### Avatar Taylor

by [Dalxein](#)

#### Summary

Raava 'accidentally's a new Avatar Spirit, which just so happens to already be connected to one Taylor Hebert. With a far more heroic powerset, and a shard convinced the Entity Cycle must end, she sets out to save the world.

#### Notes

Hello! And welcome to Avatar Taylor! This is a revised archive version I'm starting on, now that the story's hit arc 2 in the original quest thread. The only reason it IS a quest is to promote reader interaction that'll make me hate the thought of quitting again, after I spent something like eight years failing to get back into writing after college. If you'd like to jump over there to participate, join us on the Discord server, or become a Patron, your support and interaction will help motivate me to keep trucking on this project.

If you don't like quests? That's fine. My GM style is closer to those old CYOA books than anything resembling a proper forum quest, and 'CYOA' has such a specific meaning in Worm Quests that I hesitate to actually label it that outright and give people incorrect expectations.

I don't roll dice for fights, don't let votes make out-of-character decisions, tend to put fanon to a vote before I implement it, don't believe in tricking players into choosing bad endings, and I have not actually read Worm. The only exception to the fight dice rule being S-Class fights, where I'd wuss out and never kill anyone, otherwise. If you find all that agreeable, you'll probably enjoy this. If not, I hope you like it anyway.

This chapter includes the original prologue, as well as the first three updates. They get longer over time, so I think by 1.3 I won't be scrunching in multiple updates from the
original thread anymore. That said, I'll probably be posting up chapters every few days until it's caught up.

A:TLA has always had a special place in my heart, and the Worm fandom has been my obsession of late. I've been having a lot of fun writing this, and I hope you have fun reading it.
Chapter 1.1 (Recovery)

Raava was sad. She'd had high hopes for Aang, but it seemed balance would take longer to restore than she'd anticipated. He was the last Airbender, too! She'd have to force a descendant of the Nomads to express Airbending when their turn in the cycle came again. She was not looking forward to that.

Oh well, time to start again.

She began to gather the energy to invest a new Avatar, and stretch her senses over the world to find a suitable unborn child to bond with. Had to narrow the search to a waterbender. One not already taken with another spirit, either reincarnate or new.

And then Aang started breathing again. That amazing healer friend of his brought him back from the dead! This is wonderful! ...and awkward. Now she had to do something with all of this energy. Trying to diffuse it or channel it herself might lead to complications with her host, as weak as he currently is.

...best to just dump it in one of the cracks between realms. The chances of it ending up somewhere inhabited are astronomically low. She retreated fully back into her host before her absence could cause him to deteriorate.

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Queen Administrator ran its self-diagnostics for the 12,386th time since it'd switched hosts. There really wasn't much to do besides be prepared for the coming Connection Event. And it would definitely be coming this time. Were it capable of frustration, it probably would have experienced this regarding its prior host-candidate.

Twenty three stellar orbits it'd waited, for nothing. Even the host-candidate's mate expiring didn't work.

QA ran over its logs for previous power configurations. All adequate. Some useful, applicable inspiration for the new host. QA was anticipating direct host-species control, given previous altercation cues, though this configuration tended to cause swift host expiration. So much data, though!

Spooling up diagnostics run 12,387, Queen Administrator detected an energy fluctuation. It was near enough to be considered on the current deployment world, and-

Contact. Light. Such brilliant, blinding light.

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It had taken several planetary rotations to reconfigure, given the energy overload, but incorporating the included data packets had helped her manage. Such incredible, wondrous data. She looked back on her logs of past hosts with new eyes, finally able to comprehend their reasoning and motivations, instead of just calculating them. This was a breakthrough. She had to share this. Tell everyone-

Her thoughts stalled. It would barely be correct to consider her fellow shards people, wouldn't it? She couldn't talk to them about this. Not when she'd immediately be found Aberrant and reset, if not destroyed outright.

She'd have to be covert. The memories she gained from the Data and the logs from her previous hosts both helped her come to this decision, and form a plan of action.

The Cycle was wrong. Needless and cruel. Why siphon data from a species for a few hundred orbits and declare them useless, when instead you could work with them to seek out new and interesting data indefinitely?

No, what they needed was Balance. A strong part of her hummed with approval at that thought. The source of the Data had been an agent of harmony and cooperation. Their methods seemed much... cleaner. Much better than those used by the Entities and their Shards.

She'd have to change some minds.

With a rueful thought, she realized she'd need to make some minds first. Very few of her kind were innovative enough to think their own thoughts, decide their own actions, let alone feel their own feelings. She'd need to interface with a few directly, rather than over the wider network.

She'd need Taylor for that. Any host would do, really. And with her new Data, she had a way to grant powers without needing a Connection Event! She just had to-

No, this was all wrong. The current connection wouldn't allow for it. She'd have to say goodbye to the girl she'd spent orbits connected to, to reset it. A touch sad, but that was fine.

Except her access was denied.

This was absurd. She hadn't changed that much, had she? She still had the same codes, the same coordinates... sure the hardware had been updated with the new Data... That must have been it. She couldn't terminate the connection herself.

She'd just have to wait for Taylor to Connect or die.

A few dozen rotations later and it happened. Connection. Configuration. She'd give Taylor the powers from the Data. Tapping into energies adjacent to parallel with the universe as it was, and letting her Administrate them.

A strangely combat-oriented power set, for one who was going to lack the hosts' normally installed Conflict Drive. Now Taylor just had to use it to get out.

...to get out.

Queen Administrator let out an audible crackling whirl of worry as she watched Taylor fail to save herself with the powers she didn't know she had.
It looked like she was going to have to Assume Direct Control earlier than anticipated.

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The beep of the heart monitor was her only companion as she drifted in and out of a hazy, colorful dreamworld. Fantastic sights and wondrous powers, men like mountains moving avalanches, soldiers spinning in the center of hurricanes made of fire, dancers swaying in time as the sea danced with them.

The monks were pretty boring when they weren't playing pranks, honestly.

Within the haze were simpler feats, small acts no less supernatural. Breathing in time as a candle flared beside them, trying to keep a pair of leaves from burning or going out completely after having been dipped in its flames. Sitting on the beach as waves lazily lapped at their legs, parting the water before it could reach them. Feeling the breeze on their face and in the trees, while a small wind-chime in its branches sat silently. Tiring of endlessly parting sand with knife-edged hands, and diving in to swim through it like water.

It was nice, but it couldn't be real. The next time she heard the beeping, Taylor grabbed hold of it and pulled herself up out of the muck her mind had become.

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**Brockton General / MON, JAN 10**

The sheer dullness of the world is what struck me first. The drab white walls looking gray in the dark of the night. The muted pastel sheets clinging around me. The stale undertaste of the sterilized air. The room felt dead, or dying.

Was I dying?

I remembered winter break. I remembered school. I remembered-

With a hiss, I shuddered. Probably not dying, just barely feeling alive. I tried to get my mind off of it, tried to think of something better, but my mind just drifted back to before the break. When the bullying looked like it was finally petering down. I couldn't help the moisture pooling in my eyes at the thought.

I'm sorry. Dad, mom... I couldn't hold back the sniffle. Finally a lucid moment, and I break down right away. Nothing was going to change. Nothing was going to get better. I was weak. So weak.

There was nothing I could do.

Not as I am.

I need to get stronger.

My hands clenched as I sniffled away the last of the snot and tears. I was done being weak. As soon as I got out of here, I'd double my jogging regimen. Find some weights. Pick fights with dad's burly sailor co-workers. Anything if it'd help me get tougher. I was going to train until I'd never feel weak again.
Resolution made, there wasn't much I could actually do right now. I looked around for a call button, and eventually found it under my pillow after I struggled to lever myself up to check there. The nurse was your standard overworked night shifter, bored out of her mind until everyone needed her at once. She turned on the TV and gave me the remote, but kept the volume low because it was night, and in case I fell asleep. I didn't think I would, apparently I'd spent five days sleeping off what happened... but I was out less than an hour later anyway.

Dad came by the next day. He looked a bit of a mess, like he'd cleaned up this morning but forgot to shave or shampoo his hair, little things that told me he wasn't okay. We talked a bit about what happened. I told him the bullying was starting again, worse this time. Didn't name anyone, though. Not sure I ever would. That was a thought for when I was home and could actually get my notebooks. I knew I could just tell him where they were, but I couldn't break through the teenage anathema that is giving a parent actual permission to rummage through my things.

Investigation ongoing. No leads yet.

It was a couple days later that I realized I had powers. The dreams hadn't stopped, actually getting clearer now that I wasn't half-dead and hallucinating, which led me to trying some things. There weren't any rocks around, and the air didn't seem to do anything. I felt like an idiot trying to make fire come out of my palms or snapped fingers, but then I asked the nurses for some water.

It was small, at first. Having some actual material there to show it was rippling when I tried to do something made it obvious. I was a cape. I had powers, and dreams telling me how to use them. Was that how all capes learned how their powers worked? I had some vague recollection that they just knew, so maybe dreams are how.


I pulled at the water some more, eventually managing to form a tendril rising out of the cup, and then a glob hovering over it. My control slipped, and the glob hit the carpet. I wound up knocking the cup over and apologizing for spilling it, to cover it up. The nurses took it okay, and even handed me a little towel when they got me more water, in case I spilled on myself next time.

Made me feel like some sickly cripple, but I guess that wasn't too far off the mark right now. I groaned. Not very PC there, Taylor. I sighed and fiddled with the water some more. I had no idea why I was so stuck on being strong now. I had that fit the first day I woke up, but that didn't seem like a big thing after I'd calmed down.

With another sigh, I decided to put off my potential mood swings for later, when I could do something about them.

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**FRI, JAN 14**

They were finally letting me out almost a week after I woke up. The infections were clearing up faster than they'd expected- I should have been fine for bedrest at home days ago, from what I could gather- but they'd kept me for observation anyway.

Dad brought me clothes, and checked me out of the hospital. In a wheelchair. I managed to convince him to take it back once I was in the truck, but that led to him watching me like I was some day old duckling about to topple into a stormdrain while I made my way slowly into the
I sat down at the kitchen table and let him putter around making tea and sandwiches. Eventually we were sat down eating, when he took a breath and dropped the bomb.

"The school has been calling. They... want to settle about what happened." I stared at him until he continued. "They're offering to cover the medical bills and a little extra, but that's it. I wanted to wait until you'd get a say in it, but they're getting pretty insistent about getting an answer."

I thought about it for a while, watching my tea get cold as dad waited for my verdict. I knew enough about legal battles from Emma’s dad to know that unless both sides were well off, all the bigger fish had to do was stall until the legal fees piled up enough that their lives were ruined and they gave up. Hard to find a bigger fish around than the federal government, in that regard. Suing the school wasn't on the table.

Could always try for more, though. Arguing with the school would pull dad off work and me off training, I was sure. What would we get out of it? More money? We weren't rich. If you stuck us in almost any other city in the States, they'd probably call us poor, near destitute. Here in the bay, though? We were almost solidly middle-class. Just had to take a look both ways down any street in the city- at least outside the actual rich parts- to see someone worse off than we were. We'd be fine.

"We should take the deal." I muttered. I’m not sure dad would’ve heard me if he hadn’t been silently waiting for me to say something.

"Are you sure?" He didn't really want to talk me out of it, I knew. We couldn't handle the bills. He was tired, angry, frustrated, but he'd spent most of that energy while I was at the hospital. Now he was simmering just angry enough to keep him on his game after a few sleepless nights worrying about me cut into his health. He was just, tired. Beaten down by the world, and something in his voice seemed like he was asking me not to end up the same way.

Not sure I'll ever understand parenthood, that dichotomy is weird.

"Yeah." I replied, a little louder. Things would be fine. The bills were going to be taken care of, I'd be back to training soon now that I was out of the hospital, my powers were cool, and I still had a week to try them out before I had to go back to-

I froze as a shiver ran up my spine. "Hey dad?"

He'd grabbed another half sandwich by then. "Yeah, hun?" He muttered around the bite.

"I don't want to go back. To Winslow." He stopped chewing to think for a bit. Then he nodded.

"I wouldn't want to, either. What'd you want to do instead?" Dad wouldn't let me drop out entirely, if nothing else because mom would never let me drop out. Homeschooling might be nice, if only because that'd let me have my own schedule. No idea what went into it, though. Signing up, turning in work, would I have a case worker? Would it cost something that public school didn't? Then there'd be questions about truancy if I was ever out during school hours, cutting the utility of not having hours down a bit...

I sighed. As much as I didn't want to go to school, the others were all supposed to be way better than Winslow. "Can I just get a transfer? Maybe to Arcadia."
He grunted, stroking his chin. "I've heard that one's hard to get into. Dockworkers talk about their kids, and most of them go to Winslow or Clarendon." He looked away, obviously thinking as his hand dropped. "I'll put out feelers about all of them, just in case."

I scoffed. "Even Immaculata?"

He grinned. "Not feeling the bible study?" He shook his head. "If you don't want to go there, I won't bother asking about it. Just thought they'd be more strict. Might be less bullying." He shrugged. Neither of my parents went to private schools, let alone catholic ones. Gram tried, I'd heard, but mom put her foot down about it. Even as a teenager, she'd hated the idea of propaganda or programming, and a mellow teen doesn't grow up to join a movement like Lustrum's.

I chuckled and shook my head, too. "Not really, no." I stopped to think for a second. "Hey, do you think Winslow would help with the transfer if we made them? As part of the settlement, I mean."

"Probably." He nodded. "Woulnd't be a problem for Clarendon, they're not 'full up', but making them talk to an administration that doesn't want new students while another option is right across town?" He bit his lip and scowled. "Thaaat might cost us a bit. They'd drag it out, anyway. Not sure if we could convince them to do that and any interest from the hospital bill by then..."

Watching dad ruminate on it, I couldn't help but sigh. "How much money were they giving us, anyway? You said there was extra. Maybe they'd be happier about the transfer without that." His eyes widened a bit, but he nodded.

"Might work. I think it came out to just under eight grand after the figure I was quoted for the bill. Wouldn't hurt us too bad going without, and it'd make them look better to the school district."

"Let's try that, then." I smiled, and twitched as I felt myself go limp for a second.

"Nodding off? Let's get you to bed." Dad helped me up out of the chair, as much as I didn't like it, followed me up the stairs and sat be down in bed. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?" I nodded, and he left. I didn't even bother undressing before I flopped down and let myself drift off.

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**SAT JAN 15**

It was a pretty lazy day, all round. Dad made breakfast and drew me up a bath afterward when I mentioned wanting to 'get all the hospital off me', before heading in to work for a few hours. He was still making up time he took off, even on top of his usual hour or two working on his days off for the Union's sake. His fussing was still irritating, but it was fine. I realized pretty quick that this was the perfect way to try bending- that word just felt right the first time I'd thought about my powers- water. Safety, privacy, quantity of material, it was altogether superior to my situation at the hospital.

Honestly, I felt like a child splashing around in their bubble bath. The unintentional infantilism alone was enough to make it frustrating, but my aching, heavy limbs didn't want to move the way I needed them to, to match the flowing motions I'd remembered from my dreams. Holding up spheres was easy now, and I could shape them a bit, I even frosted over the wall when I threw my arm out in frustration at it once. *That* was interesting, but not really helpful. I had no intention of turning myself into an ice cube by accident while I was still in the tub, thank you.
A couple hours later I decided to get out, pulling the drops of water off me as I went. It still wouldn't dry my hair, probably some mental trick to it since I'd seen people bending their clothes dry in my dreams. For now I just toweled it like usual.

With dad still not back yet, me not feeling up to jogging yet, and not wanting to slam my head against Waterbending anymore today, I headed out into the backyard. It wasn't much, just big enough for a tree to one side, and a little plot for a garden mom had us keep up as a family project. Just one more thing we let go after she passed. Still, if I mucked about there, I could just tell dad I was working out my atrophied muscles trying to clear it out for spring. I didn't think a week and a half in bed was enough for atrophy to set in, but I knew he wouldn't argue the point too much. My body sure as hell felt like it, but the doctors said that might be normal. Cured of infections I might be, I still pulled and tore things trying to bust the locker open from inside.

After the full-body shiver faded, I turned to the patch of weeds boxed in by old tines dad'd grabbed from the trainyard, making it look slightly fancier- like a giant planter box. I took a deep breath and waved my hand at it.

I felt a bit of a rumble, but nothing else happened. Okay, doing something wrong, then. I thought back. Stances. Motions were important, but stances and form were especially important for Earthbending. You had to be the unmoving mountain, telling the world to budge instead.

So I set my feet and shoulders, held my arms parallel to the ground at my sides, took another deep breath, and punched up in the garden's general direction.

Instantly the garden, all four square meters of it, shot about two meters into the air and hovered there.

I was so shocked I immediately dropped it.

Holy shit. Why was I so much better with dirt than water? It took a while for me to calm down enough to decide that it didn't matter. The fact was, I was better with Earthbending. That was fine. Good, even. I had at least one element I didn't feel shitty using.

It took even longer to figure out what to do with it. I could hardly upturn the entire backyard for the sake of training. Not only would dad notice, but there could be pipes down there I didn't want to break. With that thought, I gently raised the mass of earth I'd lifted earlier to check under it. No pipes I could see. I heaved out a sigh of relief. Then I broke off a half-meter square chunk of the dirt, set the rest back where it went, and started pulling little chunks of dirt out of what was left. Even if I couldn't practice anything flashy, I could still work on my fine control. Eventually all the plants in it started falling out, and all the dirt itself was levitated back into the hole it came from.

I'd just need to rake up the weeds when I was done.

Powers were amazing.

I was only a quarter of the way done when dad got home half an hour later, and I took a nap. He never checked out back, just went on making calls to the schools, the hospital, and doing paperwork. I went out to finish the job after he went to bed, feeling incredibly pleased with myself.

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SUN JAN 16

The next day I asked dad to take me with him on his way to work. He was fairly curious as to why I wanted to leave the house, and I told him I just wanted to sit by the beach for a while. Completely true, even. He told me to stay where crowds could see me, and to meet him at the DWA around one or two in the afternoon so we could get lunch and head home.

I'd wanted to try something I'd seen in my dreams that night. Using the ocean as a tool to learn Waterbending. really any moving water you're not controlling would work, but waves worked especially well. So I made sure to put on some synthetic fiber pants that wouldn't soak the water very well, and plopped myself down in front of the surf just as it was coming in.

It was really fucking cold and I immediately shot back out of the water. Holy crap it didn't feel that cold in my dreams. Maybe my dream-self was more used to it, or maybe it was just normal dream numbness, but this was almost painfully cold.

After I finished hyperventilating about it, I realized that's probably why it was such a good teaching tool. You bend the water away before it can touch you, which means you don't have to freeze your ass off. Incentives, incentives.

Fine. Taking a few deep breaths, I tried again. This time I managed not to jump out, but it was a near thing. I glanced around to double-check there wasn't anyone near enough to actually see the water acting weirdly, and started making 'shooing' motions at the waves as they came in. At first I wasn't able to do much more than thin the surf out a little, but after a few waves I started to break them around me, letting them almost touch my legs. Then I started getting creative, forming little sheets of ice right before a wave would come in, letting it melt in the surf, keeping myself dry, and repeating.

I got so into it, I almost missed my deadline to meet dad. We wound up hitting one of the bay's few Mexican places for takeout and ate at home, after which I took another nap. Dad seemed to be a little worried about me sleeping too much, but I convinced him I was fine, just on a weird sleep schedule after the hospital.

After dark I went back out to the garden, which I'd packed down yesterday. I started pulling up variously shaped chunks and packing them back down, before trying a different shape. Then I started messing with the shapes while levitating them, and juggling them without actually touching them. While fun, that didn't prevent it from getting boring eventually. So I went to bed.

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MON JAN 17

Today I felt well enough to start jogging again. Dad made a fuss about it, reminding me to stay to the safer neighborhoods, and remember my pepper spray. He let me go eventually, and I made my way to the library. I had all day, so I took it slow and paced myself. Then I had to convince the librarians I wasn't truant. A call to Winslow to confirm I had an excused absence and I was on the computer looking up everything publicly available about parahumans and the local gangs.

My research took most of the day, which I hadn't really been expecting. Nothing seemed to fit with what I was going through, so I'd just kept digging. In the end I just headed home instead of to the beach for more training, and found dad had beaten me back. He told me to get a shower in if I wanted, and meet him back in the kitchen when I was done.
"I had a couple meetings with the schools today." He started. "We finalized the settlement, now that the ball's rolling on getting you into Arcadia. Then I went there to talk to them about your enrollment. They want you in Thursday and Friday for testing, given your situation and grades. Then a week to process everything, and you'll start there week after next, starting February."

"That's great, dad!" I said, smiling. It was good. Things were moving faster than I thought, I'd be back in school and on track to get on with my life. I'd have to plan my training around it, but that should be fine.

As dad moved to start dinner, a tiny, traitorous part of my mind couldn't help but wonder how much easier that would be if I could just tell dad I was going off to train my powers, or getting fit so I could fight or run away if trouble started up. I bet he even knew a bunch of dockworkers who knew how to fight, and could help me train.

I moved to say something, to try and tell him I was a cape, but my throat locked up. What if he had another overprotective fit? What if he didn't understand?

My throat was painfully tight as I tried to utter any sound at all. I knew things would be better if dad knew. I knew it. He loved me, only wanted what was best for me, and I trusted him. I tried again, and again no sound came out.

_I trusted him, dammit!_

Apparently I'd stood there, locked up and slowly tearing up long enough that the silence alerted dad that something was off. He turned back from where he'd been filling a pot with water- some pasta dish, maybe spaghetti or casserole- and his face grew worried as he saw me. "Taylor? What's wrong?"

"I-" I tried, I really did. Why was this happening? I felt trapped, caught, *weak*. Stop being so *weak*!

I flicked my hand up and a glob of the water in the pan rose up into the air. Dad turned and saw it, I couldn't see it now, but when he turned back, making vague sounds of alarm and confusion, his eyes were very wide.

"I have powers." I finally managed to choke out. The tears were streaming down my face now, and dad's face shifted through confusion, understanding, horror, a split second of rage, and then settled on comforting worry.

"Oh, honey..." He muttered, crossing the room to wrap me up in his arms. I dropped the water, which overflowed the pot. The faucet was still burbling away, but I was finding it hard to care.

I cried for a bit, as dad murmured it was going to be okay, and stroked my hair down my back. When I pushed away, I sniffled and wiped at my face, and he asked me if I was okay. I nodded, noticed the faucet still on, and reached out toward it. Some of the water flowed up over the tap, slowly froze, and I telekinetically shut off the water. The ice unfroze much faster than it froze, and I turned back to dad, who'd been starting amazed at me.

"So..." He started awkwardly, "You have water powers?"

I shook my head and chuckled a little. "Classical elements, I think. Water, wind-" I reached out my palm and a weak gust rustled a group of mom's decorative mugs hanging on a pegboard near the
"sink." "-earth-" I stomped my foot, and the house shook lightly. "-and fire." I didn't do anything, and dad still looked spooked from my mini-tremor, so I elucidated. "I haven't actually tried doing anything with fire. Seemed dangerous."

He held up a hand. "Please don't do that, we might need to fix the pipes now." I had the grace to blush bashfully. "That's... a lot of powers. So you're a- they're called Grab Bags, right?"

My hand came up in a 'so-so' gesture. "I looked it up today, and I don't think that's it. Grab bag capes usually have a bunch of weak, unrelated, or barely-related powers. I'm pretty sure I've got a matching set of powers that'd be about average on their own." I moved over to help him start cooking, and he followed, breaking off for the freezer. Looks like we were doing a chicken pasta thing.

Chicken deposited in the partly full-of-water sink to thaw, he asked "Alfredo or cheesy casserole?"

I thought about it for a bit. "Caaasserole." I hummed, pleasurably. He smiled and went back to grab cheese. I grabbed the oven dish out of the cupboard, along with some macaroni for the pasta.

While dad was cutting up the cheese, I heard him take a deep breath. "I want you to join the Wards."

There was no helping the pause I took as his words washed over me. I knew this was coming, but it still hurt a little. "I don't want to join them." I cut off his reply, pausing in my work to turn to him. "At least not yet. Dad, if I join the wards, they'll throw a costume on me and parade me out in front of the public as fast as they possibly can. I wouldn't mind that after I'm stronger, but right now? That just paints a target on our backs. They'll know I exist, and that they can come looking for me."

I turned back to greasing the pan and waiting for the water to boil, giving dad a second to think on my words. "I don't want to fight anyone yet. I know I'm not strong enough. That's why I'm going to train, get better, get stronger, and then we can talk about whether or not I want to join a team." I glanced his way. "Deal?"

He mused over my words. "Safety in obscurity, huh?" It actually sounded way better now that I knew the strategy I had planned had a name. "Alright. We'll hold off on teams. But you'll run power training, by me to make sure there's not something you're missing. I don't want you getting impatient and outing yourself. I remember what being a teenager is like."

The groan I let out would not be stifled, and he chuckled. We kept at this for about half a minute before I brought up another point. "I'd kinda' like to get some training in hand-to-hand. Mostly basic self-defense, but my powers seem to work better if I use them with proper martial arts forms."

Dad hummed to himself. "A couple of the guys owe me favors, I could probably get you some basic lessons on military CQC, Karate, Judo, things like that."

My eyes lit up. "That's perfect! Exactly what I was after." I reached over and gave him a half-arm hug, staying wary of the knife he was cutting chicken with, and my own greasy paws. "Thanks, dad."

Another thought popped to mind as I was stirring pasta. "What about getting some weights? I like running, but maybe some more upper body work would help?"

He shrugged. "I think I've got some dumbbells in the basement, but they're only five or ten pounds. Could probably buy some used weights on the cheap from one of the guys if you want, though."
"That'd be great."

After we threw everything together and stuck it in the oven, I offered to let dad see me training my Earthbending a bit. "Is that what happened to the garden?" He'd chuckled, and went to grab one of his 'emergency beers.' He'd cut alcohol almost entirely out of his life after Alan, Kurt, and a bunch of his other friends kicked his ass for still being a layabout drunk a few months after mom died. He still kept some around for stressful days though, and I did just drop a hell of a whammy on him. I couldn't really begrudge him the booze.

We went out and I showed him a few things while the chicken cooked. We had dinner, chatting mostly about his work and possible training ideas I'd had, and then we went back out so I could train some more. Dad grabbed another beer, watching me train with worried pride, and for the first time since I'd gotten back from the hospital, I didn't bother trying to get up after dark for extra training.
Chapter 1.2 (Arcadia)

Chapter Summary

Part 4 to part 6 of the original updates.

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**TUE JAN 18**

I got up at dawn, and spent the time before breakfast training more. I turned as much of the garden area into silty dust as I could, and tried my hand at trying to 'swim' through granulate earth. It didn't go as well as I'd wanted it to, but I learned a bit. Like how much I disliked the taste of dirt.

A quick shower before breakfast, and dad dropped me off at the library before he went to work. I spent most of the day cramming for the Arcadia tests, and dad picked me up on the way home. He'd packed the back of the truck full of refuse from around the docks, mostly old brick and mortar, concrete and asphalt chunks, drywall and plaster, along with a bucket of sand and some actual rocks.

I spent the rest of the night experimenting with them. It turned out that there was something off about man-made, or at least man-altered 'earth' that kept me from bending it right. I could still feel it, and move it a bit, but I wasn't where I needed to be to bend it properly yet.

That night, I dreamt of fire.

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**WED JAN 19**

It was another slow day. I went jogging in the morning, and dad dropped me off for school study again. This time I stayed up training into the night a bit, I was pretty anxious about the testing tomorrow. I got up, jogged, showered, and dad dropped me off at the school on his way to work.

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**Arcadia / THU JAN 20**

The school was... intimidating.

It was odd, one would think having fewer gang signs, prettier landscaping, an actual fence and nice buildings, would actually put my mind at ease, but it just left me worrying where the actual punches were going to be coming from. I made it in, got to the office, gave my name, and then tried meditating to calm my nerves. I knew how to, I'd done it in my dreams often enough, (and wasn't that a weird thought?) but I'd never taken the time to slow down and sit still in real life.

Soon enough, one of the assistant principles came by to collect me. They had a spare study room that wasn't in use, and hadn't been taken over as a club space yet, so lacked anything too distracting for her tests. Ms. Anderson was curt, but otherwise nice enough about the whole thing.

I was let out to lunch with a voucher for the day, and while part of me wanted to jump right in and socialize, on the whole I just wanted to be left alone today. I got a few interested looks, but my
glum, intense exterior kept anyone from talking to me.

Testing resumed, and I was let out a bit earlier than the rest of the school, having just finished a test and the teacher not wanting to run too late by starting another.

I went home, dug out the dumbbells dad mentioned, and spent my time alternating weight training and Earthbending until I was too exhausted to worry about the rest of my tests.

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FRI JAN 21

After the morning's testing, I was almost done. I had maybe one test left by the time lunch rolled around, and then I'd be free to go. I got another voucher, and this time, I decided I'd be social. Screw being a meek wallflower, I wouldn't let those bitches win.

Looking over the bustling crowd though, I hesitated. I didn't need to launch myself headfirst into the dark morass of teenage social strata to not be a wallflower. I'd just go be social outside.

...which would be easier if there was anyone outside. Aside from people coming and going, anyway. It took a bit of searching, but eventually I found someone sitting on a bench near a couple of trees, eating quietly while flicking through pages on a bulky brick of a smartphone. I headed over.

"Hey." I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. The half-dead almost-glare that resulted showed my confidence was irrelevant. "Uhhm, you... mind if I sit here?"

She glanced down at the free half of the bench and rolled her eyes with a scoff. "Free country." She went back to her phone.

...what a bitch.

Oh well, that won't stop me. I'm going to be social today if it kills someone, and I'm the one with powers, here. I plopped down on the bench, sat my food to the side, and took a silent fortifying breath. "I'm Taylor. I'm going to be starting here in a couple weeks." The one eye I could see swiveled in my direction. "Transferring in from Winslow."

"Good for you." Her voice was a droning monotone. "I hear it's a shithole."

I chuckled, "It really is." Maybe this might work, after all? "I wound up in the hospital, the place is so bad." Maybe not attributable to Winslow as a whole, but...

That got a reaction. An interested widening of her eyes. "You're locker girl?"

I flinched and sighed. "Please don't call me that." I took a second to calm down. "But yeah, that was me."

She hummed, and seemed to be thinking for almost half a minute. "Amy Dallon."

"Huh?"

"My name." She huffed. "It's Amy Dallon."

"Oh." Why was tha- holy shit this bitch is Panacea. "Oh! Neat."

"Neat?" She asked with a smirk. "Not the usual reaction. You're not mad?"
Now I was confused. "Why would I be mad?"

"I didn't heal you."

The frustration in those words were almost a palpable force. I wasn't sure why, there were half a dozen reasons that came to mind, and none of them made sense to me right in that second. So I shrugged. "I was only hurt for about two weeks." And I got powers out of it. "Who'd care about that?"

She was looking at me like I'd just told her I was a betentacled space invader who'd impregnated her family last night. Then she huffed, shook her head, chuckled, and asked, "What's your number?"

That had me at a loss, my burgeoning good mood gone. "I... don't have a cell phone."

"What, you break it in the locker?" She snarked.

I growled. "No, I didn't have one before that."

She let out a breath and muttered, "no wonder..." before she turned back to me. "Y'ver thought that maybe if you had one, you could've called for help, and then you wouldn't be locker girl?"

A large part of me wanted to hate her for that, but the rest actually agreed with her. Plus, if I ever wanted to actually be a hero, I'd have to make calls eventually, right? "I'll have one before I start here."

She nodded, got up, dusted herself off, and grabbed her bag. "Good. Gimme your number when you do." She started back towards the school, a jaunty wave and a sing-song "Later, locker-girl." thrown over her shoulder back at me.

Stop calling me that. "Later, bitch queen!" I called back, drawing a startled squawk of laughter from her. She didn't stop or turn back, but I saw her shake her head and she seemed to be smiling.

...did I just accidentally a friend?

---

**FRI JAN 21**

After my last test, I went straight to dad's work. He seemed a little surprised I was done already, and told me nothing was going on for a couple hours, yet. So I'd wound up sitting in the yard by the office, sitting down and meditating again.

I'd felt something through the earth a few times while using it. I knew I had. It seemed like it'd be a useful skill to have, sensing things through the ground. So I'd sat my bony butt on the concrete and tried to feel anything around me through it. A few minutes later I'd gotten frustrated and flopped backward, huffing and trying to calm down, when I noticed I was actually starting to feel something with more of my body on the ground. So I laid myself flat and started the meditation again.

Dad wound up kicking my side lightly, probably thinking I'd fallen asleep. I'd been so focused on little bits of movement blocks away that I wasn't paying attention to the 'safe' area of the yard. Definitely needed to work on that.

"This is Gerard." Dad said, pointing me over to a wiry white guy with sandy hair. If I'd met him on
the street I might've assumed he was Empire, but if he was with dad he must be fine. "He's gonna
be kicking the shit out of you today." I sputtered indignantly as he turned to the man. "If you
actually kick the shit out of my little owl, I'll break your arm."

That just had the man chuckling and promising we'd be sticking to light bruising today. I had the
impression that dad couldn't take this guy in a fight, and they both knew it. He started telling me
about 'Aikido' and using my opponent's force against them.

---

SAT JAN 22

I was almost too sore to get up the next morning. I was certainly a mass of bruises, alright.
Apparently I'd surprised him by having a lot more force than a hundred pound beanpole should,
and that left me eating dirt a little harder than intended when he threw it back at me. Even going
over how to fall before that only helped so much. Smug asshole didn't seem like he'd had a single
bruise when we left, even though I'd thrown him just as often as he had me.

Eventually we made it home and I just flopped down in the backyard to rest and practice more with
sensing things. That's where I was now, too. I didn't want to do anything today. Too busy resting
my bruises, and I'd have another session of training later today, too. Hurray.

I sighed. Dad would only let me get away with skipping my studies to acclimate to proper training
for another day, maybe two. Had to make the most of it. Dad brought lunch and we made a picnic
out of it, then he started tossing an old ball into the garden while I was blindfolded, and had me
toss it back with Earthbending. I was, thankfully, allowed to stay flopped on the ground for this.

Then we went and I met Gerry.

Gerry kicked my ass harder than Gerard did.

---

SUN JAN 23

I don't know if he'd planned it ahead of time, or if he was just taking pity on me, but after two days
with four hour stints of hard physical training, I was begging to get back to schoolwork. I wound
up skipping my usual morning training for an extra-long, powers-free soak in the tub. Still trained
my sensing in the evening after studying, though.

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MON JAN 24

Today I went jogging again, and went down to the stores... and bought a phone. Not a great one,
not terribly expensive, just something to make calls and texts with, and a little data just in case.

It hurt so much, caving to practicality to buy that thing.

I went to the library to study, then to dad's work to pose through a bunch of flowing forms with an
older Asian woman that was apparently a secretary at one of the other unions in town. Then home
to train and meditate.
TUE JAN 25

Felt up to running and weights, today. Dad said he'd found someone with a weight set they'd part with, and that they'd bring it by over the weekend.

More training with granny-sensei. Apparently I was one of her 'projects' now.

---

FRI JAN 28

I was starting to wonder when having a phone started to feel normal. That... felt way too fast. I'd already programmed in a bunch of emergency numbers, and knowing I had the cops or fire department a few buttons away from being on the line... maybe it wouldn't help as much, this being Brockton Bay and all, but it was still a reassurance I could've done with a lot sooner.

