out of her mouth, startled that she’d asked anything, nevermind with that tone of voice. She watched as Mo-Abigail glanced down at her and considered her before turning back to the board. The woman pushed off the ground with a foot and Missy was impressed when the chair came to a perfect stop balanced on two legs, allowing the woman to expertly pull her legs up, resting it on the desk.

“They treated me like I was a joke, so I acted like a joke. I made cheap jokes and teased people. I played pranks and did my best to make it so that the ones that wanted to take it so seriously that they couldn’t have fun anymore ended up as the butt of the jokes that they abhorred. I grew bitter and jaded with it all, and if it wasn’t for-” The woman paused, frowning. “If it wasn’t for my friends, I would have quit, gone back to being an independent. Eventually, after both of the people who’d been my old team died fighting Behemoth, I almost did anyway.” The woman’s voice was oddly tired, weary and Missy studied her face.

“What happened?” The question was asked softly, Missy worried that she might break whatever spell was going on. Abigail kept her gaze on the board, her eyes half focused and she shrugged up the shoulder with the visible pauldron, a half-smile on her face.

“I had this friend. People disliked him almost as much as me, but he told me that he admired how true to myself I was. I talked to him about everything, and he asked me the reason I’d joined the Wards in the first place. Why I wanted to be a Hero with a capital ‘H.’” Abigail glanced down at her and Missy flushed, glancing away as she considered that. “All too often, people with powers are forced into this life, and they just go through the motions, but I wasn’t one of those people. And he knew that. He knew that I wanted to change the world, that I wanted to be a make the world brighter, happier. I wanted people to look up to me, to see me fighting crime and be happy about it. Which is why I joined the PRT.” Abigail let out a sigh, and Missy glanced back.

“What’d he say to that?” Missy studied the woman, and Abigail grinned widely as she considered her hands.

“He quoted Nietzsche at me.” Missy blinked at that, glancing at Abigail who shrugged. “That’s just
the kind of person he was. The quote was; ‘No one can construct for you the bridge upon which precisely you must cross the stream of life, no one but you yourself alone.’” Missy closed her eyes, taking a moment to focus, trying to parse the words. Abigail studied her for a few moments before waving a hand. “He was basically telling me that people might have opinions about you, about how you look, or how you act, but in the end, the life you choose to live, and who you choose to be? That’s on you.” Missy grimaced at those words, staring down at the paper before her.

“So what’d you do?” The words were quiet, worried, and Missy stared at the paper as Abigail responded softly.

“I went into work the next day, and I decided that I wouldn’t care what anyone said. I stopped the pranks on the people who didn’t matter to me, and I told myself that I would never let anyone else tell me what was worth saying, or doing but me. And I’ve never let anyone.” Abigail hummed in faint amusement. “Kissed the boy that I’d been pining over, told my boss to shove his ‘concerns’ about my image up his ass and took a great deal of pleasure offering my honest opinion whenever I felt it was warranted.” Abigail glanced at her hands, playfully miming buffing the nails of her gauntlet on her breastplate.

“Did it work?” She stared at Abigail, and the woman shrugged.

“The boy was flattered, but his heart was taken by another, but we’re still friends, and the rest earned me a reputation, but more than that I earned the respect I wanted from the people that I cared about enough to respect them.” Abigail glanced down at her and Missy flushed but didn’t look away. “I’ve no regrets if that’s what you’re asking, Missy. I’ve made mistakes, and I’ve not always won, and not everyone likes me, but at least the ‘me’ that they dislike is me, and that’s gotta count for something, right?” Missy stared at the woman for a few moments before nodding slowly.

Abigail returned the nod, and offered her another feral grin, slipping her feet off the desk and surging upright. She slid across the floor casually, that rasping leather on metal sound drifting off of her as she approached the lectern once more, reaching out to grasp her helmet, tucking it under her arm and turning back to meet Missy’s gaze. Missy waited for the woman to say something, anything, but the woman merely flashed her an amused wink and then slid her helmet on and vanished from view with a flicker of silvered light.

Missy sat there for a few moments longer before letting out a sigh and staggering to her feet. She made her way out of the classroom and down the hall. A short elevator trip later, she slid into the changing room, so embroiled in the words that the woman had said that she didn’t realize that someone else had been present until she’d nearly staggered into the willowy form of Flechette, slipping on her shoes.