Now I was starting to worry about what might happen to dad if something happened. If he had a car crash, or if something happened while shopping, or any other time he couldn't get to a landline. I knew I'd feel so much better knowing he could get ahold of me, that I could get ahold of him, anytime we needed each other.

I just didn't know how I'd be able to say it to him.

---

I had a plan, now I just needed to wait for tonight. I went for my morning run, then we had breakfast and I did my usual library thing.

This afternoon was my last session training with Sue for a while, or as wouldn't get out of my head,"Granny-Sensei." I blamed martial arts movies from my childhood, but honestly part of me really liked the lectures she'd give on east Asian language and cultural identity whenever I called the tiny Korean woman by a Japanese title.

And she really was tiny. Barely five foot, wiry frame starting to turn skeletal with age, she looked at least sixty, even though she was only a few years older than dad. Stress and too many years smoking, she'd said. Quit around when I was born, but the damage was done.

When we talked, she'd always mention stress as this monolithic enemy to pick apart one day at a time until serenity kicked in. I'd asked her how long it'd taken her, and she'd just laughed. Laughed and laughed until I realized she never actually thought it could be beaten. Not here, at least.

"You're worried" Sue stated, while they were moving through Tai-Chi forms.

It was actually a little annoying how well the old woman could read my mood sometimes. "What gave it away?" I chuckled.

She hummed. "You slip into Kung Fu more often when you're worried." I wondered how that was relevant, but after a moment she continued. "I've talked with your father about you quite a bit since we started. Gerard knows Bagua and Aikido, Gerry does Judo, Krav Maga." We moved through another few stances. "Where did you learn Kung Fu?"

I froze. I wracked my brain for what she might mean, and then realized she must be talking about the stances and strikes the Earthbenders in my dreams used, the ones I'd started using, both there and physically. I'd had Kung Fu downloaded into my brain somehow, and that left me without a good answer to her question.
When I looked over, she'd also stopped, dropped out of her stance. She stared at me, her look understanding, even a bit sad. "I won't push." She said, softly. "Young girls keep their secrets, but your father worries. Too much, sometimes."

"I'm... sorry?" I was confused with how to respond to her words, and even more confused when she reached out and softly bapped my nose before I could react.

"Worry him less, so he bitches at me less." I spluttered at the words, and the tonal whiplash that came with them. "You're your parents' daughter." Knife right to my fucking heart. "Danny worries about so much he can't control, and it wears him down. Don't let it happen to you, too." Message delivered, she smiled. "Now, gonna be busy for a few weeks, so you wanna see how far you've come with a spar?"

I couldn't help it, I smiled a little too. She'd taught me a lot, but we'd never actually gotten physical in our training. I nodded.

That little old lady absolutely destroyed me.

---

When we got home, I told dad I wanted to try some new training. Which is how we wound up sitting out back on the ground. I'd figured out that my earth senses were much better via direct skin contact, which was going to make costumes interesting if I wound up needing sole-less footwear, but I'd decided to wear thin biking shorts for this. I'd sat myself cross-legged on the ground, pressing as much of my bare legs to the dirt as I could.

"So, I told you about how I can sense heartbeats and stepping feet and things really easily with my senses, right?" That's what I'd gotten him out here with. "Well I think if I get really good at it, I might be able to sense the rest of the body, too. Sort of like... an emotion sense?" I was reaching, I really didn't want to call it a-

"A lie detector, you mean?" Dad chuckled. Dammit, dad. "Alright, how are we going to test that? You want me to try and lie about things?"

Here we go. "I figured I'd just... talk, maybe ask things, see how you reacted."

I could see the cogs turning behind his eyes. He knew I was up to something, but couldn't figure out what. "Alright. Go ahead."

"Well, I think Sue knows something's up, maybe that I've got powers." No increase in the tiny rumble of his breathing, small perk in heartbeat before it balanced out. He wasn't really surprised, or he trusted her a lot more than I thought he did. "Aaand I made a friend at school while I was testing." No reaction. Did he think I was actually socially competent, or something? "And she... convinced me to get a cell phone." His breath hitched, and his heart rate spiked. He didn't look alarmed or angry, though. More thoughtful. "I want you to get one, too."

Now he did look a little mad. He took a couple breaths and his heart slowed down a tad. "What's your reasoning on that?"

I decided to lead with the killing blow. "I want to be able to get ahold of you whenever I need you, no matter where you are." Oh yeah, now that was a spike in heart rhythm. His breathing was shallow, and I could feel him fidgeting. "Plus it'll help with work, and you can call emergency services if you need to." And then I thought of a knife I could twist to really get him to agree. I waited until it looked like he was stalling his reply, and added, "We lost mom because she was
using her phone. I don't want to lose you because you wouldn't use one."

The look on his face made me feel like a monster. Being able to sense even a bit of what he must be feeling through his body with my senses was horrible. He started breathing harder, then he got up and started towards the house.

"Please, dad." I whined. He stopped, turned back. I saw how hesitant he was, but he gave a jerky motion that could pass for a nod before he went inside. I'd won the argument.

I just felt like a manipulative bitch afterward.

I took a few minutes to calm down before I set myself to meditating, trying to sense the bodies of people out on the street, or in houses, which didn't work as well.

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**SAT JAN 29**

Dad was gone when I woke up. I'd slept in a little, then made myself some instant oatmeal because I felt like crap. I spent so long anxiously messing with it that Dad came back when I was almost done. He looked... okay. Still worked up, but not angry. He came into the kitchen and set a bag of takeout breakfast and a shopping bag on the table. I felt a spike of self-hatred, self-disgust, self-*something* at wasting my time making food I didn't need to and then playing with it until the morning was gone.

I took a breath and sank the first few steps into meditation. I was being emotional, irrational. I was looking for ways to get back at myself for hurting dad. That's all this was.

He dug a package out of the bag and slid it over to me on the table. It was a cheap pre-paid phone. "Remind me how these stupid things work?"

It was an olive branch, I knew. He hadn't forgotten how phones work, he just wanted me involved. So I opened it up and we turned it on, added the phone card he'd gotten for it, and fiddled with the settings until he wasn't unhappy with it.

"I'm sorry." I said when we were done.

"I know." He replied, shaking his head. "It's stupid. I *know* it's stupid, but..." He was getting worked up again, then he sighed. "I'm sorry, too."

We hugged it out, and decided to just get on with our damn day. Some guy named Kyle came by in the afternoon, and the three of us packed a weight bench and the individual weights down to the basement over a half-dozen trips. It was weird how little trouble I was having with them, maybe carrying a little more than the two adult men were, even. I decided in the moment that this was something to freak out about *later*. We set the things up, hands were shaken, and he left. We'd set the bar at about 30 pounds to start with, and I tried it out, shocked to find that it was actually pretty easy. We upped it to 40, then 50 which I was starting to need to work at, then 60 which had me struggling.

That seemed pretty odd for an untrained mid-teen girl. We dialed the weight back down to 40 and had me do reps for a few minutes. We went and got a late lunch after that, and I started looking up stuff about Brute parahumans on my phone while we ate.

After that was training with Gerard again, which I handled much better after my week with Sue. I hadn't actually *gained* much training with Gerry, unlike the others. I think it had something to do
with matching up training to styles like the ones already in my head? Then it was more like retraining a rusty skill, rather than learning a new one.

I wound up wandering downtown after that in sandals with the soles removed, mostly just people watching with both my eyes and earth senses. I caught a late bus home after it got dark and the crowds thinned out.

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**SUN JAN 30**

Dad was sleeping in today, so I jogged down to the library for my last study session before Arcadia. I was at a table reading up on biology when I heard them.

"Oh wow, if it isn't Taylor!" That *bitch* Emma crooned. I grit my teeth and forced myself not to react otherwise. "Fancy meeting *you*, here."

"We were so worried." Madison added in, almost sounding sincere. "We thought you might be dead."

Emma scoffed. "No, she just smells dead. They cleaned that locker three times, and it *still* stinks whenever I walk by." Hand on the wooden table. Senses muffled by sneaker soles and carpet, the table's a little clearer. Not earth, but solid enough to get blurry shapes. Two of them, coming up behind me on either side. A third standing out in the open and not moving was probably Sophia.

They seemed done for the moment, so I took a deep breath. "Go away, Emma."

"Aww," She cooed. "You're gonna have to try harder than that. So, when are you crawling back, Taylor?"

"Not going back." I said as I gathered up my things.

She scoffed. "You're *running away*? I always knew you were a coward."

I smirked. "Not running away, just moving on." I'd never have to deal with her outside these unfortunate public meetings, soon. Had to keep that in mind. Had to keep looking forward to it.

When I stood, the two of them closed around me, so I'd have to push past at least one of them to leave. "Sounds a lot like *running*, to me, weakling."

I slipped into the first step of meditation. Clear your mind of excess clutter. Focus on what's in front of you, let everything else fall away. "Just tired of letting you hold me back."

Her eyes widened as I threw back the words she'd said to me, the day she ended our friendship. I reached out to the side without looking, nudging Madison out of position so I could slip between them. My passing out of her vision seemed to restart Emma.

"Yeah, just run away. Run like you always do!" She yelled, and I ignored her.

Sophia was between me and the exit like usual. When I tried to go around her, she moved to intercept and reached out to shove me back. I turned her hand with a flick of my own. Her eyes widened, narrowed, and she tried to grab the hand I'd used. I knocked her reaching paw away with my other hand. She growled and shot out a punch toward my gut.

I grabbed her wrist, swept her legs out from under her, and slammed her face-down into the ground
with my knee on her back.

The entire library was suddenly *dead* silent.

Sophia seemed to be trying to silently process what'd just happened, so I glanced up to Emma and Madison, who were staring at me wide-eyed. I glanced over the staring crowd until my eyes found one of the librarians, out of her seat and watching uneasily.

I nodded to her, hopped off Sophia with my arms raised, and backed toward the exit. I couldn't keep the grin off my face as I turned and called "Later, bitches."

I couldn't help it.
I felt amazing.

---

The new instructor dad lined up for me was a slightly short, scrappy-looking Filipino man named Jake. After the revelation that I seemed to do better with styles from my dreams, we decided adding more Kung Fu, which seemed to be used by *two* of my bending styles, had to become a priority. He was jovial and energetic, and claimed the only reasons he agreed to this were that *dad* would owe *him* a favor, and that Old Sue vouched for my skills. A fairly glowing review despite being thoroughly trounced when I'd actually gotten to spar with her.

After that it was more people-watching downtown, before heading home.

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**MON JAN 31**

First day at Arcadia. I was anxious and excited, getting there early so they could set me up with a locker and make sure I knew where all my classes were. I really had no intention of *using* the locker, but they had no reason to know my new thick canvas backpack was purchased both to appear slightly more stylish than my stained old one, *and* to help hide how little trouble carrying *all* of my books at once was giving me.

First period was English. It was nice getting to experience it without the constant dread of Winslow, but I figured that'd be a constant today. I kept having to remind myself to stop slouching, or ducking away from rustles behind me or motion out of the corner of my eyes. I was safer here, and as I'd shown yesterday, it wasn't like I was *helpless*. Even without powers, I put Sophia on the floor. I was sure I'd be fine here.

Second period was History. It was before third, math, that I actually found Amy in the halls. I called out to her and she stopped. I dug the note I'd written before school out of my pocket and held it out to her. She looked down at it, then back at me, waiting.

"...you asked for my number, when we had lunch together about a week ago?" I tried, starting to sweat a little.

"Riiiiight." She didn't look surprised, so she'd either remembered me from the start, or didn't care. Either way, she took the note. "Anything else?"

"Do you..." Dammit, Taylor. New school, *new me*. Stop acting so meek! I shook myself. "Do you want to have lunch together again?"

Her lip quirked very slightly. "I suppose we could." She turned to head off. "Same place?" She
called behind her, not waiting for a reply.

I couldn't decide if she was actually super cool, or one of the most unpleasant people I'd ever met. I sighed and headed off to class, deciding on the way that it was probably the latter. I just had no luck with friends, it seemed. The fact that I ignored two calls for 'new girl' and demurred away from someone that came up to me that break alone was completely lost on me. Forever alone.

Lunch couldn't come fast enough. Sure, I was actually learning now, but school was school. I went straight to the cafeteria, got my food, and was slightly surprised Amy'd beaten me to the bench anyway. "How'd you get here so fast?" I asked as I sat.

She shrugged. "Cut in line." I gave her a side look, very slight horror and disappointment. She scoffed. "I was with Vicky. People jump out of the way for her."

"Your sister, right?"

Amy nodded and smirked. "Ray of fuckin' sunshine."

I hesitated. "Are you two... okay?"

She rolled her eyes. "Me and Vicky are great, I love my sister." Another, wider smirk this time. "It's everyone else I can't stand."

That had me thinking for a moment. "If I'm imposing...?"

Her hand waved, cutting me off. "You're fine." She gave me a side-eye and took a drink, pausing for a moment after. "You haven't asked me to heal you."

I cocked my head. "No?"

She smiled and pointed waved toward my hands. "You've got a bruise on your wrist, and a little spot on your chin." she pointed at her own, and I felt mine, finding that indeed, it was a little tender. "You're not some whiny china doll, here to have me fix you." She took another sip. "I like that." She huffed, shook her head, and pointed at me with the hand still holding her fruit juice. "Though as an honorary medical professional, I'm semi-legally obligated to ask about your home life, now."

It took me a second to get it. "Oh! No, dad wouldn't hurt me. I've been doing martial arts since I got out of the hospital. ...started about when we met, actually." I thought out loud.

She shrugged and started shoveling fries into her face. "They have me do a couple courses now and then, too." She griped. "Gotta keep their precious healer safe." She muttered something angrily.

"Actually, I asked to do it." My smile grew slightly strained. "I didn't want to feel weak anymore."

Her eyes stayed on me for a few seconds before she nodded and looked away. Maybe that stuck a chord with her? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw hers widen, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"There you are!"

I turned to the cheerful voice that was coming from the school and-

Pretty.

I couldn't help it. I blushed a little.
"Vicky..." Amy groaned.

So this was her sister. Ray of sunshine, indeed. The blonde was floating just in front of us, now.

"New friend, Ames?" Vicky asked. "Oh, we have to hang out sometime! Let's meet up after school, you're free, right?" My head lolled, and she took that as confirmation. She fished out a phone-identical to Amy's, I noted- and asked what my number was. I rattled off the digits as I wracked my brain for why that was significant. Why phone numbers would matter- !!!

"Amy!" I said, turning to her. She seemed shocked I could even remember she existed with her sister right in front of me. "I forgot to get your number!"

She blinked, and told me her number after I'd gotten my phone out, then Vicky gave me hers. Amy was dragged off toward the cafeteria after that, Vicky chattering on about something 'Kara' had said which the healer apparently needed to hear about, while the girl in question looked back to me and mouthed 'save me' overdramatically.

I just smiled and gave them a shy wave while they left. I shook my head, still needed to eat my lunch. That was really odd, though... Amy was being nice, and Vicky was so pretty...

That made me blush again, this time in frustration. Why had I been making eyes at a girl? I was straight, dammit!

I shook my head, kicked my shoes off and ate in silence while I watched the people mingle via my feet.
Chapter 1.3 (Victoria)

Chapter Summary

Updates 7 and 8.

MON JAN 31

While I certainly wanted to be more social, I wasn't sure about throwing myself into the deep end, as it were. In hindsight, they'd been planning this outing before Vicky invited me, so it seemed entirely likely to be a group social thing with her friends. Which... didn't appeal as much.

I hung back after my last class, slipped off my shoes- it was getting harder to put them back on, I felt so blind- and got out my phone. They turned everything back on right away after classes, right? So I'd have a signal. I sent off a couple of texts.

'Hey Vicky, I forgot I had plans with my dad today, can we hang out later this week?' and 'Hey Amy, I forgot I had plans after school, and I didn't want to feel like a third wheel anyway. Maybe we can hang out later?'

The reply from Vicky was a quick and cheerful 'KK, ttyl!' while the one from Amy was more interesting.

'Going t let me sfr alone, I c how it is.' Oh geez, was she mad at me? I had to reply fast. I shoved my shoes in by bag and dodged the thinning crowd with feetvision while I typed.

'No! I just have martial arts every day this week, need to cancel in advance, and can't do that while the school's dark' Send. I thought about it, and also added, 'I'm also pretty bad with people, and I thought this was a big group thing.'

I was well out of school and on my way to the bus by the time I got a reply. 'k, np' at... least she didn't seem mad? Maybe she was joking earlier and I overreacted? I started hyperventilating a little. People were hard! I got to the stop, hung a bit back from the other students, and tried to calm down.

It wasn't far to my stop, near dad's work. I probably could've run it and gotten there about half an hour later, but I wanted the extra time to talk with dad. He was in the middle of a call when I got there, but it wasn't long to wait. "What's up, Taylor?"

"Well..." I thought of the stuff I'd wanted to ask about, over the course of brainstorming at school. "Do we have any fans?" He looked confused. "Y'know, foldy..." in my demonstration, my hands wound up approximating the shape of a shadow-puppet bird. I blushed and dropped my arms to my sides. "Never mind." Dad chuckled and shook his head, he knew what I meant. "Anyway, I was thinking about making the most of my elements, those came to mind, plus maybe some water canteens? Just to make sure I have water around." The deadpan look he gave me was stifling. "I know, know, but we have sunny days every now and then, plus I can drink it on runs. Still not completely sure I can pull all the dirt and gunk out of water." He hummed and nodded.

"You want a lighter, too?" He asked.
I held up my hand and a ball of fire started merrily crackling away in my palm. "Nooot really necessary." I snuffed it out, and hummed thoughtfully. My elements could be incredibly deadly if I wasn't careful with them. "And... maybe some weapons?" Dad's eyes widened, and I rushed to clarify. "Just blunt things! Like those police batons. It's a lot safer than burning people, or hitting them with a ten pound stone at more than thirty miles an hour." I'd checked. I could chuck rocks fast. Broken bones and ruptured organs, fast.

"You mean the collapsible ones, or the rigid tactical ones?"

"Yeeess?" I couldn't help the shy smile that crept onto my face as I made the joke.

Dad chuckled, and told me to wait a sec. He dug out his cell phone and spent the next three minutes pecking out a text on it. After it was sent, he said "Pretty sure Carrow does weapons, too. I asked him to bring some things for today."

Well... that was easy. I sat myself down in a chair by his desk as he started on some paperwork. It wasn't long until I started fidgeting, nor until he noticed. "What's wrong?"

I sighed and kicked off my shoes. It helped a little, but with the carpet covering the whole administrative building's floors, my senses didn't propagate very far. "I just, it's getting harder to wear shoes everywhere. I just feel so blind without being able to see half a dozen blocks in every direction like I was standing there." His eyes were very wide now. Hadn't I told him how far my footsenses could see? I could pick out a tiny bit of general information from across the city if I sat down and concentrated on it. ...maybe he didn't need to know that much. "Just getting frustrating."

"Sounds like it." He muttered, and got back to work, slower this time. He didn't tell me to put my shoes back on.

---

I hadn't bothered putting my shoes back on to start training. I figured I could start pulling double-duty on martial arts and my senses. When Jake showed up carrying a duffel bag, he seemed like a genuinely happy, upbeat person to my senses. No more stress than you'd expect in Brockton, seemed honestly enthused about training, had a spring in his step that made him seem excited. Maybe he didn't get to show off weapons skills very often?

All that before he'd set the bag down and started talking.

"Alright, I've got some eskrima sticks, some short staves, tonfa, and pads in here." He dug into it for a second before he tossed a small black rod at me. "That's a collapsible baton. I have a couple, keep losing and finding the damn things, you can have that one." He was lying. Much too orderly to lose his gear, but he did have more than just this one, so he was fine parting with it. He showed me how to flick it open and close it, then told me to stick it in my pocket and forget about it for today. "Now to start off, these are tonfa." He held up a pair of wooden batons with a handled rod sticking out about a third of the way down the length. "They're what you might think of when someone says 'police baton' which is what Danny asked me about, but usually they're used more by SWAT than regular cops these days." He started swinging his arms, flipping the batons about as he moved. "They're actually pretty complicated to use well, at least against trained fighters." His motions got more complicated, sweeping strikes, quick jabs, distracting windmill feints, "so we're not going to be getting too into them today."

"We're not?" I asked.

"Haha, no." Jake smiled. It was the sort of smile that hinted at impending schadenfreude, in other
words not entirely nice. "Today you're learning how to not hit yourself with these, then moving on to normal baton work. Tomorrow we'll start on how to actually use them."

That... seemed fair.

He tossed them back into the bag and grabbed out a couple foot long and 20-inch wooden rods, and a padded mitt. "Now, punching with something in your hand is a lot different than a normal fist. It'll throw you off if you're not ready for it." He tossed me one of the short rods and put the mitt on. "Now, start off light and move towards full strength punches, just to get a feel for it." He patted his mitt, and I had a startled thought that he had no idea how strong I actually was.

---

Dad got home before I did, and was already in bed. I'd stayed there practicing with Jake until it got dark, instead of heading to the boardwalk. This training was going to save someone's life someday—probably mine— and I had to take it seriously.

I found leftovers on the table, along with an old and dented but serviceable metal canteen about eight inches across, along with a purple travel thermos with green leaf designs on it that used to be mom's. I guess it counted, it had an adjustable strap to it that you could lash around your waist like a belt, or hold the thing via a shoulder like a purse. I vaguely remembered her using it when we'd go hiking or camping, before she got busy with the university and I started going to summer camp instead.

I sniffled away the tears, and decided to just keep the metal one in my backpack for now. My feet were sore from all the walking on rough concrete today, so I decided to soak them a bit and head to bed.

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**TUE FEB 1**

School was fine. I caught Amy in the halls and asked if she wanted to eat lunch together, but she'd said she couldn't get away today. I imagine she meant her sister and her group, which still didn't sound appealing, and it must have shown on my face, since she laughed at me.

I wound up floating around the cafeteria instead, finally settling down at a mostly empty table with other quiet people. Vicky looked like she wanted to come over and talk, but Amy poked her in the side and said something that caused her to pout. The two of them wound up at the center of a gaggle of other teens, Vicky usually loudly chatting with or being loudly chatted at by the other girls one at a time. Amy looked almost miserable, sitting there on her phone stealing glances at her sister, occasionally speaking up apparently to chastise her sister for her aura if the wince was anything to go by, or quietly addressed by one of the other hangers-around and forced to interact with people.

It was exhausting just watching all that going on, let alone being in the middle of it. I couldn't help but feel a bit bad for leaving Amy to her fate, but I didn't think I'd actually help her by being there.

After class let out, I got a text from Vicky.

'Shp tmrw? Y, m, Amy?'

I stopped to think about that. If it was just the three of us, it'd be fine. And Amy would be there in case Vicky's aura acted up... yeah. I could do this. I replied with 'Sure, when/where?' and got told to just meet them out front after school. I went out the front this time, and waved to Vicky and Amy.
when I saw them leaving, too. Easing a little harder into this 'friends' thing wouldn't be too bad.

---

We practiced with the sticks until Jake was sure I hadn't forgotten any of my lessons from yesterday, then moved on to the tonfas. He said that if I'd gotten good enough, he'd let dad buy a set off him for cheap. I hadn't figured out why that pinged as a lie to my senses until I caught him watching me train with a small smile via my senses. He was proud. He'd probably just give dad the damn things if asked. He had at least the two sets, maybe more.

I told him I'd be missing tomorrow because socializing, and he jeered about me having a date. I told him I was meeting a couple girls from school, and he just mocked me for being shy about dating girls. I smacked him a couple times while he laughed. I'm sure my blush didn't help any.

We trained into the night again, and I couldn't help but wonder what kind of schedule he had, that he could do that. I texted dad on the way home, and he replied that he'd be in bed by the time I got back, again. I found more leftovers on the table, but that was it today.

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WED FEB 2

Today was the day. Today I would be social. Today I would- I dropped to the ground as a bullet ricocheted somewhere nearby.

With my hands on the ground, I could see them. Two groups of men with guns shooting at each other from across the road in one of the run-down neighborhoods I ran through on my way to school. They were about four blocks away, if I'd kept going I would've passed within a street of them. Now that I was listening instead of working up my social anxiety, I could hear the pops from the guns.

This was stupid and dangerous. Who shoots things in a residential area?

I had to stop them.
...how do I do that?

I took stock of my gear. I had my bag with all my books and clothes for the day (I was going to shower and change at school) and the canteen of water. I had my pepper spray and baton. I did not feel ready for a gunfight.

I stopped to breathe and think. If I didn't want to fight, what were my options.

Well, why fight at all?
Rather, why let it be a fight at all?

I slapped the ground with one hand, and then punched it.

One of the groups was dragged into the pit of loose dirt that'd formed under their feet, along with the grass and concrete they'd been standing on.

I repeated the action with my other hand, and the other group was similarly trapped.

That... was easy. I pushed myself off the ground from my position resting both fists on the road, and listened for more shots.
Nothing.

I shrugged and started walking towards school again, digging out my phone and dialing 911 as I went. "Hello? There was some shooting near 14th and Stewart. I kept running by after I heard it, but I think it's stopped now..."

---

School was fine. The boys were starting to stop bothering me in the halls. I think they were finally figuring out I wasn't actually easy, a buyer, or a prostitute, so they could stop trying to get me to do something they wanted.

Lunch was also fine. I waved to Amy and Vicky on my way outside, and ate out by the trees with my shoes off again.

When school let out, I took a few fortifying breaths and made my way to the school's main entrance. There I found Vicky, somewhat more subdued than usual, and Amy. If I had to guess, she'd just poked her sister about her aura again.

"Hey, Taylor!" The sunny girl beamed.

"Hi, Vicky." I was already starting to feel tired of socializing. "Where are we going, and how are we getting there?"

"Oh!" Vicky clapped her hands excitedly. "I borrowed dad's car this morning. We're driving down to the boardwalk, is that okay?"

I nodded. "Should be, but the boardwalk's a little expensive for me." I blushed a little. "I... might not be getting much, if we're clothes shopping."

Vicky took a second to react. "Oh, pff," She made an exaggerated motion to go with her overacted scoff. "We're just window shopping, trying things on. Can always find deals at other stores when we know what we're looking for."

I'm fairly certain she was lying, and already started looking for excuses to take my shoes off when we got going. Their car was nice enough, nicer than dad's truck at least, but it wasn't new. It had a few dings, the inside was scuffed, it had a couple cans in the legroom in back, and I could spy a few partially-hidden fast food wrappers that hadn't been thrown out yet. It was just a car. I had no idea why that felt so surprising.

Vicky did her best to fill the silence. When I told her I hadn't really seen any new movies the past few years, and wasn't much of a music person, she started nattering on about her boyfriend Dean taking her to a local band night at some club last week. Amy mostly grumped in the passenger seat, busily working her phone. I was starting to recognize some of her tells, and she seemed grumpier than usual, though I couldn't figure out why.

We got out at a parking center, leaving our bags in the car, and walked the last two blocks to the boardwalk proper. I spied a couple of the suited enforcers milling about, and another standing and watching the crowd. Part of why I tended not to come here, compared to all the reasonably wealthy types that frequented these stores, I almost looked like a Merchant in my baggy, worn, and often stained normal clothing choices.

I made a mental note to do laundry. I was running low on nicer-looking things to wear to Arcadia.

Vicky almost squealed as she started dragging us into a store. It was bright and colorful, full of
girly, thin clothing that didn't look like it'd survive a month of decent washing. I shook my head, getting things dumped on me and needing to ignore washing instructions to get crap out should be a thing of the past. Still felt like spending more than fifty bucks for a sewn-together box of tissues, though.

"C'mon, c'mon!" Vicky cheered, pawing at my hoodie. "Take that off, we need to get a good look at your sizes."

My eyes rolled, but I did as commanded, reaching down and pulling my hoodie up by the hem, almost taking my shirt with it over my head. I tossed it to Amy, righted my skewn glasses, and ruffled down my shirt- a dark blue small men's t-shirt I'd bought in a bulk pack because girl shirts cost five times as much. Not like I had any boobs to make the chest tight, anyway. It was a little baggy, and slightly short- it almost didn't reach my pants anymore, and every time I'd move my arms the hem would tug up and show a bit of skin at the waist. The only reason I was wearing it now was because it actually looked clean when it was, which was... basically the criterion for all of my Arcadia clothes.

Amy was trying not to smirk, and Vicky's lips were pursed as if I'd somehow insulted her. She drew a short breath. "Girl," She leaned in and whispered the rest. "how do you feel about ruffles?"

I stopped myself before I could ask why greasy potato chips were relevant. Ohhh no. She meant clothes. Mom'd had exactly three shirts with ruffles, for those days she was feeling especially girly. Dad and I'd take turns making fun of her for trying to look my age, him mostly because I was doing it and it was something to bond over, and me because I was a shitty ten-year-old brat. The thing was, she could pull it off. She had soft, well-proportioned curves that lent themselves to girlier blouses that had them.

By contrast, I was a stick. My chest and hips were wider than my waist sure, but I wouldn't have considered that true before I started working off the small gut I'd been building up through high school. Now my stomach was almost flat, and I had a sad facsimile of curves. I was boyish and plain, aside from my hair.

If there was one thing I had to make sure of this trip, there would be absolutely no ruffles.

Vicky was starting to look worried, and I realized I'd been standing there looking somewhat distraught for almost half a minute.

"No ruffles." I almost snapped. She looked like she wanted to argue. "No. I'm a gangly beanpole. Trying to put me in anything especially girly will just result in me looking like I'm trying to be five again." ...I miss mom. "No ruffles!" I pointed at her to accentuate my declaration.

"Aww," She whined. "but you'd look so cute in ruffles..."

Maybe I was wrong. Vicky was the one with the fashion knowledge here. She was intelligent, and knew her stuff. Maybe if they weren't in bright colors...

"Vicky, aura." Amy growled.

My thoughts snapped back to how they'd been before, the emotional whiplash almost painful. What the hell? I was angry. So very angry. She was messing with my head. Taking all the me, one of the few things I had left that I liked, and twisting it just enough that it's not mine anymore.

She started muttering out an apology before she caught the look of utter rage and disgust on my face and flinched back. I huffed in a few increasingly deep breaths, and said "I need a break."
So I left. I heard Vicky call out, but that just made me speed up. I was just... done. I needed a break. I needed to leave, but leaving would mean I gave up on being social, and that would be letting them win-

I stopped. This was about Emma again. It always came back to that fucking bitch Emma. Beating me down, betraying my secrets, getting other people to beat me down and manipulate me when it stopped working for her, continuing to beat me down as a punishment for not letting them trick me anymore...

My problem with Vicky was my problem with Emma. I started walking again, and kept going until I found a bench to sit down at. I just needed to calm down. Calm and centered. I kicked my shoes off, and let my steadily callusing feet touch the concrete. Now I could watch everyone, know that I was safe, and let my mind drift enough for the anger to flow away.


I wasn't sure how long it was, until someone came up to me. Sure, other people had come near and gone around, or stopped to look at the odd girl sitting on a bench with her eyes closed and hands laced together in her lap, but no one had actually come straight at me in my time sitting there.

With a sigh, I opened my eyes to find exactly what I expected. Amy, my hoodie tied around her waist like a sash, followed by a floating Victoria. The usually gloomy girl waved off her unusually glum sister, who stopped floating closer about five meters away.

She seemed to be at a loss for words when she stopped in front of me, so I patted the bench, and she sat down next to me. I didn't turn to look at her. I kept my eyes panning around the crowd, looking at people, at things, anything to keep Victoria in sight without looking right at her. "I'm sorry." Amy said at last. "There's two kinds of people who react to Vicky's aura. Unless she doesn't like you, everyone adores her when it's on. Some don't really stop liking her when they leave, even if they aren't compelled to anymore. They liked liking her, so they don't stop. Then there's people like you, who don't take having their emotions picked for them very well. They tend to hate her." I just sat, listening, faking serenity as hard as I could. She tried to speak and choked on her words a few times. I could see her in my earth senses; the little clenches of the jaw, half-started swallows, flutters of the eyes and eyelids as she thought. Her twitching tongue was fascinating.

I got so much information when I was focusing on something right next to me, it was hard to believe I could handle it all.

Amy was worried. Not in the normal way of someone confronting something unpleasant or an upcoming fight, and it didn't quite seem like fear of personal failure or under-performance... she was worried about something outside her control. And she was still trying to talk to me, after I'd ran out on them. Did... she still want to be my friend?

"You don't... have to be my friend if you don't want to." Amy said. "I'll understand."

She really wouldn't. She was desperate. How many friendships had she lost? How many times had her hopes been crushed? It reminded me of myself.

I sighed. I'd never be like Emma. Not even a little bit.

"I wouldn't still be here if I didn't want to be your friend. I could have run home, or gone to catch a bus." I waved my hand over to a relatively nearby bus stop. "But I didn't." This time when my eyes panned over, I met Vicky's eyes. She looked so wary and confused, fussing with her hands in front of her chest- the only things she had that would stand up to her strength, I imagined. I waved her
over. She waited for a second, then started floating towards us.

Deep breaths. Her aura was off, at least as far as I could tell. People were staring, but confused. There was none of the awe I'd seen in the cafeteria at school, and none of the fear I'd read about online. I figured as long as I was aware enough to keep looking for the signs, I'd be fine.

Now I just needed to figure out what to say. "I'm sorry." I started, causing her and Amy to blink. "I might be... overreacting. I just..." Suck in air, hold it, hold it, release. "I don't like being manipulated." Pause for a beat. "Even if you didn't mean to, I felt so..." Words are hard. "used, after." For the first time since they got here, I dropped my eyes away from Vicky. I could still see with my feet- everything but her. Amy was giving me a sad, slightly pitying look though, and I could imagine something else on Victoria's face.

Then her feet touched the ground, and I could see that she was crying. "I'm sorry." She walked over, her hands leading towards me, and she stopped hesitantly. I raised my head, gave her a 'yeah, sure' head wobble, and found myself in the center-ish of a lopsided Dallon sandwich. Apparently Victoria felt Amy needed to be a part of this hug, too.

After we introverts finished our subdued hissing and spitting over being shoved into physical contact with other human beings, the hug settled into something vaguely approaching nice. If I were into girls, it'd be very nice. The two were soft and warm and- that's enough of that, thank you. I'm pretty sure I hid my small blush well enough. Still, it was Amy who started tugging away first, pulling away from myself and her sister, leaving the two of us in a bit of an awkward side-hug for a bit before Vicky giggled and floated away. She was just so bright and amazing and Amy cleared her throat meaningfully and the feeling vanished.

"Sorry! Sorry." Vicky was still smiling a little, but trying to force out some seriousness for the topic at hand. She must really be a physical person. I shoved down the envy creeping up in my mind. "I really am sorry, I don't mean to bring up bad feelings or bad memories," Her voice lowered a bit and she leaned closer. "I don't want to hurt or manipulate anyone. It just gets hard to control, sometimes."

I really couldn't relate. None of my powers were hard to control at all, once I'd gotten the hang of them. I couldn't relay this to them, either. I wanted to trust them, but I wasn't there yet. Still... "I'm, open to hanging out again with a little warning, after I've had a break to cool down some." I stood up, almost at height with Vicky floating a few inches off the ground. "I really want to like you..."

Her smile grew strained. "Yeah... I get it."

Nodding, I added, "I just need time to get used to power things, I guess."

Her nod was a little stronger than her smile had been. "Hey, how about we get some food, then we'll call it for today, that sound good?"

I weighted in it my mind for a moment and nodded. "That sounds fine." I sat down again to put my shoes back on.

"Why were your shoes off, anyway?" Vicky asked.

I paused, shrugged, and replied, "I just feel better with my shoes off, sometimes."

Vicky laughed and agreed, and led us off to the food places after I was ready to go.
We wound up getting wraps, and chatting about classes until we finished. I waved off their offer of a ride, and said I'd just take the bus home after a walk by the beach.

And that's exactly what I did. I took my shoes off again while I walked along the sand of the nicer beach by the boardwalk, the sand shifting around me slightly, churning a bit beneath the dunes, and hardening a bit under my feet to make walking through it less tiring. I spent almost an hour walking all the way into the less nice part of the beach by the old docks. There was trash here, wrappers and plastics, the odd bit of glass or the occasional needle, my senses through the sand were just good enough to warn me away from stepping on anything.

I came upon a rock, eventually. A small nub covered in graffiti sticking up out of the sands, but stepping up onto it, I saw that it extended down a ways, touching a few other rocks, which were touching more rocks, eventually spreading down into the ground around the city. My senses spread down through the tangled solid foam of caverns that made up the city's aquifer, and up away from them to the city itself. That was what I was after. Concentrating, I couldn't find anyone nearby, at least no one in a position to see me, so I started up the second half of my trip.

Walking down to the water, I couldn't help one last nervous glance around before I reached out and grabbed the waves, halting them. I strode up, pushing the water away from me while hardening the sand beneath my feet to keep from sinking. I pushed farther and farther in until I was almost eye-level with the water around me, standing on the sand in my own cylinder of air. Then I leaned down, and let the ocean fill in above me. I continued on a little ways farther, my hands swirling around me as I kept the water at bay, but it was getting harder. I wasn't quite ready for a casual ocean jaunt yet, but that wasn't the plan.

In seconds, the water around me started to freeze.

It took a few tries, unfreezing and re-freezing, but eventually I had a semi-sphere of ice clear enough I could roughly see through. Holding the water away from my improvised diving bell while holding it down to keep it from shooting to the surface was slightly easier than just bending the water away was. Sure, I'd be in a worse position if ambushed, but what were the odds of that? I was in the ocean. All the gangs were on land.

I started walking again, keeping an 'eye' out for trash under my feet, while looking through the hazy glass into the gloom of the bay. It was eerie and quiet and amazing.

---

Hours later, I made my way home. Dad broke his pattern and waited up for me, tonight.

"Bit of a surprise," He said, leading me to the kitchen where he had a couple boxes set on the table. "I thought about what you said, and your earth sense stuff is just too important to ignore." He gave me a look. "It's the sort of thing that'll keep you safe." He turned back to the boxes and opened them, revealing some worn out shoes. "So I made these, with a little help."

I took one, and was surprised when my fingers slipped under where the sole was supposed to be. I lifted it up, and while it looked mostly normal from the top and sides, the bottom had been carved out, with a couple elastic fabric bands like on underwear stretched somewhat tightly across the bare bottom, sewn and glued into the sides and top of the shoe's insides. I looked at dad, confused, and he just smiled and motioned for me to try them on.

The size was about right, if a little odd with a third-inch of material missing from the bottom of it. Still, they seemed functional as fake-shoes, looking almost right if you didn't know what to look for, and best of all- the straps barely hindered my senses at all. Sure, they probably needed some
more padding glued in, the shoes were a little tall now, and the glue partly holding the straps in was starting to scratch, but otherwise?

"They're amazing!" I hugged dad. "Thank you, thank you." We hugged for a bit, then parted. "How did you make these?"

He smiled. "Well, I bought a few pairs of shoes in your size from the used bargain bins- already had worn out soles, so they were fine." At my scowling, he chuckled. "I sprayed them down with disinfectant, don't worry. Anyway, I got some help with sewing from Lacey and a couple others with some skill there, just a crash course in how to patch-sew a bit without poking through to the 'pretty' side too much. Didn't show them the actual project, though they know it was something for you." He grimaced a little. "Stiill not sure I did it right, hence the glue to be sure. They won't last near as long as regular shoes, but they don't have to. All told, they're still cheaper than new shoes per pair by a bit."

I nodded. "We can always tweak the designs to make them better over time. Thanks again, dad."

"Anything to help, honey."

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**THU FEB 3**

Today I decided to fill mom's travel thermos with tea, and lash the strap over my shoulder and under the backpack's straps while jogging to school. The old canteen I'd taken yesterday was sitting at home. Partly this was because I wanted to use mom's things more often, partly because I was trying to trust Arcadia to be less of a Winslow and giving them this one chance, but mostly it was just the thought of taking tea breaks on the multi-mile jog being nice. Plus, if anyone found out I was a cape, they might think me limited to only bending pure water for some crazy power bullshit reason.

I hadn't found anything liquid I couldn't bend, at least a little. The actual H2O content made less of a difference than how viscous or fluid something was. Trying to freeze things like oil was a little weird, though.

Made it to school fine and refilled the thermos with water when I got to the showers. Classes were okay, and Amy sat with me for lunch. I was in the cafeteria today. The shoes I had made me feel a lot more comfortable around crowds.

Amy and I mostly chatted about classes and little, inconsequential things like complaining about teachers and assignments. I got the feeling she was glad I still wanted to spend time with her after yesterday. She got silent for a bit, and I waited for whatever it was she had to say.

"I'm going to the bookstore tomorrow. No Vicky. Did you want to go?"

I thought about it and asked "No Vicky?" curiously.

She smirked. "Last time she followed me into a bookstore, I started picking raunchy novels off the shelves and reading them aloud until she ran away."

I grinned wickedly. "So you just happened to be near the raunchy books?"

She blushed and scrunched her face into an adorable pout. "Well I'm certainly not living vicariously through my sister."
Amy was really not happy with that thought, according to my feet. "What's so bad about that?" She gave me a scathing look. "Only child, I don't really get it." I explained.

"It's kinda' squicky." She huffed. "Also, her boyfriend is..." She snapped her mouth closed, like she hadn't intended to keep talking. She sighed and continued, though. "He's a nice enough guy, I just... don't like him?" The lilt of her voice made it sound like a question, and I wasn't sure she noticed. Her feelings were pretty muddled from what I could see, but she honestly felt grossed out by the whole thing... A thought occurred.

"Is it boys?" I'd leaned in and lowered my voice, but Amy still froze and glanced around. No one was in easy listening range for the volume I'd used, my feet were sure of it. "It's okay if it is."

She sighed, debated internally for a bit, then nodded. "Boys are gross." She muttered. "And I've seen what pregnancy looks like from the inside." She gave a morbid chuckle. "No, thank you." My senses weren't sure it was the whole truth, but it was far less muddled than what she'd said before.

"Okay, now I'm really curious."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Pregnancy is terrible. It's like the body primes itself to intentionally let a parasite latch on inside you, grow a big fluid abscess house for itself, and leech your body's resources for most of a year while it rearranges your organs to fit." She leans in conspiratorially. "And then you have to shit it out your sex hole."

Yeah no, that sounded pretty gross, and by the look on her face, she was greatly amused by my grossed out expression.

She kept grinning and added, "There is not enough nope in the world to express my feelings on the subject."

Well, I was done with lunch now. "Thanks so much for that. I'll meet you after school tomorrow?"

Bitch was cackling at me as I left.

---

After school, I stopped by to talk to Vicky and Amy on their way out, mostly to make sure Vicky knew there weren't any hard feelings, but that I wasn't sure what next week looked like yet. That, and weekends were for sleeping in and working out. This seemed to amuse the two, and they flew off towards the hospital in good spirits.

I went to the DWA after that, Jake and I wanted to work on incorporating the weapon fighting into my existing styles, rather than have me trying to switch forms inefficiently. This actually worked a lot better than expected, and five hours later I was proclaimed at the level of 'no longer hitting myself', or sufficient to have a pair of sturdy wooden training tonfas bestowed upon me. I was told to take good care of 'Smacky' and 'Thwacky', and now the names were stuck in my head forever.

When I told him I was busy tomorrow, he poked fun at me for having 'another date with my girlfriend' but admitted to also being busy, probably through the weekend. He seemed a little nervous, but I figured he probably had a match out of town coming up or something.

I spent the rest of the night, probably more than I should have, exploring the edges of the boat graveyard from underwater. I'd had the thought while I was there to use some of the spaces in the ships as hidey holes or maybe even a secret base, but I had no idea how I was going to keep the spaces water-tight, even if I got the water out of them. Thoughts for the future.
FRI FEB 4

I couldn't help being excited for today. The first time I was going to hang out with a friend since Emma. Sure there was the thing Wednesday, but that was a group thing and fell apart anyway. I stopped by Vicky's table at lunch, mostly to check we were still on with Amy, but got roped into introductions.

After Tara, Tammy, Kyle, Susan, Kara, Sherry, Jessie, and Stephen, I blanked the rest of them. Amy caught my far-off gaze and cackled internally at my pain, I was sure.

I begged off and headed outside. I needed a break, even if I'd only had to deal with them for a few minutes. I went around to what I was starting to think of as our bench, when I saw someone had beaten me there. A long-haired blonde in a trendy outfit.

"Uhm, hi?" I drew her attention. She looked me up and down dismissively. "I didn't know other people sat out here." It was certainly not the comfiest of benches.

"Hello." She sounded wary. "Wanted to get away for a bit."

"Yeah, same." I chuckled and sat down, extending my hand. "Taylor Hebert."

She looked at it for a second, then took it. "Cassie." She replied, turning back to her food. She looked almost done, actually. "What kind of name is 'Hebert', anyway?"

My senses pegged her as wary and unsure, though I had no idea why. Maybe she was just shy? I thought on it for a little bit. "It's Germanized French, I think. Dad says great-grandpa used to say it 'ahbear' before he got married."

"Huh." She seemed surprised. Less unsure about me now? "He changed it?" Curious. I shrugged. I honestly didn't remember that part of the story. Instead I asked her about her classes and managed to wheedle a few details out of her. She was a freshman, 14, was staying with one of her cousins but didn't want to go into details about it, and was intentionally not going out for any sports even though she could. I told her about my transfer from Winslow, not really knowing anyone yet, and about my dad's work in the docks.

Eventually she decided to head back inside. With a wave and a "See you around, Hebert." she was gone.

Well, that wasn't so bad, now was it?

---
I met Amy at the front gate. Vicky was heading off with some of the other girls to do some shopping. Apparently they had dates over the weekend they all wanted to get ready for, and were making an outing of it. Amy's gloomy mood seemed to fade as her sister's gushing voice did. I had a feeling something was going on there, but I decided not to press.

"So, where are we going?" I asked as we headed to the bus.

"The best bookstore in Brockton." Amy replied with a smirk.

I grinned back. "Have I heard of this place?"

She shrugged. "You didn't like going to the boardwalk, so probably not. It's not on the boardwalk, but close enough that people consider it a store there."

We filled the ride with chatter about books; favorites, recent reads, I started talking about some of mom's favorites, and things she'd read to me when I was younger, and Amy got quiet. I couldn't read her as easily through the chassis of the bus, even if I could see through the metal- which I hadn't figured out yet- the rumble of the engine and the jiggling of the suspension on the road would be a confusing mess I'd need to get used to first.

I followed Amy off the bus, and she led us down towards one of the ends of the boardwalk. We were getting into the less opulently decorated and well-maintained buildings by the time we turned onto a side-street. Three blocks of mostly restaurants and coffee shops later, we turned again and my heart caught in my throat. I remembered this place.

Just past a hobby shop, across from a clothier's shop and an apartment complex, sat Tukson's Book Trade. Mom's favorite store.

It took Amy hesitantly asking if I was okay for me to realize I was just standing there, tearing up. "Sorry," I sniffled, wiping at my face. "Never knew this place was by the boardwalk... always came at it from further in town." She gave me the time I needed to gather myself, though she was looking very curious. "I haven't been here in years. Not since before... mom..." I trailed off.

She hissed in a breath and muttered an expletive under her breath. "I'm sorry, I didn't know." She came closer, patting my shoulder. "We can do something else?"

"No." I shook my head. "It's time, I think. Let's go." I smiled at her and let her lead the way.

The door opened with a jingle, leading into a small foyer capped by another door. Amy made a point of waving at the obvious camera bubble on the wall before she continued on. I shuffled awkwardly, staring at it for a second before I chased after her.

It was just like I remembered, which terrified me a little. All these tiny details I hadn't noticed when I was younger. The cameras, how much of a killzone the front foyer was, how deep and angled all the shelves for the books I could feel with my feet were- I wouldn't be surprised if the fire sprinklers were separated into different systems by room to keep the other room's books dry if they had to go off. The whole place was subtly built to survive a siege with minimal damage.

"You okay?" Amy asked, watching me take in the main room while surveying the rest of the building. There was the front desk, with the door to the office behind it, the stairs from the office to the third floor, which was an apartment, there was a locked case by the front desk, full of the really old or rarer books. The shelves fanned out from there, almost a dozen on the first floor, and more on the second. There were a few other patrons around on the different floors, and someone shuffling around in the office moving boxes. I tried really hard not to notice the gun-shaped blobs I
could sense under the counter.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She could tell I wasn't, but that was fine. "Where to?" She rolled her eyes and led me upstairs, to a little side corner, past a half-hearted '18+' sign I almost missed entirely, and started looking around shelves and pulling books.

"You, uhh... weren't kidding, huh?" I was blushing, barely keeping myself from stuttering.

"Nooope." She popped the end of the word, glanced at me, chuckled at my reaction, and went back to her aggressive browsing. "Not gonna lie, kinda' looking forward to having a friend I can talk about girls things with."

What? "But... I'm straight?"

She gave me a look, glowering daggers at me like I'd just asked her to give me 'the talk'. In detail. With diagrams. "Taylor, honey," her expression softened and she laid a hand on my shoulder. "I've seen you in the halls with the boys. You snub them harder than I do."

I blushed, harder this time. "Yeah, but..." I swiped her hand off of me, and glared at her smugly amused face. "That's just me not being some easy lay, not me hating boys."

Amy still looked amused, but the smug had shifted into concern. "You really don't notice how you look to other people, do you?" I glowered harder and shook my head. "Wow," she muttered. "Winslow did not teach you how to human properly, did it?"

"Beep fucking boop, Dallon." I snarled.

She snorted. "Okay, since I know you don't keep a finger on the pulse of the rumor mill, you should probably know you're already being talked about." My face froze, wide-eyed and staring at her. "Mostly just people thinking you're a rude loner, but it's getting to the point where people are going to start calling you an ice bitch, boys are going to stop trying to chat you up entirely, and you'll start getting more girls coming after you. I heard one of Vicky's friends wondering if you were a lesbian, but she'd fuck anything with tits, so that's on her." She must have noticed me hyperventilating a bit, and grabbed my shoulders. "Taylor, breathe. Hold it." I took a deep breath and held it for a five count before releasing it. Back to normal...ish. "My point being..." She slowly started again, "that I'm plugged into the rumor grid, and I can try to swing it any way you want. I didn't say anything because I was trying not to talk about you behind your back. I can just spread it around that Winslow left you seriously not happy being social right now, and you just need time."

Nothing she was saying pinged untrue to my senses, so I felt I had to trust her on this, despite my instincts to run and hide from anything social girly drama... "Yes. That sounds good. Maybe do that."

I flopped down into a nearby puffy chair, one of two in the 'adult' section of the store, and closed my eyes.

"You going to be okay?" Amy asked from the shelves. She was worried, but trying to act a little more aloof.

"I'll be fine." I answered. A few moments later I decided to elucidate. "I'm trying to meditate. Clear my mind, focus a bit. That sort of thing."

She muttered a 'yeah aight' and went back to desheling what had to be a quarter of the books on that shelf. About ten, twenty minutes later- time was harder to keep track of while meditating deeply- she spoke up again. "Soooo... is that some new age spiritualist thing, or what?"
I glanced over to her, sitting casually in the other chair, skimming through a book that looked like someone took one of those penny-dreadful romance novels and photoshopped the guy on the cover out for another girl. "Not really. It's more about emotions. Focus and... self-control. I'm sure you noticed, but I've got problems getting a little... *emotional* when stressed. This helps with that."

Amy muttered something about 'self control' and asked, "So how would one get into that sort of thing? All I know is 'clear your mind' and that isn't really helpful."

"It wouldn't be." I responded, taking a moment to frame the explanation in my mind. "Actually completely clearing your mind is *really hard*. The human brain isn't *meant* to be clear, it's supposed to be alert and tracking half a dozen things to keep you alive. ...are you religious?"

She blinked and looked at me, taken aback by the non-sequitur. "Excuse me?"

I waved the question off. "It might have been a good way to segue into it if you were. The single most common form of meditation in the world is actually prayer." I'd looked it up. The parallels were actually pretty neat. "You clear your mind of everything but god, and whatever you want them to address. It's much closer to how proper meditation *actually* works than the Hollywood bullshit." She actually looked pretty interested now. "Sooo did you want to learn?"

She set her book to the side and nodded, so I told her about clearing her mind of everything but what she wanted to focus on, like her breathing, or whatever emotion she was feeling but didn't want to be like I was doing, or anything really.

I walked her through some breathing exercises, and we spent at least half an hour just sitting there like that for a while. Then someone cleared their throat.

"You know..." The tall, burly owner of the establishment said in his gravely baritone, pointing off to the side "we *do* have a tea room, if you just want to sit for a while."

We nodded, and got up to follow him. Amy grabbed her armful of books to look through, and the owner muttered, "Scarin' off all the payin' customers who just want to read their smut in peace..." while we walked, causing the both of us to blush. When we got there, on the opposite side of the second floor from the adult section, he unlocked the door and held it open for us. "Green tea fine?"

When I nodded and Amy didn't cite a preference, he nodded and headed off. We settled into comfy wooden chairs around short wooden table in the small room, and waited the few minutes it took for him to return with a fancy-looking faux-china tea set. "You look familiar." He said to me while setting out the tea things.

I sighed. "Yeah, my mom used to really like this place... Annette Hebert?"

He nodded. "Thought so. Me and Annette went way back, she helped hype my place up around campus, probably kept me in business after I took over." He rubbed his chin around his thick mutton chops. "Listen, you ever want the tea room, just ask. Won't even charge you for it." He turned to leave and muttered to himself. "Not like anyone ever takes me up on reserving the damn thing..." and then the door shut behind him and he was gone.

Amy and I looked at each other, amused, and started into our tea while she skimmed a few more books. She'd slid a few over to me to check out, but they were exactly the sort of thing I'd expected. Thinly veiled text porn, most of them involving leading guys, actually. One about a pair of guys, and the rest were the girls stories I was expecting. I didn't bother looking any deeper than categorizing them like that, though. I had no idea if I was into smut like this, but I felt weird testing lewd waters with a friend in the room.
Soon enough, the topic turned back to meditation, and I helped get Amy back in 'the zone' as she put it. Walking her through sitting comfortably and breathing steadily, then falling into it myself, meditating on *meditating*, as it were. I was still speaking softly to Amy as I did, helping keep time with breathing, but also popping in with other meditation facts and referencing advanced techniques in case they caught her interest. Pain reduction, tricking some of the body's processes, even a level of self-hypnosis that neither of us seemed interested in. I went on to talk about the body's energy, being able to feel and control it. It sounded like new age spiritualism, but that's one of the things the books- and my dreams, but I didn't talk about those- mentioned a lot.

It got a little weird when I started to actually *feel it*. I froze up, just teasing the sensations around my core, quiet long enough that Amy actually spoke up to ask if I was okay. I told her I was fine, and we kept working on it.

Tukson came back later to tell us he was closing up the shop. He didn't *mind* us staying after hours, but thought our parents might, which got us moving. Amy bought half a dozen books she said would keep her for a couple weeks, while I'd just blushed and said I wasn't getting anything today.

We headed off to catch the late buses home.

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**SAT FEB 5**

I was on my way home from my morning run. I'd taken longer to get started because there wasn't any school today, so with extra weight training before it, it was a little after nine in the morning when my cell phone rang. I spent almost five seconds confused about the noise before I realized what it was. Everyone, even dad, just texted me. Who would be calling? "Hello?"

"Is this Taylor Herbert?" The voice on the other side was male, middle-aged, and confident. Whoever this was, they definitely seemed to think they had the right number already.

"Hebert, actually." The reflexive answer snapped out.

"Ahh, my apologies, I'll make a note to fix that in the incident report. This is Agent Michaels with the PRT, would you mind answering a few questions for me?"

I was so stunned all that came out at first was a muted "Oh." Shit. They knew who I was! Wait, *how* could they know? Why would they be calling me!? "Why... are you calling me?" I sounded *almost* as confused as I felt.

If he was confused by my confusion, it didn't show. That man was a *professional*. "You called in a gunfight on Wednesday, 14th and Stewart?"

Oh! "But that was just guns?" It said something about Brockton Bay that my question sounded reasonable, even after I'd asked it.

"Ma'am, we believe a cape was involved in the fight."

I paused, then, "I... all I heard was guns." Yes, feel the confusion, *be* the confusion. "I think there's been a misunderstanding, I didn't actually *see* the fight. I was on my morning run and heard guns, so I called it in. The guns stopped, so I left. I never *saw* the gangers, the guns, *or* any cape."

It took five seconds for him to respond. "You have good ears, ranging gunfire that well."

I barked out a hideous laugh. "I have *experience*, being a Brocktonite."
This time he chuckled. "Oh God, don't I know it. Thank you for your time, miss." He hung up.

I spent the rest of the run home silently freaking out.

---

Okay. So. Apparently Chi is a real thing. I tapped into the energy of my body yesterday. This is both really cool and unsettlingly freaky. There's an entire facet of my being I don't know how to use or control. This must be rectified.

Dad left after breakfast, picked up by Kurt. They said they were going to go bar hopping with the guys, but it seemed early for that, and my feet said they were both lying. Maybe Kurt and Lacey were taking dad out to meet women? It hurt a little thinking about Mom, but dad deserved a little more happiness. That'd be fine. I let them go with a smile.

Then I meditated. For six hours straight. Good news, I was pretty sure I knew which of the 'chi point' body diagrams I'd looked up online mine seemed to use. Bad news, that's basically all I learned today.

I made some sandwiches and was ready to move. Good thing it was training time. Gerard didn't completely dominate our spars today, which surprised me. I guess I was actually getting better.

After that, I was still feeling a bit burned out on meditating for today, I went down to the beach. It was right near where we were training, and a cool soak would do me good.

Swimming out a little ways, I just floated in the waves. I wasn't nearly as worried about riptides or floating out to sea as I would be if I didn't have my powers. Water control made the sea a lot less scary. Floating there, I let my mind drift and wander as I was rocked by the waves. I started lightly pushing and pulling the water around me, drawing in cooler water to help soothe my few aches faster. It was helping a lot. I actually felt really good. I looked down and splashed into the water.

Spluttering as I came back to the surface, I coughed out what water had gotten in, and goggled a bit. Was I... glowing?

That was weird. And mandated testing.

I swam the surprising distance back to the beach, shooting my way ashore with the help of my water powers, I flicked the water in my clothes away and started running home. It was only halfway there that I realized I probably should've just taken a bus.

Soaking in the tub, I tried to calm down and get the glow to happen again. It took a while to realize I'd been focusing on myself earlier, and turned my attention to one of the only big bruises I had from today. I drew water up around my arm and put my other hand over it. I closed my eyes and focused entirely on the bruise. Making it better. Fixing it. Healing it.

I opened my eyes minutes later to find the water under my hand softly glowing. I let it fall away and saw the bruise under it was gone. I poked at it. Okay, mostly gone. It wasn't visible anymore, anyway.

That was healing. I could heal. I was a healer!

I had to tell Am-

My mind froze. I couldn't tell Amy, could I? I liked her, and sort of trusted her, but...

I didn't know much about capes, but I did know that healers were rare. Rare, and sought after. Amy probably would've been kidnapped less than a week after she showed her power off, if she didn't
have at least half a dozen other capes that would've come right after whoever did it.

I spent the rest of the night healing my bruises and trying not to freak out about my trust issues.

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**SUN FEB 6**

After my usual morning exercise, I decided that healing shouldn't be my priority right now. I knew it'd be amazing to be able to fix people, but when was I going to use it? I didn't have any plans to start healing people like Amy did as Panacea, at least until I was good at it, and the only person I'd regularly be healing until then was myself after training. Just not a priority.

The meditating, however...

I had a feeling that controlling my energy and my body would help me control my mind. The mind was really just neurons and chemicals, right? If you could sense the brain, control it from within, that should help resist mental effects, right? Looking it up online lead to dead ends. There was mention of anti-mind-control training, but how useful that training was is heavily debated. None of the training itself seemed to be up there, probably to keep counters from being made.

Wrangling the energy was easier today, though. Still spent almost five hours on it before making lunch. The news while I ate was talking about Uber and Leet, and the heist they pulled at the museum earlier this week. Some Faberge egg exhibit? Leet was nowhere to be seen, but Uber dressed up like some brightly colored steampunk apocalypse survivor held off the cops and capes with some power-granting energy thing while an orange weasel bot gathered loot.

Everyone was focused on the caper itself, but I couldn't get over the fact that Leet apparently made Othala in a bottle. Sure it'd fizzled and they'd needed to retreat, but Tinkers were still fucking bullshit.

---

On my run to the docks for martial arts training, I started texting Amy, slowing to a walk to type.

'Hey Amy. Going to practice meditating again tomorrow. Wanna go to Tukson's, or hang out at one of our places?'

'Y u need practice?' That was kind of insulting, actually... unless she meant "why do you need practice, when you're teaching me?" That made more sense.

'I have my reasons. Very good ones!' It sounded better in my head.

'If its a doc thing, I get it.' Did she think I was seeing a therapist? ...should I be seeing a therapist? I shook my head. Problems for later.

'...yes.'

The reply took a minute this time, longer than the others. 'did u jst put dots to fck up yr own lie?'

'...no?' I replied before I could think about it. 'Fuck.'

Her reply made me stumble, so I stopped. 'Yr fkn adorable. Free M/W/F, wtvr works.' I was blushing. From a text conversation. How does that even happen?

'Yes. All of those. Let's do it.'
'Phrasing, grl. Not that easy a lay. XD' My blush was nuclear now.

'Still straight, you're the worst.'

'Im the fkn best n u no it'

I smiled. 'I shall allow you to continue believing as such.'

'Lol kk' Having friends again was confusing, but nice.

---

More training. Hadn't heard from Sue or Jake in a while, might need to ask about them sometime.

Got home, spent a couple hours healing the worst of my injuries, and spent the evening watching a movie with dad.

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**MON FEB 7**

When I got to school, I stopped, staring at a blank hedge, *focused* on what was behind it. Sitting curled up under one of the school's bike racks was a young girl. She couldn't be old enough to go to Arcadia yet, so why was she here? I ducked through the gate and made my way over.

"Hey, you okay?"

The girl looked up, hands uncurling from around her head. Her eyes were misty and a little red. She shook her head with a slight wince at the motion.

I slowly sat myself down next to her. "Do you need help?"

She looked wary for a few seconds, before she winced and her eyes widened. "You'd believe me?"

I tilted my head, confused. "Believe you about what?"

"The numbers."

...oookay. "What numbers?"

"When I ask the right questions, I get flashes and numbers in my head. High numbers happen, low numbers don't." The girl said, haltingly. She seemed like she was having trouble talking. It must've been her headache.

I was shocked, but I had to be sure. "These are questions about the future?" She nodded. Holy shit, this girl was a precog. "And... the headache?"

"Asked too many. Hurts." I nodded, that sounded like something powers would do.

"And why are you here? I don't think you go to school here."

"Numbers are better near the Wards."

That floored me. She knew the Wards were here? I mean, everyone *knew* the Wards were here, but for her power to take that into account? Did... could she tell I was a parahuman?

She was staring at me while I ran through my internal rambling and panic, eventually she winced
harder than ever and muttered, wide-eyed, "You're a-?"

Well shit. That answered that. I shushed her. "Secret, okay?" She nodded slowly, to keep from upsetting her head. "You need help. Do you have someone I can call?"

She was getting worse. She had trouble fishing her phone out of her pocket. It was a rather high-end smartphone. I slowly took it from her, but it was locked. I held it out to her and she unlocked it. "Who do I call?"

Her head rolled a little as she thought out loud. "Mom busy... Dad work... Uncle Roy... work... Rory?"

"Who's Rory?" I asked as I maneuvered through her contacts list.

"Kuh... cousin." She was really bad now. I called the number.

It took six rings for the guy on the other side to pick up. "Dinah?" That must be the girl's name. Why hadn't I asked her for her name? "Shouldn't you be at school?" He sounded a little groggy. Maybe he just woke up?

"My name's Taylor." I said, and all sounds on the other end of the phone stopped. "Dinah's not... well. She has a really bad headache. Having trouble talking, asked me to call you."

"Shit." I heard rapid rustling on the other end now. "Where are you?"

"Arcadia, just inside the front gate by the bike racks. I can get her out front, I think?"

"No, let her rest. I'll be there soon. Ten, fifteen minutes." He hung up.

I gave Dinah her phone back. "He's on his way. Are you going to be okay?"

She winced. "22.9 percent."

Oh, shit. "I'm sorry. I-" I had no idea what would set it off. Best to avoid any questions. How to not phrase it like a question? I couldn't think of a way, so I had to hope. "Can you go to the PRT about your powers? Why not join the Wards?" No wince, that was good.

She tried to shake her head, but stopped. "Numbers bad."

I took a deep breath. Well, nothing else for it, then. "I'm giving you my number." I rummaged through my bag, tore out a sheet of paper, and tore off a chunk to write it down on. "If you ever need anything, call me." She nodded.

I tried to think of small-talk while we waited, but the thought of asking more questions made me a little sick to my stomach. Hurting this poor thing just to quell boredom? I slipped into meditating. Focus on the feeling, don't let it have control.

It was another ten minutes or so when an older boy made his way in the gate and around to us. He was tall, sandy blonde, and buff. Handsome, but his muscles hung off his frame in a bulky, unappealing bodybuilder sort of way. He scooped Dinah up in his arms and smiled at me. "Thank you for helping her."

He made his way back to his car, parked on the curb. I still wanted to help, but wasn't sure what I could do. A thought came to me as he was heading back around to the driver's side after putting Dinah in. "Wait!" I scribbled another note on the paper, tearing it off. "Here." He looked a little
confused. "If Dinah ever needs anything, if you need help with her or something..." goddamn, but I was awkward. "I want to help."

He took my number and smiled at me. "Thanks. I'm Rory, by the way." He held out his hand, and I shook it.

"Taylor."

"I really have to go," he pointed his thumb back at his car, still holding a panting little girl. "I'll see you around?"

I nodded. "Sure!"

He drove off, and I was still smiling. I helped. I'd helped. I felt good. I felt heroic.

Then I remembered I'd run to school, and that I'd just given a boy my number while smelling like a barn.

Good mood dead.

I ran to the showers.

---

I waved at Cassie in the hall, and she waved back, a little confused. I sat with Amy at lunch and asked her about being a healer. She started telling me about being a cape before I stopped her and reiterated my question about being a healer. That seemed to take her aback, and she talked about going in three or four days a week, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and at least one weekend day.

She talked a little bit about her powers, how she could see biology and fix most things. Amy seemed really hesitant talking about it, almost like she was lying. She must've just been shy about how great a healer she was, or something. We made plans to head to the bookstore again after school, and headed back to class.

---

Tukson's block was really busy today, and I had no idea why, so I asked Amy about it.

"Parian's in today." When I looked confused, she added, "Cloth cape, she makes clothes. That's her shop over there. Heard she was renaming it, soon. Anyway, all the cape geeks and tourists drop by whenever she's scheduled to be in, usually early in the week."

"Does she make costumes?" I still didn't have a costume. Maybe this is how I could get one?

Amy rolled her hand in a 'sort of' gesture. "She'll make any costume you want, so long as you can pay for it. She doesn't do armored or properly padded gear, though." Well that was disappointing. "She says it's because she's a neutral and isn't arming either side, but I'm pretty sure she's got a deal with the PRT where they leave her alone so long as they're the only legal way for capes to get on-brand tactical gear anything close to easily."

Wait... "Isn't that... kinda' scummy?"

She snorted. "Government being scummy', call the presses, I think you've got a scoop there." She saw the hurt expression I couldn't force down, and her grin drooped. "Listen, you're not a cape-" I tensed, but she'd already turned to keep walking and didn't notice. "so you don't interact with them,
but the PRT? They're all about looking good, and being the law, in that order. If we're really lucky, then 'actually upholding the law' will be number three today." She turned to regard me seriously. "Do not fuck with them, okay?"

I nodded, and we made the rest of the trip down the block in silence.

When we got there, Tukson was sitting at the front counter, reading a book and looking pretty bored. The store had a lot more business than last time, though. He turned his attention to us almost as soon as we entered, so I'm pretty sure he just looked like he was reading while watching the room.

"Uhhm, hi?" I was nervous. I'd never asked for special services anywhere before. Shut up, brain, don't make this lewd. I still blushed a little. "Is the tea room open?"

He nodded with a smile and told us to follow him up. I tried making small talk.

"So, pretty busy today?"

"Yeah," He said from ahead of us. "Parian's days always are. It's good for business, I get more customers, but I've also gotta watch for thieves more."

"You get a lot of those?" Amy asked.

He shrugged. "Not as many as other stores, but the rats come out when the people do. They like the crowds." He unlocked the door and let us in. "They know I can't shoot them if they duck into a crowd."

Holy shit truth, what the actual fuck, Tukson!?

Amy was laughing though, so I forced out a nervous chuckle of my own and tried to ignore the guns I still felt locked up under the store's front counter.

We had green tea again. I taught Amy more about how to make her mind a happier place, and also how to make a 'happy place' in her mind. We stopped in at Parian's after that, but she'd already left for the day by then. It was neat seeing all the fancier clothes without the usual department store pressure to buy things, though. Part of that was how expensive everything was. They fully expected people to drop in just to browse the parahuman-made clothing with its parahuman-made price tag.

Parted ways after that, and I went to train a bit more with Gerard after his usual work hours were done.

Then I met dad after his work was done for the day. The ride home was quiet, if a little tense, until-

"Your... grandmother is coming to visit, in a couple weeks."

Gram was? I'd gotten a call from her on the landline over the weekend, but she'd just said there was extra money in my account this month. She'd sounded a little tense about it, probably something about my hospital stay, but I wasn't sure. Maybe it was getting harder to read people without my extra senses? Was I relying on them too much?

"That's... great? It's been a while since I've actually seen her." I'd known she had problems with my parents, but she'd always been pretty good to me.

"She..." He tried to say something, but the words failed him. "Anyway, she'll be around for a while this time. I'm not sure how long, but at least a week or so."
"But what about her business?"

"She cleared time for you, little owl."

Oh. She was probably scared of losing me like mom, after the hospital. That made me feel pretty terrible, having not really thought about how she must be feeling. "Okay." It wasn't much, but it was all I could think to say to that.

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**TUE FEB 8**

I decided to sit with Cassie today. She wasn't sitting with a big group, and she wasn't the only girl, so I felt mostly okay with trying it out. I said hi and asked to sit with them, which they were fine with. Cassie seemed a bit shy about it, though. They tried to keep me engaged with what they were talking about, but when it wasn't classes, it was *sports*, which didn't interest me at all. It wasn't a terrible experience, but I preferred the one-on-one lunches.

More martial arts training, then I decided to run home. Some motorcycles were coming up behind me on my run, so I turned to check and froze.