“Oh, hey, Vista.” Backing up a few steps, Missy stared down at the dark-haired girl as she fiddled with her laces. The girl returned her look for a moment before coughing and turning her attention to her shoes, tying them both and standing. The girl took a step away from her and Missy headed for her locker, entering the combination and opening it smoothly. When Flechette cleared her voice though, Missy turned to stare at her. “Hey, uh Vista? Do you know of any hairdressers near here?” The words were subtle, and Missy glanced over.

“Why? Got a hot date?” The snide comment slipped free before she could stop it, and she watched the other girl’s expression fall, her face visibly shutting down as she took a few steps back. The older woman’s words ghosted through her mind and Vista took a deep breath, calling out as Flechette took a few steps away. “Wait! Flechette, sorry. It’s been a rough week, I didn’t mean to snap.” The older girl paused, staring back at her nervously and Vista did her best to offer a smile, lackluster thought it
might be.

“I-I get that yeah. And it’s not a date, well…” The girl paused, expression dimming as she fiddled with her shirt. Vista stared at her for a few moments watching the clear apprehension spreading over the older girl’s features for a few moments before snorting and peering into her locker.

“Gimme a few minutes to get changed, Flechette, and I’ll take you to my hairdresser. They’re fairly close by.” She glanced over at the other girl, watching as the Asian girl perked up and nodded, taking a few steps away and turning.

“You can call me Lily.” The offer was tentative, and Vista stood staring into her locker for a few moments. She stuffed the letter into the top of the locker and grabbed her clothes, moving to strip carefully out of her uniform.

“Right, Lily. You can call me Missy. So tell me more about this ‘Not a Date.’” Smoothly stripping out of her costume, Missy found herself grinning at the noise of frustrated disquiet that came from Lily’s direction.

Lily pulled the brush away from her head, her other hand coming up to fiddle with the freshly washed and cut strands of black hair that hung before her eyes. She considered the new style of her hair. It wasn’t overly shorter or more complicated than how she’d been wearing it up to now, but it felt different. Bolder. She stared at herself, turning her head one way or the other, considering the modest make-up that she wore and grimacing quietly.

“This isn’t a date,” Lily muttered nervously to herself, staring quietly at her reflection and then glancing down at the simple black dress she was wearing. She was just going out with a friend to... talk, nothing more. The fact that said friend was a girl that she found quite adorable was beside the point, as was the fact that the attraction was apparently mutual. Also unimportant was the fact that they’d chosen to host this discussion at a suitably atmospheric location on the boardwalk.

Letting out a low groan of confusion, Lily dropped her brush on her vanity and took a few steps back, dropping back onto the edge of her bed and staring up at the alarm clock on her headboard. She considered the hands on the ornate face and quietly did the math in her head.

Two hours. She could still call and cancel. She reached over, dragging her phone over, and staring at the face, freezing when it came to inputting the lock-in code. She stared at the image on the face, taken last night as they’d all crowded up together near the massive bonfire that the city had been maintaining.

Dropping back onto the bed, she moved her fingers in a familiar pattern, typing in the right numbers. Instead of going through to the phone, she chose to open up the photo gallery, scrolling to the image that she made her background. She stared at all the familiar faces, her eyes settling on Amy’s bemused features.

In the image, the other girl sat two spots over from her, next to Weld and Aegis, but even in the photo, Amy’s eyes were on her. Most of last night had been like that. It hadn’t bothered her so much as it… confused her. She’d grown accustomed to Amy’s almost furtive shy glances over the last few
weeks, but things had been different last night.

When they’d met in the parking lot, she’d been nervous, afraid that Amy would push, that she’d say... something. But Amy had been quiet. Lily had been oddly charmed by the subtle happiness in Amy’s expression at her arrival, and Amy had been the one to insist that they focus on their friends that their conversation could wait until their... ‘meeting’ today.

But Lily’d felt Amy’s eyes on her over the rest of the evening. Lily blushed quietly as she glanced at her phone. Gertie had often told her that Arthur had often studied her like she was a work of art, and Lily finally understood the meaning of that. She wasn’t sure what had happened, but Amy had rather suddenly started paying very close attention to her, and for some reason, the thought of that terrified her.