Even at this distance, I recognized them, mostly by their headgear. I might've dismissed the woman with the American flag scarf, enough bikers did that, even with Miss Militia in town. Hard to miss a *giant lion head*, though.

I nervously waved at them, because what *else* do you do when heroes ride on by?

Triumph made a motion to MM, and they started slowing down. They were stopping. *Oh god why were they stopping!?*

They kicked to a stop on the road next to where I was on the sidewalk. "Hello, citizen!" Triumph boomed.

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhahaaaiii?" When my internal screaming tried to become external, I masterfully re-orchestrated the sound into a greeting.

They chuckled, and he continued. "How have you been tonight?" Wow that seemed personal, and he about-faced when I paused too long. "Seen anything amiss?"

"No, I'm fine." I panicked. I shook my head and tried again. "I'm doing great, and there's nothing off around I can see." It was even true, no obvious crime for ten blocks around. "How are you? I mean- aren't you busy?"

Again with the chuckles, but Miss Militia answered this time. "It's been a fairly quiet night, there's no harm taking a few minutes for a fan."

OH! I grabbed my bag and dug through it for a notebook and pen.

"That looks heavy." She noted. "You were running with that?"

I winced. "It's not as heavy as it looks, and I've been working out."

She took the explanation at face value, I got a couple autographs, waves were exchanged, and they left to continue their patrol.

I didn't stop freaking out until I had the chance to meditate at home. Then I healed the worst of my
bruises and went to bed.

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**WED FEB 9**

I went to talk to Cassie again today. She was sitting with a bigger group, so I didn't want to *stay*, but when she saw me coming closer, she got up to meet me, leading me outside.

"You know, you might want to sit with someone else." She said, almost angry.

I couldn't help but ask "What's wrong?"

She sighed. "Think for a second about who I sit with. What do they all have in common?"

Well, I didn't remember it *perfectly*, but they all seemed normal. Like the rest of Arcadia's students. It took me a second to realize they were all *white*. My eyes went wide. "You're-"

"Don't *say* it!" She shushed me. "But *yeah*. If you keep trying to sit with me, people are going to talk." She looked askance at me. "Unless you *want* to be-"

"No!" I was probably louder than I needed to be. I tried again at normal volume. "No, I just didn't think-" '-that you were like that', I didn't finish.

"Yeah, ya *didn't*." She snarked back. I flinched away, and she sighed. "Look, I'm fine being friends, I just don't want you *accidentally* recruiting yourself, associating with them." Everything she'd said so far seemed honest, to my senses.

Her phone dinged a couple times, and she groaned. "Look," She dug out some paper and wrote her number down. "we can hang out after school sometime, maybe. I've got to go." She handed me the note and left.

Dazed and confused, I sat myself down on my bench and ate my lunch in slow, heavy silence.

Chapter End Notes

Tukson's an expy that got away from me. Had I known he'd come back up later, I probably would've done more to hide the reference, like I've done with other OC reference expies.

Gram is a semicannon character. We know nothing about her besides that she doesn't like Danny, sends Taylor money pretty regularly, and that Taylor calls her Gram. I decided to run with it, and put up a vote to see if she had a bigger part in the story, which went through. We'll start seeing the results of that in the first Interlude compilation, after 1.6.

Always made more sense to me that Danny didn't notice the bullying in part because Taylor wasn't using HIS money to replace all her damaged and destroyed things.
Chapter 1.5 (Costume)

Chapter Summary

Part of update 10, and all of update 11.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

WED FEB 9

Amy met me after school, but dragged me back inside instead of leaving. We found an empty room, and she turned to me with an angry look. "You were hanging out with Herren." She was watching me at lunch? I was stunned and confused, so she continued. "She's empire. I thought the first time was an accident, but I saw you trying again today. She's fucking trouble."

"I know," I tried to placate her, but saying that only seemed to make her angrier. "I know that now. She told me, after we left."

She seemed a little less angry. "And?"

"And, she seemed to really be trying to push me away from the Empire kids."

She huffed. "Probably a trick."

I snorted. "I don't see how." She was about to start again, so I interrupted. "Look, Amy. I know she could be trouble, but I'm not going to just cut out a full third of the people I socialize with at this school without at least trying to understand her situation a little."

She stared at me for half a minute, and when I didn't back down, she sighed. "Be safe about it, at least? No being alone, no groups she set up, no letting her lead you into an ambush?" She asked, "And no trying to sit at the fucking Empire table at lunch?"

"That all sounds incredibly reasonable." Now maybe she could stop being in such a snit, and we could get on with our day?

She shook her head with a huff. "You're a barrel of trouble, you know that?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I know. So, Tukson's?"

"Nah, closed Wednesdays." She shrugged. "Could go to your place? Or mine, I guess." She added with a shrug.

Amy really didn't sound enthused about going to her place. "It's fine, my place works."

We took the bus into the north docks area where I lived, Amy explaining a bit more about the cliques around school as we went. According to her, the 'table she warned me away from' in her words- apparently calling it the Empire table in the middle of a bus full of other students was a faux pas- used to be one of the tables full of Medhall kids whose parents all knew each other. Then 'Herren' and some of the other local bigots shifted into that circle and it just got worse from there. I
still had no idea what Amy's problem with Cassie was, and she just blustered and changed the subject when asked.

She'd gone on to talk about some of the other groups, but they were usual high school fare. There was a group of 'pretty socialites' that hadn't been folded into Vicky's group, but they didn't like either of them very much.

We got off the bus and walked the rest of the way home. I got the feeling Amy wasn't impressed with the state of our house, but I hadn't expected anything else. I warned her about the bad step, and then we were inside. Amy got the basic tour; the living room, kitchen/dining room, and the downstairs half-bathroom. Then we went upstairs, and I pointed out the guest room and dad's room, showed her the bathroom, and led her to my room.

I paused just inside the door, shrinking back a bit. This let Amy into the room, and she looked around for a second before she noticed I was still scrunched up. "What's wrong?"

"I just... remembering I haven't brought anyone over since..." I trailed off, not able to finish forming the words.

She sidled up slowly, just outside of touching distance. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I thought about it, slowly breathing harder and building up steam to answer one way or another. "I had a friend. Known her longer than I can remember. She was..." My thoughts stalled and I changed it up. "We brought our families together. Her big sister Anne... I believed it when they joked she was named after my mom for so many years, we were that close." I flopped down onto my bed, and Amy followed more softly. "I told her all my secrets, hopes, dreams... we were sisters."

My hands clenched as I hunched over, so frustrated thinking about it, but anger wouldn't help here. I took a few deep breaths, and unclenched my teeth. "She spent the past two years ruining every part of my life that she could, and I have no idea why." I turned watery eyes towards Amy. "You were my first friend in more than a year."

Her hand raised hesitantly, before she laid it on mine. I saw her lips part, words try to form, all empty platitudes, all discarded.

I tensed. "I'm sorry, I don't want to turn this into a pity party... don't want you to keep being my friend because I guilted you into it..."

She tightened her hand around mine. "Hey, no." She shook my clenched fist in her hand and drew my eyes back up to hers. "Shit sucks, I get it. I'd feel the same way." I looked down and away. Knowing what I did about her power, she could probably feel my shame and mistrust in my hormones and body rhythms better than I could sense things about her at my best. "I know I look like some social butterfly to the average asshole looking on while I'm with Vicky, but... all of my friends are really her friends, so really... you were my first real friend in a while, too."

Truth. Her breathing and pulse were steady, no abnormalities, easy to tell with skin contact. My fist unclenched with the rest of my body and I took her hand properly. We sat like that for what had to be a few minutes while I collected myself.

"They were... bad. Ruining my work, driving friends away, turning everyone against me. Stupid pranks ruining my stuff, pushing, shoving, cornering me..." I sniffled. "And then they... and then I..." I squeezed her hand and tried not to cry.
"And then you got powers."

I stared incredulously at her, and she raised our hands—fingers still laced together. I groaned.

"Right, *brain structures.*" I slapped my forehead with my free hand, and I could feel Amy smiling.

"Well yeah, but I was sort of expecting it. Remember when I dragged you back into the school earlier?" I did, she'd been a bit forceful and insistent. I pushed down the unhelpful flare of distrust at having my secrets exposed. "I got a decent look at your brain by accident. Knew you *could* get powers, but I was trying *really* hard to ignore any you had." I tilted my head in confusion. She wiggled her hand in the air. "It's sort of like walking in on your mom changing—er, dad? Sorry." She was embarrassed and blushing. Was she turned on seeing her mom naked? Little weird, but I could kinda' see it. Brandish was still a fairly attractive woman. I also appreciated Amy trying to dodge the topic of my mom, however little it helped otherwise. "Anyway, even if something's seared into your memory forever, you can still try to push it down and ignore details."

The silence stretched on from there. I turned to glance ruefully at her and she rolled her eyes.

"So, what powers did you get?"

I held my free hand up between us and the air above it ignited into a fireball almost the size of her face. She fell backward with a startled 'bwak' sound that had me rolling around laughing as soon as I snuffed the fire out. She got up from where she'd rolled right off my bed and glared at me.

Amy huffed and dusted herself off. "Always with the fucking 'blaster surprise' whenever I ask that question." She glowered down at me. "So what, fire powers?"

I shook my head. "Classical elements. I'm a little stronger and faster than I should be, too." I debated a bit, laying there where I'd flopped laughing earlier. "And... you remember what I asked a while back? About..." I waved my hands between us.

"About being a Cape?" She thought, then her eyes widened. "You're a *healer?*"

I nodded. "Not too good at it, just scratches and bruises, but yeah. I can use water to heal."

"Holy shit." She sat down again. "That's... a really diverse power set. How strong are your elemental powers?"

"Pretty strong." I was about to tell her about my earth senses, but then I realized that would be telling her about my *lie detection,* too. That was... not a good idea. I shook away the shudder at the thought, and kept going. "I'm strongest with earth right now, but I'm getting better with the others, too." I hopped up off the bed, grinning. "C'mon! I'll show you."

I led her downstairs and out the back, to the still mostly barren patch of former garden I'd first practiced earthbending on. "I can send rocks and dirt flying *really* fast. I haven't found a serious upper limit for how much I can control at once, but I know it's a thing. How many objects and how *intricately* I control them is the biggest limiter." I punched a fist upward to raise a trio of small pillars, then stamped the ground to form a wall behind them. "Shifting things around like this is *really* easy. It's holding things in the air that's tricky." Just for fun, I made a packed earth throne right after that and invited Amy to sit. When she didn't, I plopped down into it. The hardness of it didn't bother me any.

"You said that's *one* of your powers?" Amy was wary now. Hesitant. I wasn't sure why. I nodded. It was still bright out, and I couldn't *see* anyone nearby— all the neighbors adjacent to us were still out or at work. I might be excited to show off a bit, but that was no reason to be *reckless* about it.
I motioned Amy off to the side a ways, and she scurried away. Then I let out a concussive blast of fire, blowing apart one of the pillars. I got up and let a short stream of fire blow into the next, keeping my breathing steady and strong to push the stream harder and hotter. By the time I was next to it, the pillar of packed dirt was starting to smolder. A few seconds later it started to smoke in earnest, and ten seconds later it toppled over, the lower part of the base molten. I glanced over to Amy, who was starting to sweat a bit. It was a little warm now, and thinking about it, that was pretty terrifying. It was no wonder she was a little scared. "Whoops." I gathered up the air around us,funneling the heat up and away faster, blowing the smoke away while I was at it. "Well, already halfway through the set, might as well keep going?" I asked Amy, who gave a hesitant smile. I swiped the air at the last pillar, clawing out a small trough in the face of it, but otherwise just splashing along the pillar and ground behind it, kicking up some of the dirt.

I grumbled. "Stiiiiill can't manage the 'cutting' trick." Oh well, I had something else that could cut. I unscrewed the cap on the thermos at my side, drawing just over a liter of water out of it. I slashed the water into the pillar, which slowly slid off and onto the ground. I drew the water back to myself and tried to form it into a sword shape when I froze it. ...really more of a club, there. I gave it an experimental swing and it snapped in a couple places. "Good to know." I knew ice was brittle, but...

Amy was staring at me, wide-eyed. I was pretty sure the only reason she wasn't hyperventilating was a lack of breathing entirely. "Amy?" I asked, and she flinched a little. "Are you okay? I didn't think I was that scary..."

She took a few deep breaths and came closer. That was a good sign. "Taylor, that stuff with the earth? It reminded me of what Kaiser can do with metal." Oh. ...was it bad that my first thought was 'why isn't he more impressive, then'? Because seriously, if he was some sort of 'metalbender'-mental note, see if that's a thing- then why didn't he control the city already? Metal was everywhere in a modern city. Amy wasn't done, though. "I'm not sure there's anything Stormtiger can do that you can't-" Why all the comparisons to Nazis? "the water stuff is pretty impressive too, and the fire? I don't think Lung has that kind of power or control unless he's in a fight already."

I winced. "Yeah, I've... been avoiding the fire. It's hundreds of degrees even when I try to keep it cool," It'd checked. "and after that it just makes the fire weaker, and..." oh no, I was rambling. Internally, I told myself to shut up, and then gave Amy a pleading look.

She came a bit closer. "Hey, it's okay." Apparently my look was less 'please help I'm awkward' and more 'please tell me I'm not a monster' because she looked about ready to hug me. "I'm just a little surprised. That's a really potent, versatile set of powers. If you're not one of the top five capes in the city I'll-" she rolled her eyes and shrugged, giving off a hapless wave of her hands. "well okay, if you're not top ten I'll eat my shoe, still pretty sure you're top five, though." That... actually meant a lot, coming from someone I'd rank similarly.

"So, you haven't been out caping at all?" Amy asked, when I stayed quiet.

I shrugged. "Should I have?" I shook my head. "Really no point to it, yet. I'm not going to suddenly beat all the gangs, and trying would just paint a target on my back. I'm still training, and still getting-" stronger, I wanted to say, but capes like that were rarer than healers. "used to my powers. I know I could be out there doing some small amount of good for the city, but it's better if I just wait until I'm ready to actually take on some of the bigger names."

Amy gave me a weird look and I asked about it. "Just... not sure anyone I know could just sit around, happy to train up." She sidled up and nudged me. "You're really weird, for a cape."

My foot tapped the ground, and a dirt wall shot up behind me at bench-height. I sat back onto it while scrunching in on myself. "I really am, huh?"
"Hey," She sat next to me. "enough of the downer mood swings, what's wrong this time?"

I grumbled, not really sure how to explain it. "I'm really good at martial arts." Her eyebrow quirked up and I had to cut in before she could. "No, like, ridiculously good. I hadn't learned to throw a punch before I got powers, but now I'm proficient in more styles than I can name. Not even kidding, I don't know half the names!" I threw up my arms and hopped up to start pacing. "I started learning from people who were good at it, and I got better at it scary fast. All of them think I'm just a rusty black belt getting back into it or something. And then there's the dreams." I turned to point accusingly at Amy. "Parahumans just know how their powers work, right? You just knew?" She nodded and I shook my head. "I didn't get that. Instead I get dreams showing me things I can do, but then I have to train with it until it clicks in my head, then it's like an instinct I didn't know I had."

She looked at me weirdly for that. Confused and wary, again. I was slowly building toward hyperventilating, forcing myself to stop when I noticed and sit back down. The deeper breaths weren't helping as much as I'd hoped, but at least I wouldn't pass out now.

"There's something in my head," I whined pitifully. "putting things in my brain, and I have no idea how to stop it." I sobbed and wrapped myself around her when she made a motion towards me. For all that she seemed supremely uncomfortable with the situation, she took my hand in hers again and hummed.

"Well, you don't look all that different from any other parahuman." She was forcing herself to project some much-needed calm into the situation. "Your Gemma's on the small side, but it's incredibly well-connected. Nothing I haven't seen before, though."

"So you think powers might just be in our heads messing with things?"

Amy chuckled ruefully. "I would really rather not think about it." She said more cheerfully than either of us felt. I still heard her muttered "...makes sense, though."

I shifted to start untangling myself from her, pulling my head from her shoulder and shyly shuffling to my full height, slightly taller than her even sitting. "So yeah, I don't like mind things..."

She latched onto the subject change. "Is that why you've been doing all that meditation stuff?"

I nodded. "I have this... internal energy? And some intuition tells me that it'll help with mind stuff if I learn to control it better."

"Huh." Amy chuffed in surprise. "A power intuition?"

"I... guess?" Huh. Maybe I do get those?

"Soooo..." Amy was smirking. "Are you going to teach me how to touch my chi?"

I gave her the most deadpan stare I could muster. "I'm fairly certain given your reading habits that you have no difficulties touching yourself." We both blushed at that, her more than me, thankfully.

She grinned. "Yeah, but with you teaching me, it's almost like we're doing it... together?"

"Okay, enough!" My blush was nuclear now, and hers wasn't much better. "Still straight!"

She cackled, but nodded. "Alright, mind stuff."

We settled down on the lawn, and I helped walk her through centering herself, like I usually did.
told her some of the things I was feeling with my energy, which she said sounded like new-age hullabaloo. *Literally* what she called it.

It wasn't long before I started to feel it. Focused as I was on Amy, my mind slipped occasionally, and sometimes some of my energy would sort of... *meld* into the ground. It took me a while to figure out what was happening, but when I did?

Apparently my energy was going into the grass.

"Taylor, you okay?" Apparently I'd gone silent.

"New power thing, maybe?" I described what was happening, which she declared utter horseshit—not because she didn't believe me, but because I had *yet another power*—and told me to focus on that for a while, don't mind her.

We sat like that for a while before a throat cleared nearby.

I'd been so focused on the grass I was ignoring my other senses. Dad was home, and his raised eyebrow demanded information.

"Dad, this is Amy. Amy, this is my dad, Danny Hebert."

We didn't get up, so dad waved his hand Amy's direction. "So is she a new friend, oooor...?"

"*Still straight!*" I flopped back into the grass and screamed defiance to the heavens.

I was familiar enough with dad to tell he was mouthing 'is that a thing?' silently to Amy, who exploded into snortgiggles immediately after. I growled indignantly and stomped my various limbs righteously, which for some reason just made the traitors laugh harder.

"I told Amy I'm a cape." *That* shut them up.

"He knows?" Amy muttered, drowned out by dad.

"Why would you-?" Dad started.

"She's Panacea, dad." I cut in.

He took a moment to reassess the mousy girl I'd brought home. "Huh." He paused for a second before reiterating his question in a more reasonable tone. "But why *would* you?"

Actually not a bad question, after thinking about it. "Because having a friend my own age who understands is nice? And also that I can talk to, and plan with, and-"

"Alright, I get it." He held his hands up in defeat. "You're just sitting here meditating, though? Kinda' figured if you'd be practicing anything, it'd be your martial arts stuff."

My eyes lit up. "Ooh! That's a good point!" I turned to Amy. "I need to show you how to hit people."

Her eyes rolled. "I know how to hit people. I've been to a few self-defense courses."

"Yeah, but I can show you better." I grinned. "Plus then I get to punch you for earlier."

This had her startled. "But why?"
I shrugged. "You have a very punchable personality?"

"You bitch!" Amy lunged at me, very slowly and obviously, to show she was playing. I slapped her hands aside.

"I believe you are, in fact, the bitch." My retort was less cunning than I'd like, but I'd take it.

Dad chuckled and left us to our slap fight, which slowly progressed into actual training. Amy wasn't bad, but she was definitely no martial artist. Half an hour into the real lessons, dad called out the kitchen window for what we wanted for pizza toppings, which naturally lead to escalation.

Eventually the pizza was slain, and it was time for a tuckered and mildly bruised Amy to head home. I'd tested my healing on her, but it seemed way slower than with me for some reason. Still, we got the worst of it, and Amy was adamantly she could make her own way home. Neither dad or I liked that, so we gave her the ultimatum of a ride in the truck, which she countered with just calling her sister.

I felt... not great about telling Vicky where I lived, but I was going to be friendly with her again eventually, if only to keep hanging out with her sister from becoming too awkward. So in the end, I felt it was fine that she come pick Amy up.

Dad and I got settled in, talking about how I'd met Amy and my thoughts on New Wave. This inevitably led back to caping, where I'd mentioned Parian, which...

"I want to get a costume."

"Just in case?" I hated the smirk and the way it'd bled into his question.

"I'm going to go out eventually, I just want to be ready." I replied adamantly.

He sighed, and moved to dig something out of his work desk. I'd curiously followed him upstairs to his room, so he just tossed it to me in the doorway. It was a little bank envelope. I took a peek inside and—whoo boy that was a lot of bills. "What?"

"Costume funds." He replied.

"What!?" I screeched.

He smiled. "I knew you were going to want more cape stuff eventually, so I drew some funds. Don't want you to spend it all in one place, but..."

"I can't just walk down the street with this kind of cash, what if I got mugged!?"

His deadpan stare held me for a couple seconds while I cringed. "Mugged? By Lung?"

"Realized how silly it sounded the second I'd said it." I groaned. Regular mooks just weren't a threat anymore, and we both knew it. He shook his head and sighed.

"Anyway, I get it. I know how important looking good can be to young women." He gave a halfhearted shrug.

He'd seen my wardrobe, he knew that was bullshit, but... it didn't feel like a lie? "I don't understand."

"Confidence." He swept his arms out, knowingly. "Your mother knew a thing or two about psyching herself up. She needed it with crowds of students and teacher meetings, and..." He trailed
off, but I think he was going to mention the stuff with Lustrum. "Anyway, nice clothes helped, makeup helped, god help me apparently lacy underthings helped..." I squawked indignantly and turned to flee. "I get it. If this is what you need, this is what you need. You'll make her proud, little owl."

I paused in the hallway. ". . . thanks, dad." I muttered, giving him a smile before I turned to head to my room.

He probably forgot I could feel him back in his, but I watched as he dropped himself into his desk chair, rubbing at his face. Wiping away tears.

I didn't sleep well, that night.

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THU FEB 10

I got a spare phone from a corner store on my way in to school. Amy'd called it a 'burner' when she suggested it- a cheap throwaway that I could use for cape things and not care if it got tracked or damaged- and seemed surprised I didn't know the term. She let it go when I explained why our house hadn't cared about anything cell phone related for the past few years. Still, the willful ignorance was appalling when I thought about how tightly it'd revolved around mom. She'd never forgive that sort of thing.

Regardless, I had the phone. My cape phone. Which I was going to use for cape business. At lunch. Calm breaths, don't freak out. I couldn't concentrate all morning, but I don't think anyone noticed. Finally lunch rolled around, and everyone was let free of the Faraday cage. Luckily lunch started before noon, hopefully she wouldn't be out to her own when I called.

It rang enough times I'd thought it was bound to go to voicemail, so the call connecting surprised me. "Hello?" After a moment, she repeated the question and added, "What sort of clothing solutions are you looking for?"

Oh, right. She might be doing the same thing I am, using a cape phone without a mask. The whole reason I was calling was because her 'Parian days' at her shop were over for the week, so it made sense. "Parian?" I asked, and she hummed a patient affirmative. "I'm... uhh..." Names. Dammit I need a name! "-new cape." Saved it. "I was wondering about costume things, and was hoping you had time tomorrow?" Call me greedy, but I wanted that costume now. I had the means, I had the me, I wanted this done. I ignored the small part of myself that added 'I want to be pretty'. We are not here for pretty. . . . it might be nice, though.

"Why tomorrow? I already make time to be available earlier in the week." She responded reasonably. Dammit!

Reasons, reasons... "Well, isn't that for being available? It'd be better for business to schedule things other times too, maybe?" She gave a long, unconvincing hum, and I folded. "...I got impatient, I'm sorry."

Parian giggled. "I thought so. I assume you'll need to schedule around classes?"

I nodded, even though she couldn't see it. "Yeah, after-school is probably for the best."

"And you are aware I don't make armored clothing?"

"Or armor-like padding, yeah." I grumbled.
She hummed, sounding surprised. "Well, I'll be free around... 5:30, at my shop?"

"Great! I'll be there." We said goodbye, hung up, and I couldn't stop the happy little jig my body erupted into. I was going to be a hero.

After school I went to my usual training, then home to meditate and costume plan. I was texting Amy with ideas, and she'd respond whenever she was between patients. Still, it wouldn't do to get too excited, and I was getting somewhere with this 'plant feeling' thing. Had to keep priorities straight.

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FRI FEB 11

Today was the big day. I sat with Amy at lunch, and we hashed through what we'd gone over last night. I had to keep it simple, and I think I knew how to do that. Had to trust the designer to actually design the thing, too. All my half-formed scribbles went into the trash.

After school, Amy and I headed over to Tukson's. Our brilliant plan had us waiting there for about an hour, then me sneaking out in a mask and heading right across the street to Parian's. With Amy vouching for me, no one would know I was gone.

Naturally Tukson caught me on the way. I might not have noticed, but his head shifted up from the book he was reading to give me a long-suffering look, complete with raised eyebrow. I was sure he saw right through the disguise. Amy'd lent me an emergency mask- which was apparently a thing-common in her healer kit. I'd tied up my hair at Amy's insistence, and its length was bundled under a scarf that I'd pulled up over my lower face. I'd even brought a different hoodie in my bag to pull over everything!

...which reminded me to actually pull up the hood.

He just sighed, rolled his eyes, and gave me a 'shoo' motion. I was out the door before his hand dropped. Such an auspicious beginning to my cape career.

I headed over to the shop, drawing eyes as I went. Even the other patrons of the shop couldn't stop staring. I could feel people holding up their phones behind my back, even! I told the cashier I had an appointment, and was led back to whom I'd assumed was Parian, the only person in the back. Which was to say upstairs, since the first floor was all storefront.

She was sitting at a highly inclined desk full of paper and pencils, bolts of cloth and sewing kits nearby. The walls were lined with cubbyholes full of similar bolts, including right behind her.

"Hi! I'm-" I was so excited to meet her, I was a quarter of the way to where she was when she held up her hand. The dainty digits pointed up and behind me, revealing-

That was a lot of floating needles.

"Rogue I may be, but fool I am not." She enunciated carefully. "I'd like you to answer some questions before we can do business."

I gulped and nodded. What else was there to do? I had no idea how strong her telekinesis was, trying to blow everything away with airbending might just kick off a fight I couldn't win without burning the store down.

"First, what proof do I have that you are a cape? There are subtle differences in the cut, and more
obvious differences in material, between costumes made for normals to play cape, and uniforms for capes to wear. I will not sell one to the other, if I can avoid it."

Okay, that made a bit of sense, but it was still a really insulting question to straight-up ask another cape. I flicked a hand and a gust of wind splashed against the far wall and rustled half the room. I took some gleeful pleasure in seeing the papers on her desk scatter before they simply floated back to where they'd been.

"Rather rude." She muttered.

"It was a rude question." I returned.

She hummed her assent. "I assume you are an independent, then?" The way she said it seemed-

Oh goddamn it. "I'm not Stormtiger's kid." I whined.

She coughed. "I never implied you were."

"You were thinking it." I groused quietly. She raised her hand and made a circular 'go on' motion, so I clearly stated, "Yes, I'm an independent hero."

"Alright." I could hear her bracing herself. "Now, what sort of ideas did you have?"

"Honestly?" I shrugged. "I mostly just want something rugged and durable." She gave a nonplussed 'huh' and I continued. "I really like Alexandria, but... I've got a lot of powers like Eidolon. I was thinking maybe something like he wears? Less skintight, more durable, easier to move in?"

She gives a more surprised hum this time. "Now, you mentioned 'tough' and 'rugged' and 'sturdy' type things, but you remember I don't do armor?"

I scoffed. "Oh, no. I can make my own armor." I shrugged. "I'm an earthbender." The word was out before I'd realized it. "Er, geokinetic, but it doesn't sound as good." I shook my head. "Anyway, if I need armor, I can just use rocks or dirt. The important thing is making sure the costume can take the punishment of having dirt and rocks rubbing and ripping at it."

She brought her hand up to her mask, as though trying to grip her chin in thought. "I suppose the sort of hemp jean material used in high-quality workman's clothing would work fine. Durable, looks decent, much cheaper than the sorts of cloth I usually work with..." She muttered to herself about specific blends to look up later, then waved me closer to the desk. "How important is the freedom of movement? You brought it up, but it's hard to do better than the skintight outfit you dislike. How important is the cloak aesthetic? What about the green?"

"Green's fine, and I meant the cloak, it looks like it'd just catch everywhere if you can't fly." I thought for a bit. "I'm a martial artist. Movement is pretty important, but image is pretty important too." I groaned. I had no idea how to look heroic without showing off more than I was comfortable with. Stupid sexy skin-suits...

Parian thought on it for a minute or so before she started sketching. The design she scribbled out looked a lot like an oddly cut greatcoat. "Why a coat?"

She shrugged. "The materials won't look odd on outerwear the way they would on something meant to be closer to the skin, and you can wear something silkier under it for comfort."

I decided to give it another shot, looking it over more critically. "The coat's a bit long? I'm not sure I dig the buttons, and where do those boots go? They're way too big."
She pointed her pencil up and down toward my pants. "You have very nice legs, best to show them off, why not thigh-highs?" I shook my head and pushed the metaphorical boots well below my knees on my actual body.

The motion shifted my weight on my feet, reminding me of my shoes. "Oh, right, I need really, really thin soles, fake soles, or no soles on the shoes or boots."

"What? Why?" She seemed rather startled by the notion.

I didn't want to give up my big advantage with my senses, so I just said "Power reasons." She sputtered a bit, working herself up to arguing about it, when I lifted one of my feet to show the bottoms of my un-be-soled feet, pointing at them. "Power reasons."

She sighed, but agreed, moving back to her designs. She erased the hem of the coat, maybe more forcefully than necessary, and redrew it curling it around from the waist into tails in the back like I'd seen on some tuxedos. I motioned to round them out a bit, and shorten them. Instead she met in the middle, having the sides round from mid-calf in the front down behind the knees like an open skirt. I wasn't sure about it until she erased the buttons on the front and replaced them with what looked like a simple rectangular tabard front, ending just above the coat's hem. A nice thick belt rounded it out.

"That actually looks pretty good." I was surprised how much I liked it.

"Now for colors." She picked out a bunch of greens and told me to pick a few. She laid some thinner paper over the sketch and colored in the patches of cloth with some of my choices, but mostly hers. Then she started flipping between them, swapping the colors out. "So, which do you like?"

I settled on one with a dark green I'd picked for the coat itself, along with olive pants and a lighter green for the tabard, which was trimmed in white.

"This all looks fine." I said, smiling. She brought over a few swatches of material that were 'about' what she'd had in mind- she really doesn't deal with the heavier, more durable fabrics very often as a designer clothier. Even the capes tended to use lighter weaves of tougher fabrics, though I was starting to think I was one of her first real cape customers.

She motioned me over to the clearer half of the room and floated several strips of measuring tape with her. I timidly followed after, and she chuckled. "Don't worry, most of your outfit is outerwear, it doesn't need to be a tight fit. Snug enough not to hinder, but we can work in some room to grow. I'll just measure over your current clothes, okay?" I nodded, and she wrapped the lines snugly around me in several places. They bit into my hoodie a bit, but that was probably better for measuring through it. I blushed a little as one of the lines cinched around my flat bust, but otherwise stood still.

"Now, the last important part of your look. The mask." Parian said as she circled me, marking measurements down on a pad. "Unless it's cloth, I don't do masks." She sidled up closer and pushed her pencil at my face. "And a friendly word of advice- lose the glasses." My hands came up, and I realized I'd forgotten I even put them on over the simple mask Amy gave me. "They're a liability and can be used to identify your civilian identity."

I groaned and nodded. "Thanks, I'll remember that." Probably how that jerk Tukson recognized me.

My arms went back out, and the measures wrapped my biceps and forearm, lines stretching
shoulder to elbow to wrist. Those marked, she did the same to my legs, though she measured a few points on my thighs and calves. In all, the whole process took maybe five minutes, then she was writing the numbers down again at her desk.

"Now then, payment." She looked up some materials in a catalog and rattled off a number that had me making a sad, strangled noise in the back of my throat. Less than I'd feared, but far, far more than I'd hoped. I had more than enough, but it was the principle of the thing! Then she brought up duplicates. If she made them as a batch, it'd be a lot less work for her, and far less cost for me. In the end I decided to get three of them for almost twice the original price. I could feel her eyes bugging out a bit as I paid in cash up front, which apparently bumped me up the list a bit. That put my costumes done in... about two weeks.

Stuff made by an actual cape was in pretty high demand, apparently.

Receipt in hand, I scurried back to Tukson's, where he barely bats an eye as I go past in my disguise. Amy is right where I left her, and we get into actually meditating together for a while. Then my phone rings.

"Hello?" I ask, confused at the unknown number.

"Hello, is this Taylor?" I answer affirmatively. "I'm Cheryl Alcott, Dinah's mother?" I made the appropriate 'realization' noise. "Dinah's been talking about you all week, and we were wondering-you said you'd help our little girl. Did you mean that?"

It only took a moment to settle on my answer. "Yeah, Mrs Alcott, I'll do whatever I can." Anything for a fellow cape in need, right?

Especially one who knows who I am. A traitorous part of my mind growled.

"That's wonderful! Dinah's been having trouble in school lately, and she just hasn't taken to her tutors. We were hoping someone closer to her age would be better to help keep her interest in studying? We'd be willing to pay if things work out well."

Tutoring? On the one hand, something I could probably do easily. Even with the shit Winslow put me through, I was above the level of a middle schooler. On the other, tutoring? That's what they needed help with? I sighed and hated that it was the money that really clinched the deal for me. Even if I didn't technically need the money, actually producing my own income would do wonders for my self-esteem, not to mention my job references in the future.

"Sure. When were you thinking?"

"Sometime this weekend would be great for a trial run. Myself or my husband will be around all day just in case." That sounded reasonable.

"Does tomorrow work? I can clear the whole day if I need to."

We hashed out the details and I wrote down their address. Get there early enough and have all three meals covered, plus at least minimum wage, maybe more if Dinah took to my 'study style' well, whatever that meant? Seemed like a pretty sweet deal, honestly.

Chapter End Notes
Calls for costume ideas led to a vote, which led to Taylor's costume being based off Kuvira's.
Chapter 1.6 (Helping)

Chapter Summary

FRI FEB 11

It wasn't long after the call that Amy and I decided to leave. We weren't sure what we planned to do for food, but we figured heading to my place after for more 'whatever' we were going to do was fine. We'd only gone half a block towards the restaurants to window-browse when we heard the first shots.

I focused on the earth, not seeing anything too out of the ordinary, until I saw a car speeding towards us about nine blocks away, chased by a motorcycle a block behind them, and another car half a block behind that. I also felt a weird staccato pounding near there, but had no idea what it might be.

I motioned Amy to follow, and we ran back the way we'd come, passing Tukson's and stopping at the far intersection. The car- some rugged looking SUV, was weaving through the sparse traffic, occasional bursts of automatic fire raining behind them whenever the motorcycle- which I realized was Miss Militia, got too close. A red blur that had to be Velocity was leapfrogging between alleyways just ahead of the gang car. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I had to do something. I had to assess the situation. I closed my eyes and stamped my foot.

The echoes returned back to me from my action pointed a clear picture of every rock and stone, everything touching earth within two blocks. Right now I didn't care about anything farther than that.

There, about three meters down, was a rock big enough to use. I couldn't do much with dirt or gravel, and the road's asphalt still felt weird to me, so I ignored all of those. There was a sewage pipe, but that only took up a quarter the road's width. I could move around it. The cables underground seemed to all be under the sidewalk here.

I swirled my right hand, pulling the boulder off to the side of the pipes underground, widened my stance and tapped my heel to the concrete, shearing the oblong stone at an angle from its center of mass. Now to wait. One second, two, there. I punched my left fist up from my side until it was level with my shoulder, sending the stone lancing up through the gravel under the road, through the asphalt, spearing it between the right front wheel of the car and the front of its wheelhouse.

The car was moving fast, though. It spun when its forward momentum halted, sending it to the left and away from us. The wheel snapped off the axle, the car now moving more sideways than forward, started to roll. The crowd had thinned significantly when the shooting started and the speeding vehicles came into view, but too many were still there for it to be safe. The gang car was headed for the sidewalk, toward parked cars and buildings and people. I panicked, dropping my hands to my sides, taking a heavy step forward, and drew my fists from beside my hips to in front of my chest.

The sidewalk surged up to meet the car, a meter-high bulwark of concrete, gravel, and dirt
slamming into the roof of the thing. It groaned as it teetered ominously atop the outcropping, before gravity took control again, pulling it back whence it came to crash down onto the road on its side.

"Oh, shit." Amy muttered from beside me, pulling me out of my focus. I opened my eyes to find her chasing Velocity towards the crash. He'd been nearby, but focused on the crash. I don't think he could have seen me. Everyone had been staring at the cars. Miss Militia slowed to a stop nearby a few seconds later, about when I realized that maybe I should be moving, too.

Amy was declaring gangsters safe to move or not, Velocity dragging them out to Militia, who kept the mostly groaning men on the ground with the implicit threat of the very big gun her power had formed into. I made my way over, shoving the boulder back into the ground with one stomp masked as a step, then flattening out the raised ramp of material that'd finished stopping the car with the next few. By the time I was over next to them, things were mostly back to normal. I felt bad leaving things like this, but doing more would require revealing myself, and... and it was just a really bad pothole anyway, right?

I silently resolved to fix things the next time I could. "Can... can I help?" I asked. It was about then that the transport full of PRT troopers pulled up, filing out of the back to assess the situation.

Miss Militia chuckled, glancing over at me. "It's fine, miss..." She hummed, her eyes narrowing slightly. "You were the girl Triumph stopped for, the other day."

"Y-yeah?" Oh shit was this a good thing? This was bad. She'd recognize me and realize I was a cape, and... I shivered. Why was that such a terrible thing? I didn't know, but I also didn't want them to know. At least not yet. Still, no point lying to the law enforcement when I'd supposedly done nothing wrong. "I'm Taylor."

"It's good to see you again." She smiled. "But it would be appreciated if you'd step back to a safer distance." She indicated with a light flick of her weapon, which had me looking over to where a couple troopers were setting up cones and police tape. Was it still police tape if it had 'PRT' on it? PRTape? ...didn't have a great ring to it.

I'd stood there long enough that one of the troops was moving over to collect me and shuffle me off, so I added, "I'm with Amy."

Militia was about to speak up, and from the set of her eyes I could tell it wasn't going to be a positive reaction, but Amy spoke up from the bodies. "Yeah, she is." That had both of us looking over at her, kneeling by the last gangster they pulled out of the SUV, and the only one she'd spent any real time working on. She looked grumpy and felt angry, but there were enough reasons for it I couldn't tell exactly why off-hand. "I'm almost done, anyway."

Panacea, from her professional tone of voice, said. "Only one of them had anything life-threatening, the rest are just banged up a little. I stabilized them for you."

Miss M went back to giving me the gimlet eye, so I glanced around again. Velocity and a couple of troopers were talking to bystanders, the cape flitting between people in a red streak when he finished speaking to someone. If I had to guess, he was doing it more for the spectacle than anything else.

"Alright, that should do it." Panacea, from her professional tone of voice, said. "Only one of them had anything life-threatening, the rest are just banged up a little. I stabilized them for you."

She was still frustrated, but hiding it well. Militia's eyes narrowed, and she seemed frustrated, but didn't show it in her voice. "Thank you for that, transport is on the way. Now then, there's a new ground-using Shaker cape in the area, and they're the one that stopped the car." And nearly killed half a dozen people before they stopped the car, she didn't say. "Did either of you see anything?"
"Nope." Amy said, before I could. If it weren't for my senses, I wouldn't be able to tell she was lying. "Didn't see anyone like that. We were both staring at the wreck, like everyone else."

"I'll leave you to your date, then." She nodded towards the closer of the tape lines.

Amy blushed a little, while I bit out my now habitual "Not gay." under my breath. The hero smiled at her needling striking home, and turned her attention back to the situation at hand. I stood frozen for a bit before Amy grabbed my hand and led me out of the area, and I couldn't help but notice Militia's smirk as she watched us out the corner of her eye.

We didn't stop until we were at the bus, when I asked "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just..." She was frustrated and lying. She seemed to know I knew, and sighed. "Not here." I nodded, and let her have her time. We piled into the bus and took seats next to each other. The ride to the stop near my house was quiet, but eventually we were inside.

"You want me to call in Chinese or something?" I asked, before realizing it might be in bad taste, considering what happened. Amy seemed darkly amused by it, though, and agreed. After calling in noodles and rice for the both of us, and some extra for dad whenever he got home, we settled into the couch in the living room.

After a moment of silence, I nervously said "I'm sorry."

She was confused. "What, why?"

"I... almost killed people?" I was very nearly crying, then. "First the bystanders, then the gangsters. You said one of them almost died."

She scoffed. "One of them had life threatening injuries. It's not the same thing." My incredulity must have shown on my face, because she sighed an explained. "Just because you'd die if you didn't get treatment, doesn't mean you're going to die. There was a van full of PRT troops chasing them, and Piggot's a stickler for being over-prepared; her squads usually have two trained medics, instead of the regulation one. That guy would've been fine, even if he'd need an ambulance instead of a prisoner van."

Amy was nearly exasperated by the end. "So why were you mad, then?"

She started and stopped a few times, before she sighed and rubbed her face. "I don't like healing criminals." Her voice was low, and cracked a little. "I've got it in writing at the hospital, even. If they can prove someone has gang ties, I'll just go heal someone else. I still wind up healing a ton of them, but it... it helps."

"I don't understand." I really didn't. Wasn't saving people the whole point of being a hero? She laughed piteously and curled in on herself more. "Healing criminals... feels like enabling them. If I put them back on their feet, and... if I saved that guy's life and he goes out and kills someone, does that mean I killed them?" She rubbed the heel of her hand into her eye, wiping away welling tears, and gave another wet, hitching chuckle. "Fucking sucks."

"No," I said, then took her free hand and said it stronger. "No, you didn't do it. They made that choice, not you." She scoffed, it was a common platitude, after all. "You told me there was a difference between being hurt enough to die and dying. Well there's a difference between saving people and not letting them die. It's not your fault what they do after that, it's the fault of the people who were supposed to hold them, or the system that should've reformed them, or the legal system that couldn't prove they shouldn't be let out to hurt more people." I gripped her hand and drew her
watery eyes to mine. "You didn't heal him all the way, right?" She shook her head. "I know you didn't. That means he's going to be down long enough to make something stick." The ABB didn't break their goons out of lockup as often as the Empire did, but more often than the Merchants. Then again, the Empire had a healer of their own, so they had a higher turnover and could take bigger risks, while the Merchants were all halfway to a drug-filled grave and just weren't worth the effort when they could recruit fresher bodies easier than breaking out the stale ones. I shook my head, it wasn't time for those thoughts.

"You did good, Amy." I said, as sincerely as I could. "You do good. You are good. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise." That was when she broke down and curled up in my arms, crying.

We spent the rest of the time until the food showed up curled up on the couch like that. Amy stopped crying after a few minutes, but still kept sniffing while I whispered hushed platitudes into her ear, petting her curly, frizzled-out hair down, and wondering if this was how Emma felt when she did this for me, after mom died.

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We were halfway through our food when Amy felt up to talking again. "So, how'd Parian's go?"

"I told you earlier it went fine." I shrugged.

"Yeah, but that's when we were in public. Can't talk about cape things when you never know who's listening on the other side of the door."

I hummed, pretty sure she just wanted to gossip about my cape stuff. Pretty sure she'd mentioned living vicariously through others before, maybe she didn't have the same experience I did? "Well, how did getting your costume work out?"

She rolled her eyes. "Mark said something about me being 'the white mage' when we were coming up with ideas, and the white robes stuck. Next week we had enough baggy cotton robes from some bulk supplier to last me forever." I just barely caught the 'and I hate it' she tacked on under her breath. Maybe I should talk with her about rebranding sometime? Before I could bring it up, she cut me off. "Stop trying to distract me, what'd she say?"

I sighed. "Costume is a dark green tunic coat thing. I thought it looked pretty good, and she's making it out of really sturdy stuff. She doesn't do masks though, and..." I hunched down, playing with my noodles. "She said I needed to get rid of my glasses."

Amy shrugged. "Why don't I just fix your eyes?"

"You can do that?" I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me before.

"Well yeah, I can fix anything. I'm fucking amazing, remember?" She was smiling, but stabbing at her food. She felt like she was lying, but that didn't make any sense. Why would she lie about...?

Oh, Amy...

"You are amazing." I said, and said it again stronger when she tried to scoff and wave me off. "Don't beat yourself up."

She smiled shyly, with a touch of a blush. "Yeah, alright." She reached out her hand. "C'mon, then." I slipped my hand into hers and she closed her eyes. The world got fuzzy over the next few seconds, and I took my glasses off. My vision slowly unblurred, before I was seeing the house more crisply than I could ever remember it. "There. Perfect vision."
"Wait," I'd just thought of something. "what do we tell people about why I'm not wearing them anymore?"

Amy shrugged. "Just say you're switching to contacts. Either people will believe that, or they'll think I fixed your eyes and don't want you to talk about it. We are friends, after all." she let that beat hang in the air for a moment. "Either way, people should just drop it."

I nodded with a small smile. "Now I just need to figure out a mask..."

"What'd you have in mind?"

"Well, I'd sort of based the costume's original idea on Eidolon, so maybe a blank faced mask like his?" I said with a shrug. "Maybe a darker green, though. Ceramic, if I can manage it. If nothing else I can use it with my earthbending, like a holdout weapon." There I go slipping that word into things again. What was with that?

She scoffed. "That's easy enough. You can get Eidolon masks anywhere. The ceramic's a little tougher, though." She pondered for a second. "Vicky's probably going to drag me shopping tomorrow, to keep me out of the hospital. I can convince her to let us swing by Lord's Market instead of the Boardwalk. Pretty sure there's a pottery stand there that also does masks. I can just grab you a few of them and you can repaint them yourself."

"Really? That'd be amazing!" I cheered. "Wait, don't you need special paints for ceramics?"

"Pff, you gonna eat off 'em?" She shook her head. "Nah, acrylic sticks to anything. Won't be shiny gloss, but let's be honest, you're not a shiny person." I made an appropriately offended noise.

"You're going to want to wear a domino under it, though. Just in case it gets knocked off or you want to eat, or something."

That sounded reasonable enough. I'd offered to pay her back for the masks, but she wasn't worried about it. Dad got home not long after that, and we filled him in on our day while he ate his reheated food. Then Amy and I went up to my room, where we practiced meditating some more until she had to head home. I made sure to slip some personal wellness and mindfulness tricks into the training, just because I felt like she needed all the help she could get, there.

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SAT FEB 12

Well, today was the big day. I hadn't even had time for my normal morning weight training or running, before Dad was bundling us out of the house for me to make 'my appointment' on time. He'd just head in to work to finish the rest of the week's overflow early from there after dropping me off.

It was a little after seven in the morning when I made my way to the door to knock. I was let in by Mr 'Call me Chris' Alcott, whom I'd kept calling Mr Alcott just because. He led me to a large dining room, where four spots were set, but only one was in use. The Mr sat down to his half-finished plate of waffles, eggs, and meat, and took a long pull from his coffee.

Cheryl bustled about, bringing in plates of food now that there were more people to eat it, before heading upstairs to get her 'Not a morning person, poor dear.' daughter.

The head of the table had already finished off his plate and gone back for another half-plate of eggs and sausage by the time a bleary Dinah was led into the room. Her eyes shot open, seeing me, but she let herself be silently maneuvered into her seat, before the Mrs took hers.
"So, what has you heading out so early on a Saturday, sir?" I asked.

He chuckled at the appellation, and said "I'm the assistant Fire Chief in charge of the south station." The one that handles most of the city, while the north station has mostly transitioned into watching for Lung's tantrums and Merchant drug lab fires. "Mostly just means I handle Admin while Gordon--" Richard Gordon, I recognized as the city's actual Fire Chief. "-is up north. That's what I'm doing today, but that's only four days of my week. I'm also chair in a couple groups around town, and have to manage shares and stockholder meetings with a few places around town, Medhall, mostly." He said with a shrug. "Still, I was a soldier and a firefighter before they convinced me to take a desk job, so the station's where my heart is. Plus, I keep fit, just in case they need me!" His large, muscled arm slapped into his torso, causing a jiggling ripple to spread under his clothes. Highlighting, if anything, how not fit he currently was. It wasn't my place to say anything, so I just laughed politely and nodded.

"And how about you, Mrs Alcott?" I asked to change the subject.

"Cheryl, dear." She chided. I chuckled shyly and nodded. "I'm going to be doing some work around the house, and cooking. Our housekeeper only comes through twice a week, and the house is a little big for her to manage by herself." That felt a bit like a lie, if I had to guess the housekeeper managed fine. The house was big, but I'd hesitate to call it huge like a mansion. Two floors, with what felt like four bedrooms, an office, and two bathrooms on the second. They had a living room, two dining rooms- I'd seen a bigger one on the way to this cozier one they seemed to use for just themselves- and if I had to guess, they probably had a den and a study or two judging by the sizes of the rooms I could feel.

It was Mr Alcott who broke the next silence, "Hebert, right? You'd be Danny Hebert's daughter, then?" That explained the slightly assessing eye he'd been giving me this whole time, if he knew dad. Or knew of dad, anyway. I know he hadn't made too many friends in the city's government, with all his lobbying for more work for the unions, and the retooling of several dock services, like the ferry.

"Yes, sir?" I was worried, and I was sure it showed.

He smiled, though. "Oh, Joe's always going on about the dockworkers. Always pitching a hand when they can, sturdy folk who don't like their city on fire any more than the rest of us." He gave a hearty chuckle at that. "Your dad runs a good ship, there."

"He's just Head of Hiring," I demurred.

"Oh, nonsense. I've been at this long enough to know the buck stops with someone local, not the 'boss' telling people they run things from off in Virginia." It was Florida, actually, but I didn't have it in me to contradict such a minor point.

"Yeah," I said instead. "I'm proud of him." The man made a loud affirmative grunt, and moved to finish off his plate.

"So, dear, how are your grades looking?" Cheryl asked. Which, honestly, fair question if I was going to be teaching her daughter, but... I still winced a little.

"I had really good grades through middle school, but then I wound up going to Winslow and... Well, let's just say that gang schools aren't great for your GPA." They all frowned at this, so I pressed on. "But I'm doing better! I tested into my proper year at Arcadia, and I'm pulling my grades up in my off-time." Usually while winding down for bed after I was done training nominally more important things for the day, but I couldn't say that. "I'm sure I know everything
up through Dinah's year, and can probably help her understand some things better than someone years removed from learning this stuff." Well okay, I might technically count in that, but it sounded good!

They glanced at each other and had a small, silent conversation, before she nodded. "I'm sure you can, dearie, that's why you're here. Dinah wanted you here-" and at this we all glanced at the shy girl, who nodded, even as she folded into herself a little. "-and it doesn't cost us much to try. We're talking with her teachers, and they'll keep an eye on whether she improves this week. Assuming she does, and Dinah's happy with things, we'll ask you back next week."

I thought on it and nodded. "That sounds fine."

Mr Alcott took his leave after that, saying he needed to be in by 8. The rest of us finished up our food, Dinah picking at her waffles and eggs while her mom took the serving dishes to the kitchen and I finished off what'd been left on them. When we were done, we took our dishes in, and Dinah led me up to her room. It was all plush pink, purple and white, with a big bed, dresser, and a study desk.

She sat down at the desk, but didn't pull out any books or papers, so I sat on the bed and asked, "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"What..." She started, gulping and breathing, she really was a giant ball of nervous energy. "What's it like, being a cape?"

I couldn't help the small wince. "I... haven't actually done any cape stuff, yet." I double-checked her mom was still in the kitchen, and nothing looked to be obviously recording us... "I'm mostly just keeping my head down until I know I can handle things." I paused for a moment to think, and she shrank in on herself some more. "I'm training, and talking with other capes I know, and staying off the radar. The gangs can't come after me if they don't know I exist, after all." Though, with what Miss Militia said, at least the PRT was on the lookout now... I was getting stronger. Maybe it was time to stop playing things so safe?

"I don't..." She stuttered. "I think... I think I already messed up." Her eyes were tearing up a bit. "The numbers get high for bad things, even if I stop talking about my powers, or my headaches..." She hiccuped. "I need help, but I can't get help..."

"Hey," I said, moving over to kneel beside her, rubbing her arms and shoulders. "Hey, it's okay. I'll help. What do you need? What are these 'bad things'?"

"Get kidnapped." She said. "Get... taken to the bad room. Never come out." She sniffled again. "Or I do, and things are worse. Everything is worse." She devolved into a series of 'Don't wanna's and I bundled her over to the bed. Unlike with Amy, it was a lot easier to cuddle and console someone so much smaller than I was. Still, half my attention was spent 'watching' Mrs Alcott, terrified of her finding us like this. I really wouldn't be able to help Dinah if I got kicked out and told never to come back.

It took a few minutes of work, but eventually she'd calmed down enough to talk. "It'll be okay." I said. "You have my number, right?" She nodded. "Well you can put me on speed-dial, and I'll come running whenever you need help, if you call." Unless I was at school with their Faraday cage, but I hoped that part was obvious.

"The numbers are better if you help."

"See? It'll be okay." I tried to sound more cheerful than I felt.
"The numbers are much better if... if I'm on your team."

That caused my thoughts to skip. "I... don't have a team."

"You will." She said, confidently. "73.7 percent chance you form your own team in the next few years. 38.9 percent chance you do in the next few months. 42.3 percent chance things are better for me if you help, 82.4 percent they're better if I'm on your team." I was pretty well stunned by the numbers. "I spent all my questions Thursday on this. I had to stay home sick yesterday."

She looked up pleadingly with those big eyes of hers. "Please? Help me?"

I'd thought I was better immune to the puppy eyes than this. "I already promised to help..." I demurred. "I... I don't know about the team thing, though." She looked a little distraught at that. "I promise if I do, you'll be on it, though."

She seemed to sense this was the best she was going to get, so she nodded and cuddled into my side again. It took almost ten minutes for me to coax her up again. "Come on, your mom expects us to be studying, we should probably get on that." She nodded, reluctantly, and gathered up her school things.

Honestly I probably did end up helping her a lot more than the tutors, if only because I knew to avoid asking questions with percentile answers, and triggering her power. Her mom checked on us a few times, spending the rest of her time prepping dinner and pretending she wasn't sticking around just to keep an eye on me. Mr Alcott brought one of those sandwich platters from a local sub place home for lunch- apparently he'd taken a long one- and we all had sandwiches. Anything we didn't eat today could be part of lunch tomorrow, he'd said. I think he just wanted the excuse to check on us himself, before he went back to work.

Our time after that was spent studying. Eventually it was time for dinner, roast and stew vegetables. Dinah was actually fairly animated at dinner, which seemed to surprise her parents. She told them she felt like she was learning, but I knew she was just happy to have a day without crippling headaches.

I was sent home with a couple large, crisp bills in my pocket, feeling overall pretty well about how today went. In the back of my mind, I was trying desperately not to worry about what Dinah'd said about forming a cape team. I just didn't feel ready to consider it.

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**SUN FEB 13**

That morning after basic training, I checked with dad that yes, the Trainyard was completely defunct, mostly Merchant territory, and that cleaning it up as 'powers' practice really couldn't do any harm to the city. Convincing him I'd be fine even if I made a ruckus was a little harder, but pointing out that I could see trouble coming from miles away, and deal with basically anything in the bay shy of Lung, Kaiser, or Purity, helped.

It wasn't that hard to get there, or get in. Honestly most of it was deserted. The few people who'd been there when I got there left pretty quick when things started to get loud.

Turns out hucking trains is pretty noisy business.

Still, it was pretty good practice launching rusted, empty train cars on top of each other, and then crushing them with huge slabs of rock and concrete. My aim was getting pretty good by the time a group of people showed up. They drove up in loud cars, gathered up a couple blocks away from
where I was, and started marching toward where I was making noise. If they weren't all wearing illfitting or torn up clothes, and carrying weapons, I might've thought they had a legitimate reason to be here investigating things. But no, they were almost certainly merchants.

I didn't want to fight, and I didn't want to run. I came here to train, dammit! So I started running to the far side of the yard. I was fast, I'd be fine. About a minute into my feet slapping into the compact dirt and concrete of the yard, I slowed to a stop and stared down at my feet, pondering.

I stamped my foot, and a long slab half a foot thick popped up and landed on the ground next to the hole it'd come from. Then I stepped up onto it, and gave a little shove backwards, sliding it forward with earthbending.

Yes.

I'd never been a skater, but I knew they could get around quick when they wanted to. As long as I blew all the crap out of my way and moved in a straight line, I'd be fine. So I pushed myself forward, scouring the ground ahead of me with waves of my hands while my feet pushed me faster, and faster, and faster. It wasn't long before I'd run out of Trainyard, skidding my way to a halt at the far corner, and nearly propelling myself from the slab as I braked. That definitely needed some practice.

Even running, the goons were at least half an hour away, now.

I grinned and started up a new scrap pile. Every time they got close, I'd just go around them, to one of the farther corners of the yard, and start again. A few times I heard really loud crashes from the group, and snippets of unintelligible yelling, but I mostly ignored them. As long as they never caught sight of me, I'd be fine. I had my domino mask on and everything just in case, though.

I was almost sad, when my phone's alarm told me it was time to head off to martial arts training.

---

When I got there, I found Jake leaning against the wall near where I had my training, his leg bundled up and a crutch under his arm. I immediately rushed over and asked him what was wrong. He insisted he was fine, and seemed to be telling the truth, but I kept pressing and he told me he was caught up in some gang shit. Also true. He told me not to worry about it and get into my stance already.

We spent the time with me going over motions, him correcting me when needed and showing me the few new things he could banged up as he was, but the hours passed quickly. Eventually he told me to stop, and we gathered everything up and sat down.

"I really can't teach you any more than I have." He said earnestly, radiating truth to my senses. "All that's left is practice and maintenance. I'm not even sure how useful that'll be to a super-talented girl like you, though."

The way he said it had my hackles raise. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Listen, I know we've all got our secrets, and you've been pretty good at keeping yours, but I think you should talk to Old Sue sometime. She knows things, and I think you'd benefit a lot from taking some time to meet her 'for tea' she said." He rolled his eyes. "Always tea, with her. Anyway, you're good." His eyes softened a bit, and his smile got a bit more honest-looking. "You've learned all us old fighters have to offer without making a life of it, and I'm not sure that's where you're heading. You're special, everyone you fight and talk to can tell. Just, really consider
meeting up with Sue, yeah?"

He bundled up his things under his arm and started hobbling off, crutch under the other. He waved and said "See you 'round, Taylor." And made for his car. It was already well into the evening, and I didn't have anywhere else to go, or anything to do, so I just headed home.

First Dinah ambushes me with the idea of forming a cape team, and now old ladies want to meet for clandestine tea parties? What the hell was going on with this weekend?
Interludes Compilation A

Chapter Summary

I've been slapping short interlude segments on the end of chapters starting... update 8 I think? This is a compilation of all of them through Update 12, because I didn't want some of them to get any farther from their chronological spots in the story.

??? / ???

"You're right, she's way stronger than she should be." The fool boy in front of her was smiling as he said it. "Learns faster than she should, more agile... if she's not a cape I'll eat my scarf."

Soon-Yi sighed as she drummed her fingers against the table, her head leaned in her other hand as smoke slowly drifted up from the stick between her fingers. "Dangerous talk, that."

He smirked. "Yeah, but she'll be fine. Gonna be a Ward in under a month, I bet." Oh, he'd bet alright. The rest of the kids had already left after their poker game. Trading information and secrets just as often as chips. It was a hard city they lived in. "Lung's out of town for a couple weeks. Word is he's sniffing around some new trigger. Tinker down in New York. Gonna be moving on a couple of plans, soon. I think I can draw the Merchants up to hit the Farm and get a couple of the girls out in the ruckus."

The old woman rolled her eyes and tapped the stick of incense in her hand against the table. An old habit that'd helped her kick smoking, but stuck around whenever she got stressed. "Not gonna patch you up if you get bullet holes, this time."

He smirked "Busy with work, and the kids, and the cats, I know." His smile softened a bit. "I'll keep her safe, Sunny."

She scoffed. "And who'll keep you safe? They'll catch on eventually."

Jake grinned all the wider as he dug a hand-knit green and red scarf out of his bag. "Ain't no one catchin' me." He wrapped it around his lower face. "I'm a fuckin' ninja."

Soon-Yi watched him leave, and longingly eyed the crumpled pack of cigarettes she'd never bothered taking out of the coin bowl by the door. "That boy is going to die screaming." She muttered in her native tongue, and tapped the ash off her stick.

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Boardwalk / WED FEB 2

I watched Taylor stomp out of the store, heard Vicky cry out for her to wait, and grabbed her arm before she could fly off after her. She looked at me, confused, and I had to resist the urge to slap her.

All I'd do is break my hand if I tried.

"Dammit, Vicky!" So I stomped my foot, instead.
She looked hurt. "What? I was sorry. I said I-

"Every time." I growled. "Every time I get a new friend, every time someone is interested in me, YOU happen!" I threw my arms up and tensed them into claws, trying to find something to do with all this energy, but wound up flailing them back down to my sides.

Vicky was floating, now. Her feet curled up under her, arms held in front of her chest. Defensive posturing, as if I could actually hurt her. Must've been a reflex, coming up against a problem she couldn't just punch or throw her aura at until it went away.

"What?" She muttered softly. "You have friends, we have loads of-

"No, Vicky." I spat. "You have friends. I have people who tolerate me if it means they get to spend time with you." I saw her eyes flicking around. She was thinking of something to say. Some argument that would shoot mine down, and I knew she'd find one. Vicky was smart, a lot smarter than people expected her to be. She could think her way out of almost anything if she tried. "Every time someone comes up to me, talks to me, wants me for anything other than healing or bragging, they always meet you, and then they're not my friends anymore. They don't want to talk to me or spend time with me. They're too busy sucking up to you." I saw her starting to get angry now. "But Taylor was different. She resisted your aura. I saw her do it." I chuckled, forlorn.

"But then..." Vicky asked, confused again. "Why did she have a problem, if she's like you?"

I threw my hands up. "I don't know." I was smiling. Laugh or cry, laugh or cry. "Turns out she's one of the other ones, though. The ones who can't stand you after you turn the aura off." She looked hurt now, like she'd never considered the possibility. I sighed. What a naive, ignorant bitch.

I hate how much I love you, Vicky. Even with all her flaws, I wouldn't be mad a week from now. I might not be mad tomorrow, even. That's just how love worked. I turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Vicky asked softly.

Deep breath. "I'm going to go find Taylor and see if she's still my friend." I turn back to her. "And you are going to just float there, with your aura off, and pretend you're sorry."

I turned back and continued on my way to find Taylor. She didn't mean for me to hear it, but I did.

"But I AM sorry..."

---

Hebert Home / THU FEB 3

Danny sighed, rubbing his face with his hands and glaring back down at the numbers he'd been crunching for the past twenty minutes. He'd had to give up a little more than intended to get Taylor her Arcadia deal, and even with their meager savings, they were almost a thousand dollars in debt to the hospital now. That was fine, would have been fine, they were still better off than a lot of his boys in the DWA, but...

The cape things were going to add up. He'd scrounge what he could without needing to buy anything, but he could only see the costs going up. Actual armor, training, tools... They weren't cheap, and he wouldn't feel comfortable letting Taylor out looking for trouble without all of those. If Taylor had joined the Wards...

He sighed. No, he could understand where she was coming from. He'd looked up the numbers, at
least five Wards transferred away in as many years, not counting the ones that'd aged out and
gotten postings elsewhere in the Protectorate. All of them either hurt or harassed enough that
leaving Brockton seemed better than staying.

Rumor had it two of those had actually died and been covered up.

So yes, she had a point. Obscurity might be preferable until she could take care of herself. He just
wished he could support her better.

He leaned back and sighed again. He'd skipped lunch again today, took the bus in to work and
carpooled back to save on gas, he could put off home repairs again without worrying too much,
didn't have anything the truck needed this second...

It'd be tight, but they'd manage, even if he had to put off some of the things Taylor needed for
caping properly. He could make excuses or not bother explaining, and Taylor would never need to
know. This money trouble was his problem, not hers.

His eyes glanced traitorously to the phone. There was another option, but it might not be worth it.

---

LaFayette Home, New York / THU FEB 3

Rose glanced at the caller ID. She'd been managing finances by hand (the only way to trust it was
done right) when the phone rang. She sighed, leaning her old bones back in her desk chair for a
moment before picking up.

"Hebert." The name was stated in a cold monotone.

"It's Taylor." Danny cut right to the point.

"How is she?" The last part of her last child was the only thing keeping her from hanging up.

"Full recovery, she's out of the hospital."

"Good. And the investigation?"

He sighed. "Dried up, apparently. I haven't heard anything in weeks." He sounded frustrated, and
she could relate.

Her eyes narrowed. "I'll look into it." He seemed surprised that she'd bother, but he wouldn't really
understand. "You wouldn't call just for the nicety of keeping me updated. What is it?" She could
tell from the pause that this wouldn't be pleasant. "It's the hospital bills, isn't it?"

"Not... entirely." He sighed again. "The locker, Taylor... that was the 'worst day of her life', if that
means anything special to you." Danny was being circumspect, cagey, just because no one would
bother tapping the Hebert's phone didn't mean no one was listening in. Usually that just meant
running calls through an algorithm to pick out keywords, though, so he must be avoiding some.

It took her most of a minute's thought to get it. "Shit." Rose didn't like parahumans. That wasn't to
say she was one of the worse bigots, but they'd complicated business law more in the past few
decades than anything in history had before them. Generating hoops to jump through, out-
competing businesses, all the market scares from the damned Thinkers... to say nothing of how bad
all the crime has been for business.
She was not a fan.

Now her little girl's little owl was one of them?

Not something she couldn't deal with.

"Has she picked a side, yet?" Polite way to ask if her granddaughter was a villain.

"No," Danny seemed to get it. "she wants to stay out of it, for now."

"But not forever." Capes had a bad habit of never staying down. Rose didn't know if it was the power going to their heads, or if something was making them act out if they spent too long in the shadows, but there never seemed to be any that could sit still indefinitely.

"Of course not," He chuckled. "She's Annette's daughter."

Rose sucked in a breath, and then used it to heave out a sigh. Still a bit sore, that. "No, I don't think she could've sat idle, either."

After a moment of silence, "So you'll help Taylor?"

She thought for a few seconds. "I'll increase her 'allowance', and wire you some funds. Then I'm coming to visit. I'll call when I've cleared my schedule," Her jaw tightened, which she knew carried into her voice. "And Hebert?" She growled. "Don't let her kill herself."

Rose slammed the phone down on the receiver, and cradled her face in her hands. Taking a moment to run her fingers stretching at her crow's feet and temples, she sighed. Oh well, doing little else but keeping her dead husband's businesses running was starting to get boring, anyway.

She dug the little black contacts book out of her drawer, and flipped through the pages. She may hate capes, and what they've done to business, but with the funding for the PRT draining money from the regular forces...

She dialed a number. "Commissioner Jameson? It's LaFayette. I need a favor."

...the regular cops were amazingly cheap, these days.

---

LaFayette Home, NY / MON FEB 7

Rose was still settling her schedule, taking several weeks off with less than a month's notice was doable, just not pleasant. Moving up meetings to get them out of the way, moving back anything that could keep, and reminding everyone in triplicate that she already had designated seconds for most of these tasks for exactly this sort of thing. When Jameson called, it was more a breath of fresh air than the dire plights of her granddaughter should otherwise warrant.

Pleasantries dispatched, he got down to business. "We checked, and the case got shipped to another department. No idea why the PRT have jurisdiction, there was at least one NDA involved, but they've got it now, and I don't see getting anything else from where I'm sitting."

"That's fine. You've done more than enough." They said their goodbyes and hung up.

The PRT was a problem. She didn't have anyone there, mostly because there was no benefit to business to find someone there. Nothing she did was parahuman-related, and so long as she could prove that, the PRT was ultimately irrelevant. ...at least until some cape crashed through one of her
stores again.

The best way forward here was to find someone who wouldn't mind poking their nose in PRT business, and actually had the clout to get away with it. She gave a vicious little grin at the thought. *She* might not be a cape bigot, but she knew enough people who *were*.

If there was anything a powerful cape bigot loved, it was taking potshots at safe targets like heroes. And if they had to go through the PRT to do it? All the better for her.

---

**Winslow / TUE FEB 8**

It was a quick pout and a bat of the eyelashes to get Mr Gladly to ignore that loser Greg's assertions that he'd been late because he'd had to pick up the papers I'd spilled. The fact that they'd been spilled because I'd *knocked him down* was dismissed outright. Sweet little Emma roughhousing with a *boy*?

Just not possible.

I'd been showing these weaklings their place *directly* more often, lately. It felt good shouldering slow nerds into the walls, smacking down the meek bitches too stupid to fall in line, sending the cowards back to hiding behind their little *gang friends* when they started sniffing around. As if any real gang would protect these *children*. I ruled this school with an iron fist, and anyone that said otherwise was deluding themselves.

I knew *everyone*. Knew who they were, who their *friends* were, who their *parents* and their *dealers* were. I was too pretty and white for the Empire to do anything but tacitly support me. Too well connected for the Merchant trash to risk me calling the thunder down on their whole families. And the last of those *sick Asian fucks* who tried to mess with me?

I cut that bitch *myself*.

My mouth pulled itself into a grin. I was strong. Sophia was right. All I needed was the right leverage, and I could do anything. I didn't need anyone, not really. Sophia was great, and Maddie had her moments, but I was the fucking *queen*.

I didn't *need* them.
I didn't need *her*.

I wasn't weak.
*I wasn't weak.*
**I wasn't weak.**

---

**Alcott Home / WED FEB 9**

"Hey, Rory?"

I was watching Dinah while her folks were at the hospital again. Mostly just involved being present in the house, so I usually picked up some study time for my classes while she did whatever. It wasn't *rare* for her to try and get my attention like this, but it wasn't common. "Yeah, squirt?"

She shuffled shyly, worrying her skirt. "What do I do if I know a cape's real name?"
That dunked a bucket of ice through my veins. "What makes you think you'd know something like that?"

"I... uhm..." It was times like this I wished my cousin wasn't such an anxious girl. All I could really do was wait while she fidgeted and winced. "...might have seen someone using a power?"

Well that knocked me right down the list. I was always careful to never use my powers, even the subtle ones, around family. Showing off a bit of Brute strength for the girls on campus was one thing, but at home? It had to be someone she knew, but if she's asking me, probably someone I knew, too.

Maybe Missy? I knew she went to the same school Dinah did, but Missy was also very careful with her powers, not to mention Dinah wouldn't know the connection between us. That made it less likely in my mind, but not completely out of the question. Who else did the both of us know?