Lifting her phone from where she’d allowed it to fall against her chest, Lily stared at the face once more, scrolling through the various menus and making her way to the messaging app. She considered the names, scrolling down to the second on the list and quickly tapping it, watching as her conversation history came up. She stared at the blinking cursor for several seconds before quickly typing.

‘Amy, you there?’ She watched the message blink twice before becoming solid, allowing her to know that it’d been sent. She wasn’t surprised when the response came less than five minutes later. Unless she was in class, Amy was always especially prompt with her responses.

‘Hey, yeah. Dealing with a few things at home before I have to grab my bus. Everything alright with you?’ Lily stared at the words quietly for a few moments, she took a few minutes to decipher the meaning from Amy’s brusque, almost gruff habit of deflecting. She imagined that Amy was probably taking just as much time as her to get ready. For some reason, the image made her smile as she hovered her thumbs over the virtual keyboard.

‘Yeah, I’m fine. Getting ready too.’ She paused, staring at the message before quickly shooting off a simple emoji of a smiling face sticking out its tongue, taking out any bite of her casual deconstruction of Amy’s prevarications. She watched as Amy’s response came in.

‘I’m sure that you look lovely. We’re still meeting at that place you recommended to Vicky, right? The Japanese restaurant on the boardwalk?’ Lily stared at the words and grimaced. This was her chance to gracefully back out before jumping headfirst into this. She considered the phone for a few moments before letting out a sigh and shaking her head.

‘Yeah, I think you’ll love the food if your tastes whenever we eat Chinese are anything to go by.’ Lily smiled quietly as she dropped her phone onto her chest again and let out a long breath. The truth was that she didn’t really want to back out. She liked the way that Amy stared at her, be it shy, furtive glances, or long contemplative ones. She liked that she could decode the subtle meaning behind Amy’s vague platitudes and that Amy didn’t shrink back from her touch like she did with most people. She wanted to hear what Amy had to say, and she was only afraid that Amy didn’t want this as much as she did. Part of those concerns were assuaged when her phone dinged thirty seconds later, and she lifted it to read the message.

‘Good, I’m looking forward to seeing you.’ Lily smiled quietly like an idiot, shaking her head and typing out a simple brief response before setting her phone down and slipping back to her feet so that she could fret with herself in the mirror a bit more.
[[If your curious what Victoria sang when she was dragged up on stage? Well, check out this. =] ]]

Chapter End Notes

[[Sorry about the delay, there were several rewrites that we had to do. I ended up restructuring this particular chapter twice, and then Noel basically made me go back and rewire several bits of Missy and Dennis’ stuff that was a bit odd with the missing stuff.

We finally get to see Mouse Protector. And she’s got a snazzy not home-made costume. For those of you trying and failing to picture it? Imagine someone in a fitted Redwall/Secret of NIMH style mouse costume, that had then placed a Roman Centurion outfit over the top of that (Complete with functional Pugio.)

We also get to see the woman behind the mask with her scars. A fascinating examination of the sort of damage that one accrues when you’re a lifetime cape that isn’t on the same level as Chevalier or the Triumvirate. Abigail has lost fights and she’s taken her licks because of it. She still seems like a fascinating woman.

And I think she’ll be a good influence on Vista going forward, bringing her out of the ‘Woe is me, no one takes me seriously cause I’m the little girl on the team’ mentality that she was sort of well known for in canon. And we do see subtle implications of that as Lily and Vista bond a bit. It’ll be interesting to see where that goes. Nice to see that Dean’s taking care of his friends still on the team, even if he’s not actually around.

Dennis has a fascination in theatre arts, which sort of amuses me, and we get to see Lily panicking over what is very clearly, not a date. So that’s fun. Beyond that though, we’ve seen subtle, subtle hints of what’s to come woven into this interlude like with most of the others, and there’s a bit more subtle exposition about Enna in here if you can dig it out.

Other than that, I’ve not got much to say. I’ll be working this weekend, but I suppose we’ll see 8.1 sometime next week. At the moment one update a week seems to be roughly working for me, so that’s what I’ll try to aim for. It’s much slower than we’ve been doing up to this point, but I think the longer chapters and the significantly improved readability make up for that? Also, I do have other projects that I’m putting some of my very scant free time into.

Anyway, as always, looking forward to your feedback, and if you need me, I shall, of course, be in the thread.]]

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!