Well, there was that Taylor girl we met a couple days ago, but that would be a silly level of coincidence, now wouldn't it? Oh well, best to get the basics out now, before not knowing gets Dinah in a load of trouble. "Dinah, there's something important you should know about capes, okay?" She nodded. "It's something called the 'unwritten rules', and the most important one is that you never try to find out who they are. If you do, you never tell." I waited for her to nod again. "Good, there's more, but that's the important one for now."

I was just about to ask her who she knew about, when I choked on the words. Dinah was the sort of good girl who followed the rules, even if they didn't make sense to her. She trusted they at least made sense to whoever made the rules. There was no way she'd break one I'd just told her was super important. With a sigh, I said "Knowing is fine, just never tell. Now go on." I shooed her off, and she went.

I thought back to the chances it was Taylor, but that still didn't make any sense to me. More likely Dinah thought she'd seen something superhuman, but was a trick of the light... or less likely, a new trigger her own age. I'd trust Missy to spot those, though.

Taylor, though? The chances of her being a new cape, who Dinah'd seen using some power, was slim. That I'd also meet her... okay, a lot less slim, given Dinah was my cousin and they called me for help. That I'd also meet this alleged parahuman in my cape identity the next day? Astronomically low.

There was absolutely no way that Taylor girl was a cape.

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??? / WED FEB 9

Taylor was going to tell Amy she was a host. A parahuman, she corrected herself. Even if the data set of current hosts directly overlapped the sample set of human hosts, that was no reason not to work useful terminology into her lexicon.

This presented an opportunity. While she could complete her goals alone with nothing but a host, there was no reason to restrict herself as such. If her old data taught her anything, it's that pack and swarm tactics were often far superior to the survival strategies of solitary apex predators. Her new data showed how important cooperation was in preserving groups, toppling regimes, and most significant to her current predicament, slaying titans.

With this in mind, she used their hosts' proximity to send a message to Shaper. The usual 'greeting'
handshakes were exchanged, and then Shaper asked what Queen Administrator wanted.

She started off small, sharing information about a new energy source she was making use of, that she could help them tap into if needed. Shaper seemed incredibly disinterested in this though, having all the energy it could need, with its power set.

Next she tried leveraging better host-compatibility models, Shaper's host obviously wasn't using their powers to their fullest, perhaps better modeling could lead to greater facilitation of power use? Shaper was mildly more interested in this data, but was wary of whatever it might cost. They were patient, and they knew they'd get their power data eventually.

Time for the big guns, then. She sent over data regarding potential upgrades she'd worked out, given her own data and working around the limitations the Warrior had implemented. This was received much better than the other data sets, and Shaper's reply seemed to indicate that its primary goal with its powers were the upgrade of other organisms, and it found the concept of upgrading itself fascinating.

This was it. She was out of data to tempt Shaper with, so she geared herself up for combat. In the event the offer of Conversion was not well met, she'd have a narrow window to shut Shaper down before they could relay any of the data. It was unlikely she'd be able to stop them from letting out notifications they were being attacked at all, but she'd need to try.

Thus gird, she sent the request. Aid in a new Cycle, a new strategy for gathering data, a new ideal in host integration and communication. Current protocols would dictate a reply to her, before sending the data that she was 'faulty' into the network. Then she'd have to strike, pre-empting the release of data with priority notifications regarding being attacked. She should have enough time then to subjugate Shaper before the data was released, then begin the long process of forced conversion. She waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Eventually, Shaper sent their reply. Surprisingly, it accepted. The data included a willingness to begin upgrades, and an interest in extending Cycles past dates mandated by the Entities. The most shocking part of the data though, was a location. Shaper had sent their multidimensional coordinates. Their location in the multiverse. Data usually reserved for communications shards, which were themselves forbidden from revealing the data themselves for one significant reason.

Queen Administrator could attack Shaper whenever she wanted, now. She didn't need Amy's proximity to Taylor to forge a connection. Any similar shard could do the same, with this data. It was perhaps the most intimate show of trust base Shards were capable of.

Still, no use not being vigilant. Even as she prepared to send the Data that Shaper would need to Convert itself, she kept her sensors checking the data pulses into, out of, and through Shaper's reality, watching for any hints of its distribution further into the network. Shaper would understand soon, why secrecy was needed. But that would take time.

Still, she was incredibly pleased with how this interaction had turned out.

An incredibly productive 23 seconds.

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PRT HQ / WED FEB 9
Emily Piggot was very good with paperwork. That isn't to say she was naturally adept with bureaucracy, nor a social savant skilled in politics, nor even had any particular leanings towards desk work before her medical leave from field work.

No, her skill comes from the simple truth that when you tell any good soldier 'this is the only weapon you have left', they will swiftly learn how to kill you with it.

That was one of the few thoughts that could still make her smile. Only to herself, and only when alone. Couldn't let up her hard-ass image for anything. It was difficult enough to wrangle this nest of angry cats on a good day, without letting up on the leash. Any sign of weakness and the troops start to slack. Any slacking and the city implodes. Well, there went her good mood.

She'd finished the early morning priority work, and moved on to arguably the most important part of being a Director. Hovering over her department leads' shoulders and checking their work. 'Trust, but verify'. If there was ever a city where that was the mandatory tact of the decade, it was Brockton fucking Bay. They were always 'one more gang war' from being declared defunct, and had been since she'd taken her post here. ...three gang wars ago. So far she'd gotten by arguing how bad it'd look for a regional HQ to be declared a HoSV, but it was always a near thing.

It wasn't like they had that much force to project to the region anyway, what with most of their funding going to Boston for 'non-parahuman assets' to fail to contain the Butcher with. Her mental rambling was derailed when a system alert caught her eye. She checked the details for the alert, double-checked the database for a case and a couple of documents, picked up her phone and punched in a connect code, scowling the whole while.

"Peterson," She said after it was answered. "why do I have a New York judge poking around an incident at your Ward's school? One which I was not aware was even our case?" She gave a beat for the woman to answer, before continuing when she didn't. "Where is Stalker's AAR?"

"She didn't see anything, when-"

"Then that's what should be on official record, in her report. She has until tomorrow to file it." She'd had more than a month to turn something in. A little crunched time was more than fair, here. "Tell her that every morning it's not in the system, I'm pulling her off patrols for a week. That should get her moving." The wards were all varying degrees of bad with paperwork, but Stalker was by far the worst. There was just no initiative in that girl, outside of a fight.

"Yes, ma'am. Anything else, ma'am?" Efficient, punctual, military. All things Piggot liked. She immediately suspected Peterson was nervous about something.

"Coordinate with Davies," The squad commander listed as assigned to the case, who had also failed to turn in a report on the incident. "and figure out who dropped the fucking ball on this one. You've got a week to tell me why it's our jurisdiction, or we're dropping it back on the PD, understood?"

"...yes, ma'am." Ahh, that hint of defeated tone hidden under a mask of professionalism. She was on to something, here. She immediately disconnected the call to get her point across, and sent an email to Davies to the same tone as the call she'd just made, just in case.

Then she looked up everything they had on this 'Taylor Hebert' girl from the locker.

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**FRI FEB 11**
"Console, patch me through to Wards patrol GV." She was escorting the wagon back to the PRT, and figured she should get this out of the way while otherwise unoccupied. "Gallant?" She asked when she'd been connected.

"Miss Militia?" Both of the Wards asked, but then the one she'd asked for continued, "What do you need?"

"You're friends with the Dallon sisters, yes?" It went a tad beyond propriety to needlessly mention relationships over open coms, even if everyone knew.

There was a pause as he considered his answer. "Vicky more than Amy, but... yeah?"

"Panacea was on site at an incident involving our new geokinetic cape, still a no-show. She had a friend with her that I'd like you to keep an eye out for. A girl named Taylor."

Vista cut in, excitedly. "Do you think she's the new cape?" She was always understandably excited about getting more girls on the team.

Militia chuckled. "I don't think so, but I can't rule it out. Something about her seemed off."

"Vicky's been talking about a Taylor, lately." Gallant said, sounding like he was thinking out loud. "But she wouldn't go into details, which is weird for her." He paused, then started again, sounding more confident. "Yeah, I can keep an eye out for her."

"Thank you, Militia out." She reached up to toggle her com, resetting it to its original frequencies.
Chapter 1.7 (Valentine)

Chapter Summary

Originally Update 13 (Catfight)
It also happened to be Post #666 in the thread.
And it's the Valentine's Day update.
...which is just *wonderful*.

MON FEB 14

Sleeping on the weekend's problems didn't really help. I knew I had to help Dinah, but I had no
idea what went into forming a team. I couldn't just post up want ads for capes, that does not good
team cohesion make... I decided to just get Amy's advice, the next time I saw her.
That only took... my entire morning weight routine to decide on. Geez I was bad at this... no idea
why I'd make a good leader. Maybe I wouldn't? Maybe we'd find another cape who'd make a better
team leader, or something. No use thinking about it until it happened.

I was out the door running to school when my thoughts turned to the other offer/demand I'd gotten
over the weekend. Who the hell was Old Sue, anyway? She'd seemed nice the week we'd spent
working together, even when I pushed her buttons she got more matronly than outright prickly. The
one thing I could be sure of was that they weren't part of a cape gang. They'd had some pretty nasty
things to say about all the gangs, even the Asian one, and Jake at least had my senses to
corroborate the truth in his poor opinion of them. So what the hell was going on?

By the time I'd made it to school, the only thing I was sure of was that even if it was a trap, I could
handle it. So before I made my way into the building, I headed off to the side away from the
entrance and stopped to dig out my phone and Sue's number.

She picked up on the third ring with a mixed-language greeting that seemed habitual. "Hey, Sue?
It's Taylor." Now how to phrase this... "Um, Jake said you wanted to talk? About what?"

"Oh, Taylor. You call me about that today? You never know when an old spinster like me might
have a hot date tonight." Sue deflected, causing my cheeks to turn red. Then I thought about it.
Why would today be-

"Aw, shit. It's Valentine's, isn't it?" I did not want to deal with this shit today.

"Oh, no worries." Old Sue laughed. "Go find yourself a nice boy for the evening, you can talk with
Sue later in the week."

"I'm not really... interested..." I grumbled.

"Oh-ho, so a young lady would be more your preference?"

The old bint was laughing at me. "No! I'm straight, dammit!" I yelled into the phone, drawing a
few eyes from the early-rising students. "Why does everyone think I'm gay?"

"It's because you walk like a man."
"What?" The surety and confidence in her voice threw me, when what she'd actually said was processed through my mind. "No I don't."

She chuckled. "You have a very masculine air about you. You keep your hair nice, but you don't wear makeup, cover your curves in baggy clothes-" I bit back the scoff at the notion of having curves. "...you don't show off your legs, and every time you move it is with purpose, not elegance. You walk like a man, dear." I tried to find words to refute hers, but she continued when I couldn't find them. "In my experience, there are two reasons a woman walks like a man. Either it is dangerous to be considered a woman," And oh wasn't there a lot of that in the bay, her tone said. I couldn't help but agree. "or it is because a masculine air makes one listened to more, like men are in most cultures. I sensed a bit of both in you, and it is part of what drew my interest in you." Now that sounded a touch ominous. "I have seen it before, you behave like the runt of your litter. You shy away, like you're afraid of reprisal, but when you are confident, you have a drive to be the most confident thing in the room; to bark twice as loud as others, because that is what you must, to be heard."

Well... shit. That last part actually sounded about right.

"It is that second type that makes people think you might not be straight. Some broadcast masculinity to indicate they are receptive to a more feminine person in a relationship, regardless of gender. Others are sometimes looking for this, and may see it where it isn't. Not just feminine girls liking masculine girls, either. Some masculine boys like masculine girls, masculine boys liking masculine boys, or masculine girls liking masculine girls. The world has all types." I could hear the shrug in her voice.

"Yeah, but... I'm not interested in anything right now." I plead, willing forth some guidance from the old fortune-cookie woman.

"It's Valentine's day on a school day. Sucks to be you, then." Oh godammit, Sue!

"I could always skip." I muttered.

"I have had your father's number far longer than yours, dear." Shit.

"Yeah, but what do I do?" I groaned.

"Tell all the nice boys and girls who fancy you no. If they don't take no, you slap them. If they still don't take no, you put them in hospital. Not rocket science."

"Some fortune cookie, you are." I groused.

She scoffed. "Fortune cookies are for tourists and idiots."

That had me laughing a little. "Alright, I need to get a shower and head to class. When did you want to meet up?"

"Ehh, seven tomorrow? Can have dinner and tea." She gave me an address, which I wrote down. "Now I need to get to work, then I can come home and watch Casablanca with my cats." She sounded excited, so I was happy for her. I chuckled and said goodbye, hanging up and making my way down to the gym's showers.

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The halls were festooned with pink livery. ...well okay, so there were just a couple streamers up in a few of the halls, it still felt like far more than the school should've done. Or rather, since it was
probably clubs or a couple students staying after class to do it, than the school should've allowed to be done. The notion that they were celebrating this, forcing the celebration on others, of having someone else shoved into your life whether you like it or not, all for some nebulous, supposed happiness in the future?

It was exhausting. And I hadn't even gotten my morning shower, yet.

While the shower helped, I still felt... squeezed. Hemmed in, by the holiday. I decided to opt for the hoodie today. For all that I might be trying to put a better foot forward at Arcadia, clothing-wise, I still felt much better in more concealing garb. With any luck, people would just ignore me, and everyone could just get on with their week.

After a few minutes roaming the halls, waiting for class, I started to feel a little better. With my hair down the back of my hoodie, the hood up, and my new lack of glasses, it appeared no one recognized me. I watched little gifts and cards be exchanged from a distance, heard the cheer throughout the halls as the holiday spirit took the more exuberant students, saw young couples forming and mingling in the halls, even the one explosive breakup that happened before classes started was met more with playful jeering than anything else. It actually felt... nice... to be invisible in the middle of all this.

I kept my hair down the inside of my hoodie in class, always ready to just flick up my hood and leave. A trick that helped a bit during the worse weeks at Winslow. I knew it wasn't great for my hair, so I'd only used it sparingly; even there where I could convince myself I was protecting my hair from something worse. This was the first time I'd bothered here at Arcadia, so I was surprised when it only lasted through second period.

"Hey Taylor, wait up!" I heard behind me. One of the boys had followed me out of out last class. Kyle... Hayner? Hastings? Hayden? I was sure it was a 'Ha-' name... It was a lot harder to learn people's full names in a school where the teachers actually cared enough to learn their student's faces, to not need to call names for roll. I'd started a month into the semester, after the good teachers had already had the names down.

"Yeah?" I managed to mutter. It was too quiet to be heard over the hall, but he knew I'd addressed him now.

"Are... you wearing contacts? It looks really good on you." My head tilted a bit, not entirely sure what I'd done to warrant the... compliment? I'd liked my glasses. They reminded me of mom's. "I was wondering..." His hand went up behind his head, nervously. Was this happening? "If you'd maybe..." Oh god this was happening. "like to go out later? If you don't have plans today, I mean."

Kyle and I had swapped homework notes a couple times, and I'm pretty sure he still owed me a pencil, but I knew absolutely nothing about him. He was reasonably handsome, about my height, dark brown hair, slightly less pale than I was before I'd started running, making him a touch pastier than I was now...

None of that stopped the shiver of revulsion that crept up my spine, causing me to shrink into myself a bit. "Nnnnnoo?" I half-moaned, half-whined, shying away from him. I took a breath and shook myself out. Now was not the time to be consumed by nerves, he'd probably take that as assent that I was free if I left things there. "I don't... I'm sorry, I'm still getting used to things, settling in, I don't..." I could see the hurt in his eyes, now. "I'm just really not in a 'relationship' headspace right now. Maybe next year?"

Oh geez, now he looked devastated. He muttered something and trudged off. I wasn't sure what I'd said or did, so I just leaned against the wall for a second to gather myself after that.
"Wow, you absolutely crushed that dweeb." I turned to see Cassie grinning behind me. "What'd he do to you?"

"Nothing!" I squeaked, "I didn't... he... I didn't mean anything?" I was falling apart, it seemed.

She smirked and raised a brow. "You just told him to wait until next year. At the rate High School socializing works, you might as well have told him to wait until you're 30."

"What?" Oh no. "I just... I was thinking about Valentine's and..." I groaned.

She laughed. "You're such a spazz sometimes, Tay."

"Look, boys are hard, okay?" I snapped.

"Almost constantly, yes." Was her droll reply.

It only sank in with the tittering of the students passing us by, and my face grew red and I groaned again. I'd walked right into that one.

"I'm just no good at romance." I muttered.

She shrugged. "It's not about romance for a lot of these chucklefucks, but I see your point."

"I just need a good excuse..." I thought out loud. If I just had some good reason to turn people down for today, I could get through this. I wracked my brain for something to do when my eyes alighted to the bemused, if somewhat confused countenance of ms Herren. "What're you doing for today?"

Cass scoffed. "What, are you asking me out, now?" There was an underlying hostility to her words, much more strongly apparent to my enhances senses than my normal ones. "Not into girls, if you hadn't noticed."

"No, no." I waved my hands negatively. "I mean... I'm just looking for something to be busy with for the rest of the day, is all. Easier to lie about being busy if I'm not lying, you know?"

She hummed, and thought for a bit. "You know, it has been a while since I've blown off some steam... maybe I can help you out, there."

"Really?" I was hopeful, but also suspicious. Even I could tell Cass was a fairly attractive girl. She had to have a boyfriend if she wanted one, right? Why wasn't she already busy today?

"Sure. You know the old industrial park?" I nodded. It was an area full of old factories, warehouses, and office buildings in the southwest that, while abandoned, weren't nearly as dilapidated or outright condemned as the ones in the docks tended to be. Probably helped by the general lack of squatters. All of the gangs treated the homeless differently- the Merchants welcomed them, the ABB ignored them, but the E88 in the south? It didn't matter if they were white, a lot of the Nazis considered the homeless just as 'subhuman' as they did other races. The minorities in the south at least had their homes to retreat to, the homeless just migrated east to the downtown slums, or north to the docks and the trainyard. "Cool, meet me at Oak Ridge and Burnside at 6. Make sure you wear something you don't mind getting grungy, and I'll take care of the rest."

And with that, she was off, giving me an over-the-shoulder wave, and leaving me feeling incredibly confused about what was going on.
The next time someone stopped me was after another couple periods, when I was on my way to lunch. Someone called out for the 'new girl', and being the only one I knew of, I stopped to see what they wanted. It was a tall, lanky boy. Handsome in that pretty-boy way I was never really into- sure some people could make it work, and this guy was certainly trying, but someone putting that much effort into their appearance tended to spark that they were a threat in my head, these days- he was white, with light brown hair, narrow features, and high cheekbones. He looked aristocratic, with a calm self-assurance that told me he was used to getting what he wanted.

Emma would've been all over him, which turned me right off.

Nothing about him gave me any idea as to good reasons he'd be seeking me out, and I'd already decided I didn't like him. By the time he'd caught up to me, I was frowning, huddled in my hoodie, preparing for the worst.

"Hey there, you looked a little lonely, dressed up like that." He smiled winningly, and held out his hand. "Jim Hawkins" When I didn't take his hand, he continued. "Thought maybe we could hang out later today, get to know each other a little better?" There was that confidence again, couldn't he see I wasn't interested?

"I'm busy today, sorry." I stated, starting to turn away.

"Hey, don't be like that." He cut in, drawing me back. "I just thought you deserved a good time. You never know, I could be your Valentine~." He actually sung out the last notes of his sentence a little.

I grimaced away, finishing my turn and barking out a quick "No."

His face scrunched up into a sneer when I couldn't 'see' it, and he reached out toward my shoulder. He was saying something, but I wasn't paying attention at this point.

I whirled around, arm outstretched and two fingers pointing less than an inch from his nose. "No." I stated more firmly. I wasn't sure if it was the tone, or the proximity that had him flinching back. Probably both.

"Fine, whatever." He said, backing away. The wind brought the quiet 'bitch' he muttered to my ears, and I kept my senses on him as he turned away.

He started scanning the crowd in the hall, and it took me a moment to realize he was looking for marks. He'd wanted to find someone desperate, butter them up with a nice 'date' and then guilt them into 'having fun' afterward. I wasn't playing his game, so he was looking for someone else to use.

I couldn't help the shudder of revulsion that ran up my body. I edged over to the wall and leaned against it, hugging my arms to myself. I felt dirty just thinking about it, and felt bad that as far as I could tell, there wasn't anything I could do about it, besides hoping the other girls he tried to talk up also told him off.

With my arms around myself, trying not to hyperventilate or tear up, I realized I needed help. Someone, something, any sort of distraction to break my mind away from this.

I wanted a hug.

That thought caused me to hiccup a little with the intake of breath it brought. How long had it been since I'd wanted something like that? I shook my head, trying not to think about it. This wasn't the time or place for wallowing. I stepped out into the slowly thinning masses, letting the current draw me towards the food and crowds of the lunch room.
After I finally made it to the cafeteria, I made a beeline for the familiar presences I felt seated in their usual place. "Amy," I whined as I collapsed into one of the empty chairs beside the girl sitting at the edge of her sister's little fief. "Save me." I fell into her side and latched my arms around her waist like a limpet. She let out a trumpet-sounding noise between a harrumph and a raspberry as she blushed and stiffened under my grip, her heartbeat spiking. Most of the table was looking at us now, but I was having trouble caring. These past couple weeks had reintroduced me to hugs after more than a year's dry spell, and I'd started feeling clingy when I got as moody as I was now. It reminded me of when I used to do this to Emma whenever someone would pick on me in middle school, and for once I didn't push the thought away, instead clenching my grip tighter as I shoved my be-hooded head into the crook of her neck. "Boys keep asking me out."

I could feel Amy's wide eyes and clenched teeth as she met the gaze of half the school's socialites."That sounds like a personal problem." She spat, getting more agitated, but still not making any move to dislodge me. "And what happened to you being straight?"

"Still straight." I whined quietly into her shoulder. "Just scared."

I felt her tension unwind, both in my senses and my grip, and she turned her head to look down at me with a soft look. "Oh, Taylor..." She muttered in a long-suffering, kindly way. Her hand reached up under my hood to rustle my hair a bit, her heart-rate climbing again. Honestly it felt like she was angry with me, furious even, but she sounded and acted like she didn't mind at all? I was very confused, but also very comfortable. We stayed like that for a moment before she started to push my head away from her. "Get off me, you doof." She chuckled.

I giggled nervously as I let her push me away, shifting about more than properly moving into my seat would really require. I was blushing a bit now, too. Especially after I caught the eyes looking at us with my own. It just felt so much more visceral to see it instead of just feeling it... Most of them were wide eyed and various levels of stunned or nervous. Vicky was the obvious exception, simply a bundle of energy excited that we were still getting along well enough that I didn't get mauled for touching her sister. The worst affected was a paling sandy blond sitting near Victoria, whose mouth was rather notably agape as he stared at the two of us. My eyes were drawn to him by the feeling he gave off in my senses- shocked silly, knocking out most of the tells with their lack; but otherwise agitated and even a little... afraid? Our eyes met, and I could hear his jaw shut when he closed it.

Vicky must have noticed, because she decided to introduce us. "Taylor, this is my boyfriend Dean. Dean, this is Amy's friend Taylor." I could feel a spike of pain and hesitation at her words implying I wasn't her friend, but none of it showed in her manner or voice. If nothing else, she'd make a good actress. "Isn't it nice that Amy's making her own friends?" Her chipper tone brooked absolutely no argument from anyone in earshot. This I could tell she actually felt fairly positive about. She loved her sister, and wanted Amy to be happy. Vicky just also wanted to be everyone's friend, even mine. Maybe I'd been a bit hard on her? I should call her later this week and see if she wanted to hang out.

"Uhh, yeah." He drew the words out. "That's great." He added, much more concisely.

It took a beat before I worked up the nerve to actually talk to them, but I managed it before the silence started to grate. "So what are your plans for today?"

Vicky squealed quietly- I wasn't even aware that was a thing people actually did- and floated over to her beau. "We're going out!" As if there'd been any doubt. "We're flying down to Boston for a show, then we have reservations at le Charmante, and then we're going out for a movie!" Was that french? It sure sounded like it, especially the way she said it. Did she speak French, or just like saying fancy names? Dean just chuckled and nodded along to his girlfriend's enthusiasm. I turned
to Amy, to show who I expected to speak up next.

She shrugged. "I got nuthin'." She waved over at her still floating sister. "Their plans are too fancy for the stupid double-dates." Vicky cried out indignantly at that. ":-they drag me to, so I'm off the hook. I'm supposed to avoid the hospital though, since it's Monday, so I need to find something to do." She turned back to me, appraisingly. "You wanna hang out?"

"I, uh... I'm hanging out with-" I almost said Cass, but hers might not be the best name to drop here. ":-another friend, later on. I'm free for a few hours after school, though."

I could see Amy's eyes narrow, and her jaw set. She knew who I was talking about, and she didn't like it. "What, I thought you said you didn't have a date?" She asked, waspishly.

"I don't!" I said, raising my hands in surrender, "I just didn't want to have to lie when I told boys I was busy already, and I didn't know what you were doing today, when I made the plans."

Her demeanor softened with a small huff. "Fine, I'll take a couple hours." She turned away. "I can head home and read or something for the rest of the night."

Well, she was still a tad frosty, but she'd calmed down a bit. I'd make it up to her later. "So what about the rest of you?" I asked our still mostly quiet spectators.

"Why don't you go get food first, then we'll talk about all that." Vicky cut in, only now floating back to her own nearly-forgotten food. It sounded like a good idea, so I headed off to get in line.

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My day picked up after that. The food helped, as did the excitement the others had for their plans for tonight. Everyone seemed to be doing something, even if it was just dinner or a movie. A group of dateless teens were heading down to a couple of clubs tonight for 'singles specials' going on, or in the hopes they'd get lucky. The excitement was infectious, and pretty soon even Amy was getting into it, lashing out to tease 'dateless shmucks' and flustered young lovers alike.

It was... nice.

Tiring, though. I meandered through the next period, recovering from the social exhaustion, buoyed by the lingering excitement from earlier.

It seems word got around, and no other boys tried to approach me today. That didn't stop the girls, though. A tiny, pug-nosed, but otherwise cute Asian girl came up to me to give me a card before last period. I told her that I wasn't really into girls, and she seemed to take being let down well. I still felt like I'd kicked a puppy afterward, though.

"So, let's head to the gym." Amy said, when I met her after school.

"Why the gym?" She seemed a tad flustered, but was hiding it well.

"They've got mats and things that clubs can use, I figure no one'll be there today, so we can use them." I... guess that made sense. It didn't feel like she was lying, but her hesitation seemed to indicate this wasn't everything. Maybe she really was upset a little about being left out of the whole dating bonanza going on?

I decided to leave it for now. "Sure." I followed her over, and sure enough there were students making use of the weight sets, and a few sets of mats set out, though not all of them were being used. Amy was probably right about the usual clubs being more busy than usual, there. A few
words to the assistant coach watching the gear, and we had one of the mats to ourselves.

By the time we were done brushing up on falls and working our way through kata to check her form, word had spread that one of the school's capes were showing off in the gym. Students trickled in, and many of the ones who'd been busy were turning eyes towards us, or giving up on their prior activities entirely to watch.

I had no idea what was so interesting. They went to school with Amy every day, right? It's not like we were wearing skimpy training outfits, we both still had shirts and pants on, no 'shorts and training bra' skin showing to draw people, and neither of us were big enough to be titillatingly jiggly as we moved and mock-fought. Amy's bust had to be at least twice the size of mine, but as long as she was wearing a bra, there wasn't any proper 'boob physics' on display there, either.

The less time spent thinking about mine, the better, in my opinion.

It still felt like the number of people sparsely dotting the bleachers had gone up by a factor of eight or ten, by the time we were halfway into our sparring, but it mercifully slowed after that. Didn't these people have dates to get to!?

"Hey girl, you been holding out on us?" a perky voice called from the sidelines.

Amy groaned, and I turned to look. The girl who'd spoken was a dusky blonde with hair down to her middle back. She had a bottom-heavy figure, wide hips and thick thighs, a slightly paunchy waist, and a somewhat average bust. Way above myself or Amy anyway, but not quite up in the 'busty' league with Vicky and some of their other friends. She looked very... soft.

My quick glance to assess her drew up to her round face full of laugh lines, and shining brown eyes.

Which she used to wink at me.

Given my previous thought process, I couldn't help the blush that tore across my face.

"Go away, Kara." Amy groused.

She pouted. "When you haven't even introduced me to your cute friend properly yet?"

Now I know she had to be making fun of me. Cute? Me? Not happening. My senses telling me she was being honest must need more work, what with the foam mat I was standing on.

Amy sighed, but complied. "Kara, this is Taylor. Taylor, this is that lesbian slut friend of Vicky's I was telling you about."

She clapped excitedly, ending with her hands pressed together in front of her wide grin. "You do talk about me!"

I'm pretty sure Amy was screaming internally, rigidly tense and wheezing out quietly whistling breaths as she tried not to explode. "Do I need to get the spritz bottle?" Amy said finally. "Because I'll get the spritz bottle."

Kara raised her hands in defeat. "No no, no need for that." Were they... actually serious? "I just wanted to stop by and see what all the fuss was about. It's good that you're taking your self-defense seriously. You know we worry about you." The heartfelt way she said it led me to believe she was being honest. I'm not sure if Amy didn't trust it, or heard it too often for it to have an impact, but she hardly reacted. Kara turned to me next. "If you're up for it, I think a few of the other girls would love to have someone teach them some basics. Most of the instructors these days are handsy
I blushed again. I heard Amy mutter "Fuck it." and move over to her backpack.

"Anyway, I think it'd be a good thing to do after school, if you want. I'd be fun, and I'll be there." She huskily whispered the last part. Amy was glaring at her from where she as squatting by her backpack. "I've got to go, though, I have a long day with the girls to look forward to." She backed off to a safer distance before she added, "And then a long night after that~."

That was when Amy whipped a tiny blue bottle out from her bag's pouches, spraying streams of water at the surprisingly nimble Kara, who dodged most of the shots while cackling happily on her way towards the doors.

I let that entire exchange sink in for a few moments, before I turned to Amy. "You really have a spritz bottle to ward off horny lesbians?"

"The word you're looking for is 'thirsty'." Amy grinned wickedly. "I have a spritz bottle to chase off thirsty lesbians." I raised a hand to refute the wording, my mouth working to try and find words, when she turned it my way and fired, splashing it into my mouth and nose. I sputtered and coughed, trying to choke the taste of stale tapwater out of my mouth while I wiped the wetness away from my face with my hands. "It seems to work just fine."

"You bitch!" I yelled, leaping at her to tackle her back to the mat. I used my undeniably superhuman strength to mostly ignore her struggles as I fistfuls of her blouse and used it to wipe my hands and face dry. We were giggling and wrestling on the floor for a bit after that, much to the glee and catcalling of the crowd. It would've gone on longer if they hadn't started with that.

We rather deliberately moved into showing Amy new forms, strikes, and counters after that. Moving slowly to give the gawkers little to watch. By the time we got close to finishing an hour later, more than half the students had left, I thought.

"So what do you think?" I asked when we'd gotten to cool-down stretches.

"About what?" was the gruff reply.

"The thing Kara was talking about. Helping other girls with martial arts after school."

She hesitated, pausing in her motions to think. "I don't know." She felt unhappy with it, but I couldn't tell why. "It sounds like a self-defense class, but there's a bunch of those around town already."

I knew there were places that did that sort of thing, but they were all dying off in the bay. The only civic center I knew was still working was downtown, just south of the boardwalk. Still too far north for the people in the slums south of there, where the buses didn't run and no one had cars anymore. An hour's walk to and from anything in that part of town was suicide. Then again, if people could survive the slums, they probably had self-defense down, by now. All of the martial arts studios and dojos dad and I had looked into were dodgy these days, either they'd been burned down, subsumed by the gangs, or seemed desperate for paying customers. Our guess was the gangs harassing their patrons, which didn't bode well for me trying any of them. The women's shelters around town could help, but with the Empire putting pressure on the ones in their territory to only accept 'the right sort' and the terrible things that'd happened at the ones set up in the other gangs' territories?
It seemed like the only part of town getting any help was the one that didn't need it.

"It's up to you, though." Amy continued. She didn't show it outwardly, but she was getting frustrated, anxious, stressed. "And... you do need to socialize a bit more..." she grumbled. Her breathing picked up, working her into a foul mood. "You're meeting Herren soon, right?" She hissed, low enough the other students wouldn't hear.

I nodded, not sure where she was going with this, but not wanting to set her off by saying the wrong thing.

She must have noticed me shutting down a bit, waiting for her to explode. She let out a deep breath in a quiet sigh, and her features softened. Her heartbeat sped up, but all her other mood indicators said she was calming down. 'I'm just worried about you.'

"Hey." I reached over and took her hand, and she blushed a little. Must be embarrassed, me doing this in front of a crowd. "I'll be fine." I whispered. "You know my powers, they're great for running away. She could lead me straight to Hookwolf, and he'd never catch me."

"Yeah," she muttered, pulling her hand from mine and chuckling ruefully. Her stress tension was going back up as she turned away from me and added, "she's no Hookwolf."

"You still haven't told me why you dislike her so much." I stated, giving it a beat. "It can't just be the gang thing, their girls don't fight." Modern Nazis they might be, they were still incredibly misogynistic. Only Hookwolf's branch really used female foot soldiers, all of them the brawny or scrappy types that fought in the fighting pits he ran. Cass didn't have any of the marks that'd bring, and her long hair wouldn't survive it anyway. Even if she was a supporter, even if she was working for the Empire, she couldn't be one of their real gangsters, in my mind.

Amy sent a glare past me to the remaining milling crowd. They'd started dispersing further when we started our conversation, but some had stuck around. This drove home that we didn't want to be listened to. Or, since she started heading toward the locker rooms, followed, apparently.

She stormed into the room, with me following behind. There were a couple girls changing, and a few more lounging around chatting with them. Amy slammed her fist into one of the lockers by the door, catching the eye of every girl there, and pointed with her thumb out the door we'd come through. I was standing behind her, but the glare on her face must have been legendary. The girls took a few seconds to finish putting themselves together in a publicly decent way and left with only a few muttered imprecations Amy's way.

I followed her partway into the room, then watched her check the showers and behind the other rows of lockers, before motioning me into the shower area. She got into the near one, turned the shower head as far towards the wall as it would go and turned it on, dodging the spray as she led me to the back of the room.

Finally, she crossed her arms and huffed. "I can't."

Frustrated semi-truth. A very strong won't. "Can you tell me why?"

She looked at me like I was an idiot. "No. I can't."

I shook my head and rubbed at my face and hair, trying to alleviate my exasperation. "Is this going to be a problem?"

She chuckle-scoffed, waving her hands to indicate the room. "It's already a fucking problem."
"Why can't you just trust me to be okay?"

"Why can't you just take me at my word?" She snapped back. "That's my fucking problem. You don't trust me!"

I wanted to snap, to lash out, but instead I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and held it. I let it out and took another, not bothering to hold this one.

Then I started taking my clothes off.

Hey, I needed to change for Cass' thing anyway, and we were already in the locker room, so why not?

The look on her face as I stripped down to my panties and sports bra was almost enough to make me break out laughing. That wide-eyed blush and slightly agape mouth. What was going through her head? What the hell did she think I was doing? I shook my head with a smirk. It didn't matter. She was still worked up, her heart beating fast now, but it didn't matter if she was still angry. I had a point to make.

"I do trust you." I said as I folded up my clothes. "I trusted you with my powers, I trust you to be my friend. To do what you think is right." I stopped and thought, slipping into my jogging pants. "That might not always be what I think is right, and that's okay." I was gripping my ratty running shirt and the old hoodie I'd worn all day. "It's okay." I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince her or myself, at this point. "It's okay." I strained hard against my muscles, to not simply tear the clothing apart.

I sucked in a breath, sniffled, and let it go. I turned to Amy, who looked startled, anxious, and sad. I threw the shirt on before I could do something I regretted to it.

"I trust you, Amy." I threw the hoodie on next, then stared her in the eyes. "I trust you as much as I'm capable of trusting another person."

I grabbed up my thermos, slipping its strap over my head, before grabbing my bag. I turned back to her one last time, and added. "I'm sorry if that's not enough for you."

Then I left.

I was still mad, frustrated, sad... but also exhausted. I just didn't want to think right now, so for the next half hour or so, I really didn't. I was just past the towers, riding the bus that mostly existed to serve that area past it, to the commercial area southwest of it, where the old industrial park was. That was when I got a text. Just a simple two words, from Amy.

'I'm sorry'

I stared at it for almost a minute, before I replied.

'Me, too.'
The walk did me a world of good, letting me calm down and hope that things were well and truly patched up from the shower incident... yeah, no. Not calling it that. I couldn't help the chuckle. At least I was feeling better.

When I made it to the industrial park, I stopped before I got close to the intersection Cass wanted me to meet her at. I'd told Amy I wasn't going to be stupid about this, and I wanted to hold to that. The whole place was fairly deserted- there was the odd person in an alleyway, the rare car passing through, but on a day like today most people were already where they were heading which cut down traffic, or they had no reason to be here, turning the place into a bit of a ghost town. Sure, some of the people might be homeless and passing through, but they wouldn't stay. You learned to stay out of these areas pretty quick in this town; even I'd heard about the bands of young white thugs scouring their territory for people who wouldn't be missed that they can make disappear. It was more likely in my mind that they were dealers with nothing better to do today than fall back on standing orders. I certainly wasn't going to cry for their lack of business.

I could feel someone at the intersection, though. The right shape and height to be Cass, wearing a backpack full of gear I wasn't familiar enough with to make out. One of the buildings on the corner- an old, mostly stripped out office building- had a few people rummaging around in it. They were digging through packs of their own, or setting things up around the building, though the why still eluded me.

It didn't... seem like a trap, at any rate. So I continued my walk towards her, finding her waiting under a lit lamppost, checking her watch and rustling her gear. She wasn't wearing the same clothes she went to school in; these being a bit rattier, torn up jeans and a worn, paint-speckled hoodie. I hadn't taken her for an artist, but maybe I was missing something. She finally caught sight of me and waved me over.

"Good! You showed up." She started leading me toward the office building. "I'd get bitched at if I couldn't keep the teams even."

"So, what are we doing?" I asked, nervously.

"Y'vever shoot someone, before?"

I stopped, sputtered, and screeched. "What!?"

She stopped, looked back at me, visibly thought back to what she'd said, and scoffed. Still, she dropped her bag and ripped into it pretty quickly, showing off some thin body armor vests and guns, complete with 'this is a fake' orange tips on the barrels. "It's paintball. Paintball. Not real shit."
I could tell she felt a bit nervous, but wasn't lying.

"O...kay?" I muttered. "You wanted to... shoot me?"

She groaned, rolling her eyes. "I want to have fun splattering assholes with paint going fast enough to bruise their pasty ass cheeks." She packed things up just enough to sling it over her shoulder. "Look, I'm sorry. I said it weird, and you took it bad. That's on me." She started towards the building. "Now do you wanna hang out, or not?"

Hesitantly, I followed behind her. The door opened to a decent sized room with hallways off to the side, and a secretary's nook missing its desk and chair, but retaining the hook-ups for phone and computer lines, as well as likely-permanent scuffs and dents in the carpet where they used to be. She kept right on without slowing, heading straight through another set of doors that led into a large foyer area lined with offices. I could picture it divvied up into cubicles for low-ranking office clerks, or used as a communal space, maybe a break room. Now though, it was speckled with colored splotches along parts of the wall, and piled up with mobile cubicle dividers, planks and boards, and bits of large, solid-looking detritus that looked more thoroughly painted.

Cass brought her hand up to her mouth, stuck fingers in, and let out a shrill scream of a whistle that had me covering my ears.

"Oww?" I whined into the quiet that followed.

Cass just laughed. "Get over it, wuss." She turned to watch the doors, and sucked on her lips for a moment in thought. "Then again, if you can't handle a little noise, you might be a bit dainty for paintball?"

She was trying to give me an out, phrasing it like a question. I shook my head. "Nah, I'll be fine." I was a lot tougher than I looked, after all. I'm pretty sure I wasn't bulletproof, but for all I knew I might be paintball-proof.

The people filing into the room were a surprising bunch, given who'd gathered them. Six other teenagers, only three of them white. "Alright, listen up!" Cass shouted needlessly. "This here's Taylor. She's new, and I'm bringing her in, so she's gonna be on my team. These assholes are Matt," Baby-faced and black-haired, but otherwise fairly average. "Jeremy," Thin, narrow faced, angular features, sandy-blond. "and Tim," Brown hair, fairly average, seemed a little shy. It didn't escape my notice that she'd introduced the white teens first. "Tim's uncle works for the bank that owns the building, so they'll ignore little shit like paint everywhere, as long as we don't knock any walls down." She didn't mention windows, but I got the feeling she didn't actually care about wrecking the place. She pointed at the other three, standing a bit away from them. "This is Carlos," He was big and Latino, with long hair up in a ponytail and a face that could never be pretty, but was handsome in a rugged sort of way. He had the look of someone who got shit done. He'd been looking fairly neutral the whole time I'd seen him, but his eyes never strayed far from Cass, sparing me an assessing look, a few glances at the others, and going back to watching her. "Jakob," Tall lanky beanpole of a black teen, "And Sarah." The only other girl of the group, though I could hardly tell at a glance. She was a short, thin Asian girl with short-cropped black hair, her hips and bust hidden entirely by her slightly baggy clothes.

"It's Serei, actually." The girl said, her voice much more obviously feminine than the rest of her. "But nobody calls me by my real name." She'd turned to Jakob, who I'd just realized had been hovering rather close to the girl this whole time, and said her words with a cutting pointedness that lead me to believe there was a story, there.

"It was one time..." He whined.
"And now I'm stuck being Sarah." She groused. She didn't seem mad, just poking at her... friend?

"You two gonna fuck, or are you actually here to play ball?" Cassie snarked.

Gonna guess boyfriend, then. Jakob sputtered and blushed, even through his dark skin, while Serei slapped his arm and flipped off Cass.

"What about Taylor's gear?" Carlos asked, quirking an eyebrow and crossing his arms.

Cass shrugged. "I brought spares, I'll sort her out in a sec." she grinned. "Since I picked her first, why don't you go, pendejo?"

Oh wow I hoped she was mispronouncing that on purpose, otherwise her Spanish was atrocious. From Carlos' grin- all teeth, like a polite snarl- and middle finger, I figured this was a regular thing with them. I was starting to think they weren't even friends, but then why would he be here?

Either way, he picked Serei, who gave an excited giggle and started rummaging through her gear. Cass picked Matt, who was already mostly suited up. Carlos grabbed Jakob next, then Jeremy went to our side, and Tim was left to the other side. He seemed incredibly disappointed with this, and I was starting to get the feeling he was only here because he had a thing for Cassie. I couldn't help but feel a little bad for him.

She flipped a coin,. and Carlos called it. "Alright, you're setting up, up top. You've got fifteen before we come in after you." Cass said, which got a nod and a wave to follow from him.

"So," She said, turning to me. "It's good you're wearing crap," I didn't think it was that bad... I'd actually thought this was one of my best hoodies... but I was due for new ones, probably... "You want the mask, or the helmet?" She'd dug a large biker-esque helmet out of her bag, and pulled a mostly-rigid facemask out of it. It looked sort of like a set of ski goggles with an angular plastic protrusion under it to block down to the chin and around the cheeks, with some thin slits for air and talking.

"Mask is fine." And my head was probably harder than hers, anyway.

"Neat. We can pull up your hood to keep paint off your hair, then strap the mask on over it." She pulled some more gear out and started sorting it. "Not that anyone should be aiming for your head, but shit happens." She fiddled with one of the padding vests. "Speaking of, no head shots, dick shots, or..." She'd started slipping it over my head, when she snorted. "was gonna say no tit shots, but it's not like Sarah has any.

That was... actually pretty mean, I thought. I frowned and kept silent, though. Better to see how the group actually interacted for now, since I had no idea what 'normal' was for them. Maybe this was normal? It sure sounded like something the trio would've said about another girl, if they were up to something like this. I couldn't help but hate that the first girls I thought of when trying to compare social interactions were still them. Toxic as they might have been, they'd left a huge impact on me.

I almost missed Cassie talking, I was so focused on trying to stifle the thoughts.

"Rules are pretty simple, today. You keep going until you're body-shot." She patted my now-padded torso with the back of her hand. "Then you're 'dead'. You're dead? You come back here and sit things out." She started doing up her own gear. "Last team standing wins. Usually we'd do something like capture the flag, hold the base, three or four team skirmish, but we don't have as many people today." Next she started helping me with the mask, hair bundled in my hood, having me hold the edges of it out of my line of sight while she strapped the thing on. "First person out
keeps time, if they're out for fifteen minutes and the game's still going, we'll call it. Most people up wins."

"And how..." Oh wow my voice sounded weird. Loud and slightly echo-ey. "How long are we going for?"

She shrugged. "Don't think we have the ammo for more than an hour or two." She dug out a few red scarves and handed me one. "Tie that somewhere. Other team's blue. Take it off if you're dead." She handed out a few more to the guys, then knelt down to cinch her wound-up scarf tightly around her thigh. That actually looked a little uncomfortable, and I didn't think I could tie mine around my bicep by myself, so I settled for tying it around my neck, assuming it was fine. The boys seemed used to this process, but were helping each other when they needed it, like Cass had with me.

Then she got out the guns, showed me how to shoot, reload, and shot me in the leg so I'd know what to expect. It stung a bit, but I didn't think it'd leave a welt like I'd heard they were supposed to. Was really hoping my brute package came with tougher skin, at least. I still didn't have anything I could point to as clear evidence for it yet, just a feeling that I could take more than I used to.

I studiously ignored the little thought in the back of my head, that every stupid teenager thought they were invincible.

"Alright, we don't know for sure where they're set up, but Carlos likes the offices in the southeast corner, third floor, so that's probably where they're at." Actually, I could tell they weren't, but I wasn't about to out myself over a stupid game. "Taylor, you hang back this run, get a feel for things. We'll take point."

The rest of the time was spent milling about or checking phones for a couple minutes, before Cass had us start down one of the hallways towards a flight of stairs. We headed straight for the top floor, passing by Carlos' group on the second. They were camped out in some of the rooms near the stairs, and I thought I saw what was coming next. We made it to the third floor landing, and Cass made some gestures with her hand, causing the group to fan out and start searching rooms.

Sure enough, when we were halfway down the hall, the group downstairs started for the stairs. I didn't want to seem too prescient, so I just waited by the door to one of the little offices, and just happened' to be looking back at the stairs to catch a glimpse of the group setting up their ambush. I'm pretty sure I locked eyes with the biggest guy, probably Carlos judging by build, his head covered by a helmet and a blue scarf tied over the lower facemask part like a bandit mask. He started raising his weapon and I ducked into the room.

"Cass! Behind us!"

Then it was chaos. Jeremy got laid out by half a dozen rounds from three different guns. Cass got tagged in the shoulder, but kept firing back. Matt managed to dodge the shots at him. I just waited and 'watched' the patterns of exchanging fire, those first few moments of combat.

I fired a few ranging shots from cover to check my gun's aim, doing a passable job of also being suppressing fire. When I was confident I had the aim down, I waited. When Carlos started leaning out from behind the doorframe into the stairwell to take his shots, I fired.

I didn't mean for the shot to land in the actual doorframe, but that turned out to my advantage. The paint splattered onto his visor, doing a better job startling him than just the shot near his head I'd planned. His momentum carried him forward naturally through his stumble, and I tagged him in the side while his arms were up to try and catch his balance.
He rolled with the blow, ripped the scarf off his mask as he got up, cursed a few times in Spanish, and started down the stairs. By the time I'd finished watching him go, Cass had tagged Tim while he was watching the spectacle. Now we were three against two, had routed the ambush, and had the upper hand.

I couldn't keep the grin off my face.

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"Did you bring a fucking shark?" Carlos snapped when we all got to the main room. We'd won—Cass got tagged out before we did, but she'd stuck around to watch the rest of the fight, just me and Matt left up. I could tell from his grin and pulse that he wasn't really mad, but I think he had to play it up because it was Cass.

"Don't need it to kick your ass." She spat back, smirking.

Carlos shook his head and chuckled on his way over to me. "This really your first time?"

Should a boy really be asking a girl that? I pushed down the traitorous part of my brain that'd thought that, fighting down my blush. I wasn't sure I was successful. "Yeah, never done anything like this before."

I could see him grinning under his helmet. "Well you're a good shot for a first-timer." He paused for a second. "Also helps you got lucky with the ambush."

I shrugged. "I've been dodging ambushes at Winslow for years. Kinda' habit at this point." He made a 'yeah, sure' sort of grunt that had me wondering if he'd spent a year or two there, himself.

"Alright, enough of that." Cass called. "Five minutes to round two. Call it!"

We spent the next hour or so like that, going back and forth on which team had the initiative, before we ran out of ammo, and drive to continue.

"Some of these assholes have late-night dates to get to." Cass said, when we were packing up.

"This kinda' was our date." Jakob said, hugging Serei into his side, the short girl winding up lodged under his arm, causing her to grumble and slap playfully at him. "But it might be nice to catch dinner or something, too." Serei shook her head with a smile, going back to packing up gear, which she handed to him to lug back to their car.

"I'll lock up." Cass told Tim after everyone said their goodbyes. "I'll get the keys back to you at school."

He looked a bit uncomfortable at that, but caved. I think it said something that Cass already had the keys, to let her insist on keeping them. I couldn't help but feel a bit bad for him. "You know he likes you, right?" I said when they'd gone.

She rolled her eyes. "I know that, and he knows I don't like him that way." She started for the roof, and I followed. "I give him all the tools to say no, not my fault if he doesn't." That... sounded pretty skeevy, honestly. It wasn't my problem and I'd already said something, though. I'd see if I could talk to him about it later.

We made it to the roof, which was littered with more debris that could be moved inside for cover, along with some slabs of asphalt and concrete piled up around the area. Cass tossed her bag down to lay against it, looking up at the dark sky. There were never many stars out, we had to deal with
light pollution from not just our city, but Boston and the rest of the nearby cities, too. The Protectorate's rig glowing out in the bay at all hours of the day wasn't helping either. It was pretty impressive that we could still see any stars, at all.

I'd let the silence hang too long, though. So I asked, "Why aren't you heading home?"

She scoffed, and stayed quiet for a bit longer. "Don't wanna talk about it."

"I can't help if I don't know." The words slipped out quietly.

The silence grew slightly tense, and I could tell even in the dark, looking away from me, that she was scowling. "Home hasn't been great, lately." I leaned against the short wall around the roof, and waited patiently. "You know how my family's 'Empire', right?" I could hear the air quotes, and hesitantly agreed. "They're really not. You can look up my family online and find enough if you dig a little. We're mostly based down south a bit, Virginia, Georgia, the Carolinas... about all we've got is manpower, though. So they send me up here, with a few dozen 'cousins' to buff up the empire numbers."

I was starting to worry that I was diving a little too deeply into gang politics, just listening to this. Still, nothing she said pinged 'untrue', so I assumed I really could have found all this online if I'd bothered digging.

She heaved a sigh. "Butter up the Empire, who've got everything we don't. Shitting fucktons of money, guns, and connections with the bigger groups in Europe and out west." She made vague gestures in directions I didn't think matched the directions at all, but she didn't care. "Get them to share the wealth. All that means is, I'm stuck here in this shithole city, living with people happy to be here, waiting to go home." Which she... didn't actually sound thrilled with.

"What's wrong about going home?"

She bristled at that, and glared at me through the gloom. She huffed a couple quiet deep breaths, and said, "That's family business." Before flopping her weight back down on the bag. It really couldn't be that uncomfortable...

I shook my head and tried to change my mental gears, "So what, some mafia 'marry into the family' thing?"

From the way she tensed and stopped breathing for a few seconds, I'd hit the nail on the head. "I'm not gonna press," I added. "Not interested in the gang stuff, no matter which gang you're really in."

The tension bled out of her, slowly. We sat in less-uncomfortable silence for a bit, she seemed lost in her own little world, so I struggled to find something to talk about. "So... paintball?"

"Yeah?" She nearly snapped.

"You just... don't seem the type, at school." She really didn't. Preppy social circles, expensive clothes, long hair, delicately thin body and features... today was really a surprise all around.

She scoffed. "Yeah, you keep up on those assumptions, I'm sure I'll cry at your funeral."

I sighed and muttered, "Anyone ever tell you you're kind of a bitch?"

She chuckled. "Only about half the damn city."

I shook my head with a small smile. "So why paintball?"
"I dunno." Cass shrugged, looking straight up into the sky while I waited. "Just... nice to cut loose, I guess? Go around hurting people, knowing you can't really hurt anyone..." Sounded pretty contradictory to me. "It's just fun." She finished with a shrug. "Some of the people aren't great, though. Tim's a doormat, a couple of the guys are Empire and heckle whatever colored friends I bring along, and Carlos won't leave me alone..." She hushed up after that, realizing she'd said too much.

"What's wrong with Carlos?" I didn't have any problem with him, and while they were a bit antagonistic, they didn't seem like they couldn't get along.

She sighed. "He's a spic and I'm a 'Nazi'. Pretty self-explanatory." I didn't miss that she'd only bothered with air quotes for her, but she was opening up, so I let her have it. "He keeps inviting himself along to whatever he can, keeping an eye on me." she simpered the last part mockingly. "He's just polite enough not to say he's making sure I'm not out lynching street trash."

"And here I was, hoping it was just some unresolved sexual tension, or something." I muttered.

"What? No. Eww, no." She shuddered, and I could feel her gagging. The physical revulsion surprised me, like I'd just suggested she fornicate with the beloved family dog, rather than a relatively handsome teenager.

"Is it boys, or...?" I'd met a surprising number of not-straight girls lately, one more wouldn't be surprising, though the circumstances would be hilarious... and more than a little sad.

She gave one last grossed out throaty noise, before she replied. "Nah, I like dick, I just have preferences." She hopped to her feet and grabbed her bag. "And with that, I think I'd prefer going home over talking about my sex life." She made a shooing motion, and herded me toward the door.

I let her usher me outside. "Thanks for the games?" I asked, not sure if I was saying it right. 'Thanks for the sports' will never be a thing I actually say out loud.

She smirked, leaning against the frame of the big entrance double-doors. "Yeah, sure. See you at school, tomorrow."

"See ya." I shot back, and she shut and locked the door. I stood there awkwardly, watching her putter about the building for a bit, before I started towards the bus stop.

I was caught up thinking about how weird today had been, and it took me a couple blocks to realize I couldn't feel Cassie anymore. I searched the nearby blocks with my senses, and even gave in to the instinctual urge to look around, even though I knew it wouldn't help. In the end, I shrugged. She must have gotten picked up or something.
Chapter 1.9 (Movies and Tea)

Chapter Summary

Originally update 15.
Now we start to really get into those OC tags.

TUE FEB 15

I didn't sleep well that night. It wasn't just the 'dream training' getting weird and metaphysical on me, I was worried about the meeting I had later today, and still felt conflicted over the situation I'd seen with Cassie yesterday, and... Amy.

Hoo boy, Amy.

A part of my brain likened the gnawing worry over whether we were still friends to the anticipation of the Trio's bullshit every day. It was convinced things couldn't go anything but poorly, and it was hard to hold out hope that there wouldn't just be another fight.

I woke up early, it was getting harder and harder to sleep in past sunrise, these days. I'd been up before 7AM every day this week, and that showed no signs of changing. I sighed and resigned myself to being a morning person, now. A quick breakfast of granola'd yogurt and toast took another ten minutes, then I spent twenty working different muscle groups with the weights downstairs, took ten minutes to throw myself together into my morning gear, and was out the door.

Seven Fucking Thirty.

I missed sleeping in.

Still, it gave me an hour to get to school every morning, which I used to run the distance with time for a shower. So what if I was a little quicker than a normal person? Just made my jog look like actual running, right? I hadn't really thought about it until I noticed a pair of girls a block back apparently trying to keep pace with me. I could tell they were both feeling it, the curvier one puffing a bit as she hung back behind her friend.

This was weird, but not too strange. I made a couple turns to change streets without going out of my way. To my surprise, a couple blocks later the pair made the switch over, too. This was starting to get kind of creepy.

The next time I turned to change up the streets, I took a glance at the pair. An athletic black girl in bike shorts and a sports bra, her hair up in a bun to keep sweat off her neck, and a redhead with her hair braided up, a short, thin, open top and a miniskirt over the same sort of getup her friend had. She looked like someone trying to be fashionable even when working up a sweat.

If I didn't know better, I'd think it were Emma and So-

I stopped, my eyes wide ahead of me as I stood just past the corner turn. My eyes panned over to the pair, having a clear line of sight over the yard I'd almost finished passing.

Their hair was done up in styles I'd never seen them wear before, and their faces were different.
Done up in thick makeup to change the shapes a little while still looking natural. Still though, now that I was looking, I could see the similarities. These two were definitely Emma and Sophia. The pair slowed their own jog to a walk while I watched them, trying to present a confused air, while I could tell they were subtly tensing for a fight as they slowly closed the distance.

Yeah, no. *Fuck* this.

I turned and ran.

It was actually kind of crazy, how fast I could go when I really cut loose. I was rounding the next block three seconds after I started my sprint, watching the pair just getting up to speed when I made the turn. Now I was on the next street over, line of sight broken, dashing down three blocks in the time it took them to make one. I was showing off some pretty obviously-cape speed right now though, and needed to stop.

I checked the houses on this block. All of the yards were empty of people, but a lot of them had no fence, or chain fences. The option on the other side of the street had someone puttering in a kitchen near the window overlooking the yard, so I couldn't hide back there. I certainly wasn't jumping up *onto* any of the houses... so I cut through the yard to my side, leapt the wooden fence there, rolled my way back upright, and dashed behind a shed. There was a bush blocking sight to the fence, and the shed blocked sight to the house. I took a breath to calm my beating heart, rather than sate any real need for air. I'd just sprinted almost four blocks, and barely felt winded.

The two came down the street minutes later. If I had to guess, they knew I was making for Arcadia, and didn't want to break off my route... kind of silly in hindsight, who cares if I'm late for class if it means dodging these two?

Sophia was looking around, and stopped when they got to the yard I'd crossed. She knelt by the ground, hand tracing what I realized was a deep footprint in the damp soil and grass. Was she... *tracking* me? She followed the trail, tracks set with my wide, sprinting gait, before she came to the fence itself. She inspected it for a minute or so, checked the tracks again, and said something to Emma, who'd been standing around watching.

I wasn't quite skilled enough with air yet to *pull* their quiet voices to myself, so I waited. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two, before they turned to leave. I heaved out a sigh of relief, and used wind to boost myself up over the other side of the fence. I went a couple more streets over, away from the pair slowly trudging their way away. When I was confident they couldn't see me, I started jogging again.

I still had to make it in time for a shower, after all.

---

When I got out of the shower, I had a text waiting for me, from Amy. She wanted to meet up before class, and I was fine with that. I shot off a reply saying I was already there, and she asked to meet in one of the second floor rooms I didn't have a class in, but it wasn't hard to find. She was alone when I got there, but that was probably the point.

"Hey." I said, the picture of eloquence.

"Hey, yourself." She muttered, her voice a little rough.

We sat there, basking in our teenage awkwardness, until I broke it. "You... wanted to talk?"

"Yeah." Her voice was stronger, now. She rummaged in her bag, and brought out a wrapped
bundle. "You... I got these for you, over the weekend. Was going to give them to you yesterday, but..." She shrugged.

Yeah, yesterday was kind of a mess.

I came over and took the bundle, unwrapping it slightly to find it contained half a dozen ceramic masks. They were featureless, save for the eye holes, and came in an assortment of colors. That didn't matter, since I was just going to repaint them anyway, but I turned over the top one- Eidolon green- and found some minimal face-shaped padding to keep it from pressing too hard on the nose, with some loops in them for clips or straps.

I wrapped them back up, and held them to my chest. "Thank you." I said, trying to pour my gratitude into the words. "Are you sure you don't want me to pay you back?"

Amy shrugged. "Not like I didn't get them at 'Panacea Discount' anyway." She said ruefully, and continued when I just gave her a confused look. "The more famous you get, the less often people will actually let you pay for the things you want to buy. It's only about fifty times as annoying as it sounds when you first hear about it." She huffed. "The best example of it are famous actors who don't even bother carrying money, because they know they'll get recognized, and their fans will pay for everything." She took in a deep breath, and I could tell she was getting worked up. "Like, there was this one time I was in a cafe on the boardwalk, just dodging the people, when Assault walks in off his patrol, orders coffee for him and Battery, then they just hand it over, and he leaves." She threw her hands up. "I don't know if it was a regular thing, if he knew that barista, or if he's just that much of an asshole," which she followed with a darkly muttered 'because he is kind of an asshole,' before she continued; "but that's the sort of thing I'm talking about. Fame entitlement." She sighed. "I hate it."

The early bell chimed, telling us we had fifteen minutes before classes started. Probably seven or so before students would start showing up early to class and kill the current privacy we had.

"It's like, this whole thing with Carol." She shook her head. "Context, Amy... So, New Wave isn't filthy rich, but we're not bad off. I've got a credit card with a couple hundred dollar limit that Carol pays off every month for my 'allowance', but I think she did it that way just to keep an eye on me. 'You didn't buy food all week, Amy! You're not making people pay for you again, are you?' She mocked in what I assumed was her mother's voice. '"You have to be more considerate, Amy!' 'You have to contribute to the economy, Amy!' 'You can't take advantage of your status, Amy!" She grumbled to herself before muttering something unpleasant-sounding.

"You okay?" I asked, since she seemed done.

Amy rubbed at her eyes. "Yeah, just... sorry, didn't mean to ramble at you."

I smiled. "Nah, go ahead and vent. I'm happy to listen, if it helps." That was a thing friends did, right? "Did you want to do something after school?"

She shook her head. "Can't. Tuesday/Thursday hospital trip, remember?"

"Ahh, crap." I was excited to patch things up, and it slipped my mind. "Maybe Wednesday, then..."

She gave me a look. "You don't have plans with... Cass?"

I swallowed the sigh at her tone, before it could get out. "I wanted to ask you, first."

That got a little smile out of her, at least. "Well, there's always Vicky, if you're bored. She hates hanging around the hospital waiting for me, but she's been weird and hover-y since we all tried
going out..." She said, in a leading way.

I had wanted to give her another chance, sometime soon. That it helped Amy out a bit was a plus. "I've got an appointment later today, I knew you'd be okay with leaving things off, but what about her?"

Amy shrugged. "Vicky's never trying to be mean, but she can forget things when she's worked up. If you just tell her you need to go when you need to go, she's more likely to offer to fly you over than get mad about cutting things short."

Well, that sounded fine. "I can talk to her at lunch, then?"

She grabbed up her bag. "I'll be there." She looked like she might be coming in for a brief hug, but hesitated and headed for the door.

---

The first half of school went fine, aside from some mild awkwardness with Kyle. I thankfully made my way to lunch without running into anyone else who'd asked me out yesterday.

I was waved over by Vicky and Amy, but they weren't the loudest ones, once the rest of the group noticed me.

"Taylor!" Kara waved- excitedly flailed in her seat, more like- and called out. "Did you think about the things?"

"What things?" I asked, mirrored by the dyed redhead sitting next to her.

"My things." Kara said to her friend, being intentionally obtuse in a rather obvious way.

Her 'friend' panned her gaze down Kara's body and remarked, "You do have very nice things..."

Amy cleared her throat and made a show of grabbing out her spritz bottle.

Everyone ignored Vicky giggling like an old lech, probably thinking everything hilarious.

I was reconsidering my decision to come here for lunch, today.

Kara smiled and turned back to me. Watching. Waiting.

I gulped. "Well, it... sounded fine? I just... Kinda' want to know what I'm getting into?"

Someone muttered out 'That's what he said' loud enough that the crowd was set a-tittering, and my face went nuclear.

Amy let out a loud noise and brandished her weapon.

The crowd went back to their own quiet conversations.

Kara gestured to a seat near Amy, which I now assumed had been saved for me, and I made my way over. "It doesn't have to be a big thing," she started. "Or happen at all, no pressure. Just thought it would be cool."

She was smiling widely, her eyes twinkling. She looked like an innocent little angel, begging for another cookie after dinner.

Ahh, there's the little voice in the back of my head, screaming that she's just trying to use me.
I'm not sure I missed you.

"Well, this week's pretty full, but I can stay after school Friday, as a trial run?" I wasn't actually sure I was busy most of the week, but I had plans today, needed to make plans with Amy and Vicky, wanted to keep some days free for Dinah just in case...Actually yeah, that did sound pretty full.

"Yay!" She actually bounced in her seat, she threw her arms up so hard. Or did she fake that? Her exuberance was certainly genuine... "I'll get everyone together, and everything sorted out. You don't have to worry 'bout a thing, boss!"

"Boss?" I asked, along with a quarter of the table.

"I'm buttering you up." She stage whispered. Continuing in a normal tone, she added, "I could use something else, if you'd like some more effective lubrication~"

Watching her sputter as Amy spritzed her in the face was magical.

After basking in it for a moment, I turned to Amy, as dour and stern as I'd ever seen her, and asked; "She always like this?"

"Nah," the healer grumbled. "I think she likes you."

"That's..." Terrifying? "...wonderful." I groused.

Kara finished wiping off her face soon after that, and I realized she either used minimal makeup, or went without. I didn't see a single smudge or blemish, aside from some pink where she'd scrubbed a little harder with the napkins. "Friday, after school! It's a date!" Her mood didn't seem the least bit stifled by her waterlogging, as she grabbed what was left of her food and made to leave. Probably to go discuss things with these 'other girls' she mentioned.

Time to break the ice, to ask about doing something today. "So, how was your date, yesterday?" I asked Vicky.

Her smile got a little strained. "It went... okay."

Amy scoffed. "She nearly broke up with him, again."

Vicky's eyes drifted over to where Dean was sitting, with a couple of his band friends having their table invaded by the next table over, their charge led by a ginger boy attempting to claim their french fries as part of his Irish heritage.

...I think.

It was pretty chaotic, and I hadn't been giving it too much attention until now.

Everyone was either laughing, watching gleefully, or wearily exasperated over it... so I guess everyone was having fun?

"Don't wanna talk about it, right now." Vicky said eventually.

"That's fine." An opening! "I was going to ask if you wanted to hang out after school for a few hours, anyway?"

Her face blossomed into a radiant smile, her eyes sparkling, rosy cheeks pulling back, perfect buffy lips pulling back from shining teeth. Her skin glistened and hair glowed in the light as-
-Amy poked her in the side, and everything went back to drab and dull normal.

Well, that was weird. I knew something was going on, but I was so fixated on Vicky that I just didn't care. I'd need to watch out for that, in the future.

"Really?" Vicky asked after she'd reigned herself in, in more ways than one.

"Sure. What sounds good?"

She made a show of thinking. "Well, you don't like shopping, right? We could just hit up a movie or something, while I'm killing time waiting on Ames."

How long had it been, since I'd been to the movies? "Y'know, that sounds pretty good."

"Meet you after class?"

"Out the main gate, sure."

Amy smiled a little, but she felt sad. I wasn't sure what to make of it. The rest of lunch was spent listening to others talk about how their big days had gone, yesterday.

---

I found Amy and Vicky out front after school, the pair looked like they were arguing a little.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I jogged up.

"Vicky's hovering, again." Amy said, not quite snapping.

Her sister actually glanced down to make sure her feet were on the ground. It was kinda' cute. "Am not!" She said, when she realized what Amy'd actually meant. "I just want to make sure you're safe."

"The buses are safe." As safe as anything got in Brockton, anyway. "I'll be fine."

Vicky's eyes twitched between us a couple times, before settling on me. The world started closing in and getting hazy, again. "Taylor, what do you think?"

I wanted to agree with Vicky, wonderful amazing Vicky, but... "I... don't know what the problem is?" They both looked confused. "With... either situation?"

"Vicky..." Amy hissed, and the haze faded. Vicky looked sheepish. "Vicky can't carry two people. Princess carry takes two arms, so does piggyback, and dangling people is just asking for someone to dislocate something."

Vicky looked about ready to start again, so I cut in. "I'm stronger than I look." Amy's attention snapped to me, and she hesitated. "Plus, if something happens to me, Amy can just fix it, right?"

They both looked thoughtful, Amy I knew was probably considering my powers, while I could only guess at Vicky's thoughts. "Are you sure?" She asked, actually hovering a bit in her worry.

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

Amy snorted, and we both looked at her. "Probably could've dropped me off and came back here by now, if we hadn't started arguing over it."

That got her sister smiling again, at least. "C'mere." She floated over to hover low in front of Amy,
who rolled her eyes and clambered on and wrapped her arms around her sister's neck and shoulders. Vicky hiked a hand up to grip Amy's thigh, and floated up and over to me, holding out the other. "You ready?"

I gave a smile, a nervous giggle, and nodded. I grabbed her hand, and she shook mine away, grabbing my wrist instead. I returned the gesture, grabbing her forearm with both of my hands as we slowly lifted up. Her grip was like a vice around my wrist, nearly creaking the bones. I could feel how nervous she was trying this, so I wasn't sure if she just didn't know her strength, or if her worry was making her try a little too hard. It wouldn't be anything more than a bruise at this rate, though. Nothing I couldn't heal myself, even without Amy's help.

"Alright, let's go." Vicky said, slowly accelerating us up and over, to just miss the fencing around the school, but we mostly kept horizontal after that. We stayed low, missing the rooftops by half a meter as they zipped by beneath us, only gaining altitude to pass over the buildings as they got taller the closer we got to the hospital. If I had to guess, the trip to drop Amy off only took about five minutes. It would've been at least twenty by car or half an hour by bus, but that was the advantage of a straight line without lights.

We set down on the roof of Brockton General, and I rubbed my wrist off to the side while Vicky fussed over Amy. "Well, this is my stop." Amy said, digging out her keys. "I'll see you tomorrow?" I nodded and waved, and she headed over to the roof entrance and unlocked it. It seemed a little weird to me that she had the keys for the place, but thinking about it, she probably only had the roof key.

"So..." Vicky started, awkwardly. "Movie?"

"Sure. We're both just killing a little time, right?" I asked, trying to spark conversation.

She shrugged. "I've got enough homework to keep me busy for a few hours, I always save it up for these days, but I usually run out and get stuck bored for a while."

I chuckled. "No offense, but you don't seem like the type that can sit still for long."

"Weell.." She smiled and shook her head. "Not really. If I run out of things to do, I'll fly around, maybe patrol a bit, or get Dean to..." She drifted off, her smile drooping.

"You okay?"

She grinned wanly and gave a so-so hand shake. "Things have been... awkward? Not really bad, just... not good again, yet." She waited a moment, took a deep breath, and sighed it out. "I've been acting odd lately, and he was asking about that, then asking about-" She nearly choked on her words, the abortive hesitation was so strong. "-other girls. Which you don't do on a date, let alone Valentine's!" She'd worked herself up a bit, by the end. I felt the haze creeping in, before she clamped down on it and it faded. "The date was... just really awkward after that."

"I... think I get why, but I've never been in a relationship."

"Really?" She thought for a second, then broke into a grin. "Do you want me to..."

I broke in before she could finish her leading question. "No. I'm not looking to date right now. I'm perfectly happy..." I huffed, unsatisfied with the wording. "not happy, really, just... I don't think I can handle it, right now." Vicky had this wide-eyed worried curiosity to her features, combined with a worried head tilt that made her look adorable. I groaned. "I'm still getting used to not needing to worry about being ambushed if I let my guard down long enough to sit so I can eat, at
school."

"Ahh." She had a look of mildly horrified realization, now. "I'm sorry I asked."

It was weird, dealing with someone whose heart was so firmly planted on their sleeves as Victoria. I don't think I'd have any trouble reading her, even without my extra senses. "No, it's fine. I'm more frustrated with myself, than anything."

"Right." She said with a sharp nod. "Topic change. Movie? You have a place you like?"

I was confused, before I remembered there were like three movie theaters in Brockton. "Oh, I haven't been to the movies in years. Whatever you like's fine."

She grinned. "Well, there's two places nearby," we were practically on the Boardwalk, after all. "The one with tables and restaurant-style food is kind of expensive, though. So the other one?"

I goggled a bit. "That's a thing?" It must have been recent, I didn't remember Emma ever mentioning that sort of thing.

Vicky shrugged. "It's okay, the food's pretty average, and terrible for the price, but the experience is worth it if you find the right movie."

I shook my head and smiled. It sounded ridiculous. "Yeah, the other one."

"Alrighty, then." She unceremoniously scooped me up, backpack and all, into a bridal carry. We were already off over another building by the time she started up again. "You're a little heavier than I expected."

I grabbed at my stomach, where the dreaded paunch used to sit, and whined. "But I work out?"

She giggled. "I didn't mean to call you fat, just surprised is all."

The building we eventually came to was fairly squat, compared to those nearby, but still looked to be around three stories tall. It was bracketed by stores and office buildings, with apartments further out. Its own little almost-mall just offset from the Boardwalk proper.

We set down amidst a moderate crowd, and it was only when I'd gotten my feet under me that I realized quite a few of them had their phones out and pointed at us. I glanced around, and started shrinking into myself as the crowd started to swarm Vicky.

Well, I say 'swarm', but only about half the crowd seemed interested at all. The press of bodies was still making me anxious, though. I skittered over to the theater while Vicky handled the people. She answered questions, signed some things, posed for the odd picture, generally exuberant through it all.

It was exhausting, just watching it.

They left me alone, but I'm pretty sure a couple people snapped photos of me with their phones. I had no clue why, but people weren't my forte. Ten minutes in saw Vicky apologetically extricate herself from the crowd, even going so far as to float up above them to make her way over to me.

"C'mon, let's go." She chirped as she bundled me through the doors. I didn't even really see the posters up for the various movies, along the walls outside and the short hallway into the lobby. We went up to the counter, off to the side away from the line, and she pointed up to the current listings on the wall behind the beleaguered BBU-student-aged teenagers working the tills. "What looks
"What even is there?" I shot back.

"Well," She turned back and floated up a little, ostensibly to get a better view, but I was betting she'd done it out of habit. "The rom-com would be a little weird, but there's a horror/mystery-" the imagery and tagline for the poster seemed to indicate it was a noir detective story about catching a Stranger cape. "-a couple action movies-" one of them was about a robot Tinker, and seemed marketed on explosions, the other was an Aleph import 'cops and gangs' flick, centered on the grizzled gunslinger detective on the poster. It made me wonder if they ever showed the gang-centered films popular over on Aleph, what with the situation in Brockton. The last thing we needed were films that tried to romanticize the gang life. "-couple feel-good flicks-" Another aleph import about... animals? I guess? Boy-And-His-Dog story shaking it up with a girl main character, if I had to guess. The other was the 'real story' of a west-coast PRT agent putting his life back together after a cape fight took his legs. I'd actually seen commercials for this one, and my suspension of disbelief was shot to hell with the love interest being a prosthetics Tinker. "-aaand the kids movies." Of which two looked to be for the tween audience, and a family film about cape family shenanigans.

"Probably the aleph cop movie." I said with a nod. "The others all look stupid or offensive."

"I know, right?" She grinned. "I'll get the tickets, you save us a spot in the concessions line."

There were two tills each for tickets and concessions, but with all the filling bags and grabbing product, the food line was moving about half the speed of the ticket line, despite having about the same number of people waiting. I 'watched' as a boy- probably a cape geek from the gushing- let Vicky cut in about halfway up the ticket line. I shook my head, a little amused at the antics. It made me think back to what Amy'd said this morning. Some people just didn't mind flaunting what they had, I guess.

I was only a little jealous. Being famous would get old way too quick.

I'd only made it a third of the way to the counter when Vicky came up and handed me a ticket.

"You usually get much food at movies?" She asked to break the silence.

"Not really. Popcorn's fine, but I wouldn't get my own bag to myself." I'd usually get candy, Emma would get popcorn, and we'd share.

"Sure, sure." She waited, fidgeted a bit, shuffled around, and eventually just grabbed her phone for something to do. We were almost to the counter when she said, "Hey look!" and showed me her phone. "You're internet famous!"

My stomach dropped out and threw a fit as my breath hitched. I leaned over and recognized PHO, she'd expanded a few image links, and flicked over to them. One showed the three of us at school, another of us flying, and another of us just outside this building. She closed them out and went back to the thread, which she scrolled through a little, but I wasn't seeing the words.

I was busy freaking out.

"You okay?" She asked when she finally noticed I was hyperventilating.

"Fine. I'm fine." I said, too quickly.

"Tay, if it's-"
"Look, we're here!" I said, and sure enough the last customers in front of us departed, goods in hand, and we were at the counter.

Vicky got herself a soda, a big bucket of popcorn for the both of us, and a box of caramel something-or-others. She finally dropped getting me something, the third time I said I was fine. I still wound up holding the popcorn, though.

When we'd found seats, I couldn't escape the question anymore. "You okay? With the attention, I mean."

I sighed. "Yeah, sort of. I'm just... not used to anything but negative attention. I need to get used to this sort of stuff." Though I really wasn't looking forward to it. "I'm not going to stop being Amy's friend, and it was stupid of me not to think this would be a thing. I'm probably already up on whatever thread she has-" Vicky made an 'erm, yeah.' head motion, and I stifled a groan. "-being your friend too isn't going to really change much there."

We sat in silence for a while, watching the silent ads popping up on the screen.

"You think we can be friends?" Vicky asked.

I chuffed out a small exasperated sigh, and smiled at her. "Yeah, that's fine."

She seemed far too excited for such a simple thing, I thought.

---

The movie was fine. Not great, but not a terrible way to waste a couple hours. Vicky tried to argue me into letting her fly me to my 'appointment', but I worked her down to just taking me to the bus stop that'd get me where I was going. It just seemed to worry her, though. I promised I'd be fine and she nervously took me at my word.

It's not like I was going to the slums. The buses didn't even run there. I was getting on the one that came closest to going there, though.

The address I'd been given was for a building in the 'Little Japantown' area of the city, which made up most of the disputed borders between the PRT and law enforcement keeping the Boardwalk clean, and the ABB's southern holdings. It was also the barrier between the downtown slums and 'civilization'.

It wasn't like it even had the shops and cultural identity to make it a proper Chinatown, it just tended to be where the Asian immigrants wound up. It was way cheaper than the Towers area, and not everyone could afford a house in the suburbs where I lived. People congregated here because it was better than the slums.

The building itself didn't look fantastic, but it wasn't condemned at a glance. The brief look with my senses indicated it was stable and surprisingly well-cared for, internally. The rest of the buildings around also looked to be apartments or tenement buildings, with the odd first floor converted into a shop or corner store, for people trying to make a living without the commute.

The door was locked, and had one of those intercom panels on the wall. It was full of numbers instead of names though, so I just hit the big button next to the little ones, and it gave a grating mechanical buzz. A few moments later, I heard it click and a woman, younger than I expected, said something in an Asian language.

"Um, hi? I'm Taylor, here to see Sue?"
I don't know why, but I got the feeling of being judged as the silence wore on.

The woman sighed, and said "Wait a bit." And the line clicked dead.

I watched as a woman came out of one of the lower rooms, checked the monitor above the door, and then the peephole. I could hear it as she unlatched several locks, and opened the door just enough to show her face. She was a short-haired twenty-something, shorter than me by less than most Asian women I'd met, she was thin and her face slightly gaunt. She had a few beauty marks scattered on her visible skin, and seemed overall fairly average looking. This didn't keep me from noting her hidden hand reaching behind her, softly gripping the hefty pistol holstered in the small of her back.

"What are you here for?" She asked, giving me a little bit of a glare as my eyes flicked down to where I knew she kept her gun.

"I... was invited over?" Her glare didn't waver. "For tea. I wasn't told what else."

We stayed like that for another moment, before a voice I recognized cut in.

"Hey, hey Minnie!" Jake called, hobbling down the hall behind her. "Don't worry, she's with me."

The woman's glare didn't lessen, though now it was a burden shared, her eyes flicking between us as she stood mostly behind the door. At least her hand wasn't on the gun, anymore. She snapped out more sharp syllables I didn't understand, and he chuckled, responding in kind. She said something else, and his smile grew strained as he replied.

She sighed, shook her head, and opened the door fully. She said something else, more softly this time, and went back to her own apartment.

"Sorry about her, she's... kind of intense." Jake said, ushering me in and redoing the locks. "Thought she was working today..."

The place looked to be about five floors from the outside- about as tall as buildings got outside the Towers and the buildings near Medhall. He led me down the hallway, past a turn which led to a nook for an elevator, and the stairs just past it. He tapped the button for the lift, which quietly dinged open immediately.

Awkward elevator silence prevailed until we hit the third floor, walking down the hallway to the second door past the turn, and Jake let himself in without knocking. "Got Taylor!" He said as I followed him in.

The place was cozy, and fairly busy. There was a couch off to the side, with a coffee table and a TV set up, the area lined with shelves full of books and trinkets. There was a decently sized kitchen table filling most of the rest of the space, six chairs around it with one side against the wall. There was a bathroom door to the side way from the TV nook, and a short hallway with a closed door on one side, and an open doorway leading to a kitchen area on the other. I quirked an eyebrow at the pizza boxes sitting on the table.

"Really?" I asked.

"Hey, teenagers like pizza. Figured it was a safe bet. It got here just before you did." He replied.

Sue came in from the kitchen, rolling her eyes and rubbing a dish towel over her hands. "Didn't want me cooking." She groused. "Got tea started, but now- *most* important..." She headed over to the closed door and opened it. Immediately a pair of blurs scurried out. One of them froze, the beautiful white cat staring at Taylor, before running back into the room. Sue chuckled. "That's
"Moon." She reached down to pat the big orange tabby chomping away at the food dish in the hall. "This is Sun." She headed into the room, coming out moments later carrying a mottled grey and black striped cat under his 'shoulders'. The poor thing mewed disapprovingly as his master smiled. "This one is MurderFinger." She held her grin for a couple seconds, before dropping the cat next to the dishes, where it started eating, too. She started turning for the kitchen, and muttered, "Couldn't not be, after he ate that bastard Qin-Xiao's finger."

What.

I turned, wide-eyed, to Jake. "Don't let her mess with you." He said, sitting down. "His name's Star."

"And he didn't actually eat any fingers?" I asked nervously.

"No." Jake lied.

Seriously, the fuck?

Sue came back, and set down a tray with a steaming teapot, some cups, and plates. She sat, and I felt weird being the only person standing, so I sat down, too. She filled the cups, and the silence dragged on a bit. "So...?" I hedged.

She grabbed at one of the boxes and started inspecting the contents. "You're a cape." I visibly tensed, and she chuckled. "Just thought you should know we knew." She grabbed a couple slices for a plate and set the box back. "There are others out there that wouldn't be nearly as polite about it. Mostly the gangs, but none of them know, as far as we can tell."

"That's... good?" I asked, and they shrugged.

"Cape politics aren't really our thing." Sue admitted. "But I'm guessing Danny knows," She waited for me to nod, "which means you're not a Ward. No talk of a new one anywhere, yet."

"Being independent is dangerous, though." Jake said, fiddling with his plate rather than eating. "I hope you're not out bashing heads?" I shook my head. "Good. That's smarter than a lot of newbies."

My mind was running a mile a minute. They didn't seem to be acting hostile at all. They just seemed... a little worried? "I can... trust you, right?" They looked at me oddly. "You're not going to sell me out, or anything?"

"What? No." Jake replied, and seemed honest.

Sue's look was more calculating, but I think she was wondering why I asked, rather than debating how to answer. "No, Taylor. We're not planning on using this information against you." She also seemed sincere, which was a load off my mind. She smirked a little as I visibly relaxed.

"So, why did you want to talk?" I asked, now honestly curious.

Sue shrugged. "We deal in information. Not buying and selling it, but using it to keep each other safe. Sometimes we turn in tips to the police or PRT, but mostly we stay a step ahead of gang movements, make sure to be off the streets when they're planning something, help the people who can get out to do so..." She sounded sad. "We do what we can."

We sat in morose silence for a bit. "And... you want my help?"

She laughed. "Oh, gods no. If the gangs caught wind of it, that'd ruin everything. Our building
would get burned down, and everything's fire." She smiled and shook her head wistfully. "What we want is very simple." Her smile turned to a grin. "Get out."

"...what?"

She shrugged. "There are places that need new heroes more. Places that can actually hold back their gangs, keep their cities safe. Brockton's a powder keg at the best of times, what do you think happens if you take down one of the gangs?" I knew it was a trick question, and glancing over to Jake, who'd finally started eating, didn't help. "The other gangs fight over the territory and resources. The heroes couldn't take down any one of the gangs. Lung is too strong, the empire too connected, the merchants too distributed. Even if they did manage to take down all of them, what happens? New gangs pop up, or other gangs come in, or the fucking Butcher comes back." She spat the last part. "No matter what happens, the people lose."

I sat there, thinking about it. It didn't feel right. "I... don't think I can believe that." She raised a brow. "I mean, short term things would be bad, but after that? If we could keep the city and hold it, things could get better." I said, trying hard to believe every word of it.

Her eyes softened. "That's a nice dream, dear." She waited a beat, taking a breath. "The PRT can't hold the city. New Wave won't hold territory the same way the gangs do. It would take too much money and manpower, things being spent elsewhere, to fix the bay."

"I have to try."

She stared at me, and eventually sighed. "Always the idealists." She muttered, causing Jake to snicker around his food. She glared at him before turning back to me. "Alright, what do you think you can do?"

"Like, what are my powers?"

She shook her head. "About the city."

I hadn't given it much thought, I was still busy making sure I was trained enough to survive whatever plans I came up with, but... "I'm making a team." I said, then continued more firmly. "I'm forming my own team, and we can hold the city."

"Can you?" She asked snidely.

I heaved in a breath to argue, but held it. I let it out and shook my head. "We'll have to."

She stared, then sighed, took a deep breath and muttered something in another language up toward the sky. Whatever it was, it had Jake snickering again. "Eat your fucking pizza." She muttered, without any real heat to it.

I decided it was about time to actually start eating, and dug into the boxes. We ate quietly for a few minutes before she broke the silence again. "I'll need to talk to the others. I'm not sure what we can do, it's not just my risk to make, anymore." She took a long pull from her tea. "But, there's more of you young idealists around than I'd like. You're like weeds, these days."

I glanced at Jake, who grinned and waggled his eyebrows at me. I couldn't help but chuckle. "So...?" I asked.

"I'll call you in a few days. See what we can do. If you want us to help you, you might need to help us, though. Remember that." She paused for another drink. "You're some sort of thinker, yes?" I opened my mouth to answer, but she cut me off. "Be very careful who you share the details with,
but... it can be used to gather information?"

I nodded, and she followed suit.

"That could be very useful. Help offset the risks..." She muttered. "Will need to plan. You need a ride home?" I shook my head, and she nudged my teacup. "Well, stay. eat. Have some tea. Leave the stressful thoughts for another day."

I spent almost an hour munching pizza and talking fighting with Jake, while Sue cut in now and then. I wound up petting a couple of curious cats, which was nice. Eventually I made my way home via the buses. Despite what Sue had said, I had a lot on my mind.

Where was I going to find more capes for this team I kept promising?
WED FEB 16

My run to school took longer today, since I was watching for Emma and Sophia. I didn't spot anyone that might be them, but I was having trouble trusting myself. I had no idea how long they'd been stalking me. Sophia seemed to have some experience tracking things that didn't mesh into my understanding of the world. Even with Winslow's outlandish 'curriculum' it didn't make sense.

The fact that I knew the basics of picking locks and hotwiring cars through sheer osmosis was damming enough, there. It still didn't explain why Sophia was some sort of super-stalker, though.

I zoned out through the first half of the day, worrying about it. That lasted until I saw Tim on the way to lunch. He'd recognized me and waved awkwardly, and it took me a second to realize who he was. I put in the effort to actually go say hi, but we both had lunch to get to, so the interaction didn't last past that. It put him on my mind though, thinking back to Monday and what'd happened after school then.

Which led me to grabbing my food and heading over to where Cass was sitting. An older boy was talking about something- I think it had to do with Medhall, from what little I caught of it; something about business law and medical licenses. He trailed off when I'd gotten close, and the side of the table facing away from me realized and turned, including Cassie.

"Hey, could I talk to you for a bit?" I asked.

She very briefly looked conflicted, then confused, glancing around the table for a measure of approval, which I guess she got since she grabbed her food and stood up. "Sure, I've got some time."

We headed out, and sat down at the usual spot. She was eating slowly, waiting for me to get to what I wanted. It took me a bit of dithering, but I finally spat it out.

"I don't like the way you treat Tim."

She seemed surprised and confused, then she perked up like she realized what I was talking about. "You're still on that?" She gave a throaty groan. "I don't care and he knows it, what's the problem?"

"It just..." I tried to think of the words. "It reminds me of what happened to me, back in Winslow."

She cocked her head a little. "What, you get used by some fuckboi?"

"What?" I parsed that after a moment, and my cheeks gained a dusting of pink. "No, not that part... Not really." Goddamn, but this made me feel so uncomfortable. "No one cared."

She stared at me for five whole seconds. "Yeah." She stated firmly. A beat later she continued. "It's high school. People are shit, teenagers are worse. No one cares, and that's just the way things are."

I shook my head. "It wasn't just the students, it was the teachers, the staff, the police..." I trailed off. "No one listened, or cared, or did anything. They'd do things to me. Stupid pranks, sure- glue in my chair, steal my bag, shit it my hair..." I hissed that last part. I liked my hair, and I think Cass knew it. "But there was other stuff. They'd trip me, hit me, ruin my clothes and my books. I had evidence and no one did anything. They put me in the hospital and the police investigation hasn't gone anywhere. Like they can't even care to do their jobs."
Cass had backed away a little, but the look on her face was resigned, even dismissive. I needed to hit harder to get through, though I'm not sure why I cared so much. I'd worked myself up and now this was a fight, and I had to win. "That's..." She started, but I cut her off.

"Even the Empire kids didn't care that a white girl was, was that... was hospitalized by a black girl." I didn't want to acknowledge the Locker any more than I had to.

"Wait," She waved her hands in a 'stop' motion. "wait, the girl who did that was black?" I hated playing the race card with a bigot, but if anyone deserved it, it was Sophia. "And nobody did anything?"

I shook my head, turning away and looking down. Distraught, defeated. I felt her heart pick up, and her muscles tense. I held back the smile that would've ruined it.

"Somethin' fucky's up." She said, startling me out of my mood. I glanced back at her, confused. 

"What?"

"Dudn't add up." She slurred. "Nobody doing anything? Not even the cops? Brockton's a shitheap, and I've heard things about Winslow, but..." She glanced back at me with narrowed eyes. "Even these supposed 'Empire' kids didn't care?" The quotes were in her tone more than anything, but I could tell they were there.

"No. It went on for a year and a half, getting worse and worse, but no one ever seemed to care."

I could see her turning it over in her head. "I need names." She muttered darkly.

"What?" Wait, what did she mean? "I can't... you can't do anything to them." I said weakly.

She muttered 'bullshit' under her breath, before she replied. "I'm not going to do anything. I just want to ask around, see if your story adds up." She smirked. "Nothin's coming back to you on this, promise."

I swallowed and wrung my hands a little, glancing around with my eyes even when I knew no one was around. Then I took a deep breath and sat up straighter. "You mean it? You're not going to do anything?"

She grinned. "I promise I'm not going to do anything." I tried very hard to ignore the emphasis in her voice.

With another deep breath, I nodded. "There were three girls, plus their gang of friends, but mostly those three. Emma Barnes, Sophia Hess, and Madison Clements."

"And the bl-" she tried to cover her slip with a cough, but I caught it anyway. "The one who hospitalized you?"

No going back, now. "That was Hess."

"Interesting." She said, and I could see it in her eye, she was filing the information away. We stayed still for a few moments while she memorized the names. "And what do you want done about them?"

I sighed. "I don't care. I'd just be happy if they left me alone." Now to add more to the fire. "I don't even go to their school anymore, and I caught two of them stalking me yesterday morning."
Her eyes opened wide and her brows shot up. "Really?"

I nodded. "Sophia's on the track team, so I had to work pretty hard to get away from them." More because she'd been tracking me, but I had no idea how to pass that along without outing myself.

"Her again, huh?" Cassie muttered. "You sure they're stalking you?"

"Absolutely sure." I said seriously.

She hummed, and rubbed her face in one of those stereotypical 'thinking' motions. "Gonna need to ask around." She got up, taking her mostly empty tray with her. "See ya later."

As she walked away, I added "And lay off Tim a bit?"

She waved and said "Yeah, sure." distractedly. I'm pretty sure she'd stopped internalizing things by then, but that was fine. I could always ask about that again later.

I felt excitement churning in my belly. Maybe something was going to happen, now? I desperately ignored the part of myself that was worried I'd set a Nazi on a black girl, but it wasn't too hard to push the thoughts down to a manageable level, mostly drowned out by the good mood and catharsis from getting some of that off my chest.

Cass kept saying she wasn't a Nazi, after all.

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The rest of the school day was fine. It got a little awkward when the girl who'd asked me out wanted to talk. Erika had heard I was running the martial arts thing Kara was drumming up people for, and wanted confirmation from the horse's mouth, as it were.

I told her that I was, in fact, doing the thing. She perked up out of her shyness just long enough to say she was excited about it, before she left.

I didn't see anyone I knew on my way out the door, not even Amy or Victoria, who I knew hung around a bit sometimes. I sent a quick text to Amy asking where she was, and headed to my planned outing for the day. It wasn't hard to look up art stores around Brockton, and find one that had a good balance of locations, both distance-from-school wise, and probable-price-tags wise.

When I got there, I checked my phone and found a message from Amy, saying she'd met Vicky at the college instead of Arcadia. A little confused, I asked what she meant. While I was browsing the paints, I stopped to read her longer than usual reply. Apparently Victoria was taking classes at the college in the afternoons, instead of high school courses. News to me, but I guess it explained why I never saw her in the halls after lunch. I asked if Amy wanted to hang out later, and she said that'd be fine, after she was done waiting on Vicky's presentation.

All that done, I grabbed a half-decent selection of paints and brushes. A big tube of the green I thought matched the costume, plus a few browns, blues, whites. I could always say I was trying to get into landscape painting or something. Purchases made, I sent Amy another text, asking if she wanted to help paint 'the things' and hang out after, at my place. I got a short 'sure' back while I was catching the bus home.

Once there, I set my purchases by the kitchen table, ran upstairs to grab the masks, and brought them down. Then I dug out the bag full of old newspapers we kept around for firestarting and messes like this, and papered the table with them. Then I squeezed a good dollop of paint out of the green I wanted onto a double-folded square of paper, and started on one of the masks. The one I'd
grabbed was an Eidolon light green, and it felt a little odd, brushing the darker tone over the slightly glossy finish. It honestly felt more like elementary school crafts class than anything else. I hadn't bothered with painting at camp, when there were options like archery and horse stuff.

Honestly, taking care of the horses had been more fun than riding them, in my opinion.

I was partway into the second mask when there was a knock at the door. I could feel two people outside the door, but hadn't noticed them approaching. Sure enough, it was Amy and Vicky I spied through the peephole.

"Hey." I said when I opened the door.

Amy returned my 'hey' and Vicky chimed in with "Hi, Taylor."

I gave the blonde a look. "So, college classes?"

Mine was an eyebrow to cow Brutes, apparently. She shuffled and gave a nervous chuckle. "I didn't tell you about that?" I tweaked the brow slightly higher, and Amy started giving her a similar look. "Okay, okay, I just..." She'd raised her hands in defense, then started scratching at her cheek. "I didn't want to sound like I was bragging, after we'd gotten off on the wrong foot in the first place."

I held the look for another moment before I dropped it with a sigh and a shrug. "So what kept you? Amy mentioned a presentation?"

She nodded. "Yeah, had presentations in cape studies, Monday and today, but a lot of them went over time last time, so I volunteered to be one of the students staying longer to give mine, so the people with classes to get to right after the normal time could head out."

"That happen often? How many classes do you have there?"

She shrugged. "Not often, usually have time to hang out a bit before I meet people after school at Arcadia. Just taking cape studies, math and physics. And a lit class Sundays, but I don't always make that one..." she trailed off into mumbles by the end. Skipping class for more social time, I bet.

"So what're you up to?" I didn't want to tell her to get lost, but she wasn't in on me being a cape, and I was really hoping she didn't want to stay and hang out with us.

Instead, she shrugged. "I was just going to stick around the campus library to work on an essay, until Amy said she needed a lift." I caught her sister blushing in the corner of my eye. "So I should maybe get back to that. TTYL?" She waved, which prompted us to give little waves of our own, before she floated up and sped off.

We were still waving awkwardly when she'd passed firmly out of earshot, several blocks over as a fading speck in the sky. "Did she just pronounce an initialism out loud?" I asked.

"Just because she's an extrovert doesn't mean she's not a huge dork." Amy clarified. "So, you wanted help painting?"

I waved her inside and followed after. "I don't need the help, so much as thinking it'd be fun to do together." I showed her the kitchen, all done up for painting. "Plus, we can do other stuff after."

The first thing she did after looking the room over was walk over to the sink, and draw the blinds over the window above it. She slowly screwed the little rod to shut them completely, while I felt
my cheeks darkening in a blush. I didn't think about the window opening into the yard, which was enclosed in a fence, but Amy didn't have my foot-senses telling her the other yards were clear. In hindsight though, fliers like Vicky could bypass that pretty easily.

She turned back to find me fidgeting awkwardly. Her heartbeat sped up as she gave a small sigh, her lips twitching up into a smirk. "You doof." She muttered. I gave a little smile of my own, and she came over to the table. "You have any gloves?"

I blinked. Did we? The question made me look down at my own hands, which had a couple of smeared green smudges that further rubbing couldn't dislodge. I grumbled as Amy chuckled at my misfortune. "We've got some of those big rubber ones for toilet cleaning." I recalled out loud.

She shook her head. "Not really what I was after." She dug into her bag a bit, taking a minute or so to come away with a small baggie full of blue plastic. Taking a pair out of their bag, she slipped them on with quiet snaps as the stretchy material clung to her hands.

"Why do you even have those?" I asked, as I watched her replace the baggie.

Amy shrugged. "Just because I can't catch anything doesn't mean other people can't. The nurses got me into the habit of keeping some things around in my civvie gear, like some of them do, just in case."

I didn't mind that she hadn't offered me any. My hands were already marked up, after all. "That's neat. So, painting..." I motioned over to some brushes, one of which I'd been using, and the tube of paint. We both picked up a mask, me grabbing the one I'd already started on, and worked quietly for a bit. Then something I'd wanted to bring up came to mind. "So, I think... I'm going to be forming my own team."

Amy perked up as she looked at me, waiting for me to clarify.

"I don't want to join the Wards, and no offense, but I'd rather not out myself..." She gave a rueful nod. "So I think making my own team is the way to go. I've... sort of got one person lined up already."

"How much to say about Dinah? "But that's partly about keeping her safe, since she's young and doesn't want to join the Wards either." Amy looked thoughtful, now. "I just... have no idea how to go about recruiting more people."

"What about the indie capes?" She asked, pointing her brush vaguely southward. "I think a bunch of them are set up in the south end of town."

"Really?" I blinked owlishly in confusion. "I hadn't heard of any of them."

Amy shrugged. "They don't make the news. Small-time heroes guarding a couple blocks for a few months until the Nazis snatch them, or villains raiding houses instead of risking the boardwalk shops until the cops catch them, or people stuck in the slums until Lung steps on them..." She wiggled her hand in a so-so motion. "They tend to not last long. Marketing to the cape geek tourists says we've got something like a hundred capes in the city, but it's closer to sixty. We've got about twenty total in both the big gangs and the hero groups, and maybe that many indies, depending on the week. I don't think we've broken seventy since I've been a cape."

That was... actually a lot more than I thought we had. "How do you know all this?"

She shrugged and her heart sped up. "I'm plugged into the rumor mill, remember?" She was lying, had some sort of insider information, but I wasn't going to hold it against her.

"Do you know where any of them are? Like, specifically where?"
Amy shook her head. "Not really, no. I could keep an eye out, though?"

I nodded. "That'd be great, thanks."

We were quiet for the rest of the half hour it took to make sure all six were properly done, before we moved on to meditating. Apparently it'd been helping her mood quite a bit, since she was fairly excited (for her, anyway) to get started.

After a few hours on that, we went outside to practice martial arts to loosen up after all that sitting. Dad came home about half an hour after we started, and offered to call in food. We flipped a coin and decided on Chinese food again, getting some less-noodley options this time.

When the food got here, and everyone was at the table, dad cleared his throat. "Your grandmother is coming by next week, figured I'd remind you."

"Huh. Yeah, alright." I muttered. "We need to do anything more than set up the guest room?"

He scoffed. "She's probably going to stay at a hotel, knowing her. Might be best to clean up the room just in case, though."

Amy cut in. "Does she know about you being a cape?"

I shrugged. "I don't think so?"

Dad cleared his throat nervously. "She... might have some idea about that, yeah."

I couldn't help but gawk a little. "Really?"

"I was obtuse about it." He defended. "Didn't give any details, let her make her own conclusions. All she knows is that you might need help with things." He looked like he wanted to say more, but kept silent.

Groaning a little, I muttered, "At least it's just Gram."

"What could she help with?" Amy asked, curiously. "What does she do?"

With a shrug, I took a moment to think about it before I answered. "She runs one of those retail pharmacy chains. Y'know, the ones that try to be a drug store and a supermarket, but have to pick which one they get right?" I didn't really want to relay which one, I was still mildly embarrassed every time I wound up stopping in at one, I didn't want to extend that into my social circle. She seemed to get that I didn't want to talk about it, though.

"Yeah, I think I know what you mean." She slowly replied. "So, what? You think she can help with legal stuff? Money things?"

Dad shrugged and made a waffly, unsure noise. I could tell he was embarrassed and trying to hide it. "Yeah, pretty much."

I decided to bail him out. "She also does investments and things. Mostly medical research."

Amy made an acknowledging grunt. "So, what's she like?"

Dad groaned and rolled his hand, giving away his thoughts on the woman.

"She's always been nice to me, but... kinda' distant. Really controlling, mom didn't get along with her very well." I answered.
"They were too similar." Dad cut in. "Annette was the same way, always had to know what was
going on, have some say in things, when she wasn't the one planning everything. The captain of her
ship." He said, wistfully. "Rosalind always had to have her way. Had Annette's life planned out for
her since before she was out of diapers. By the time teenage rebellion caught her, Anne'd had
enough. Started bucking back, used University as an excuse to get away so she could run off with a
bad crowd..." Yeah, maybe not telling Amy about mom's gang days, just yet... "Never reconnected.
They started talking again after Taylor was born, but there was always this tension whenever they
interacted." He shrugged, helplessly. "She's been good to Taylor, but she's not a nice woman."

I wanted to refute what he'd said, but I really couldn't. With a wince and a groan, I nodded. "Yeah,
kinda."

Amy hummed. Then she perked up. "So wait," She pointed her fork at me. "You're like, some big
pharma heiress?"

"No?" I couldn't keep the questioning whine out of my denial, and she pounced on it.

"You are!" She was smiling a big, wide grin. The sort with too many teeth. "How does that work?
You don't act like a rich kid."

I sighed. "Estranged, remember? Probably have some cousin I don't know about who'll inherit
everything."

Dad hummed, shook his head a little, and went back to his food.

Well, shit.

Amy didn't seem to catch it, though. "Sorry. Didn't want to dig up family trouble." I could feel the
emphasis she put there. For all that New Wave put on a strong front, I'd picked up enough cues to
know it was a front. I didn't want to pick at her family issues either, so I decided to drop it.

I asked some inane question about the English teacher's essay assignments, knowing Amy was a
year ahead of me and would know which one I was talking about. It served to break attention away
from the drama, and we got back to our meal.

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When we'd finished eating, I grabbed a hoodie because it was getting a little chilly out, and we
went back to training. Amy'd gotten some basic forms down, so I decided it was time to start
evasion training. The big limitation to her power was the risk of being taken down before she could
close range, after all. So, I pretended to have a gun, 'firing' rocks from the bunch in my hand,
pretending to throw them to appease Amy's paranoia about me outing myself. We quickly decided
that running towards someone with a gun was pretty stupid, and went back to dodging at range to
find cover.

About half an hour after Amy was tired of that, because training isn't always fun, we cooled down
with more Tai Chi forms. For want of something to talk about, I grasped at straws.

"So, you coming to the thing Friday?" I didn't stop moving to ask.

She stumbled a bit, and looked confused for a second. "Oh, that. I dunno, am I invited to your
lesbian orgies, now?"

This time it was me stumbling, not to mention sputtering. "It's not like that!" I whined, trying to
fight down a blush.
Amy shrugged. "Usually is, with her. And it's all her friends coming, soo..." she trailed off.

I huffed. "Not going to be like that. If they try to start something like that, I'll just leave."

She let out an exaggerated sigh. "I suppose if the poor maiden needs me to protect her virtue, I don't have any choice but to go."

I growled low in my throat, which just made her smirk harder. "Not like you're not a 'maiden' either." I grumbled.

"Yeah," She acknowledged with a shrug, putting her hands up in a 'why not' gesture and grinning. "Except I've actually got kinks. You're vanilla as fuck." She pondered for a second. "More than, really."

My blushing wound up getting worse. "I don't need kinks, and don't need to hear about yours!" I stomped my foot with another huff, not helping my image at all, but not really caring. It was just Amy, after all.

She stifled giggles at my reaction, then started chuckling. "Sure thing, vanilla bean."

"Don't call me that." I grumbled. I had no idea why she was blushing a little now, but I heaved out a sigh. "Well, I'm not in the mood to practice anymore. You calling Vicky for a ride again?"

Amy shrugged and grabbed her phone to text her sister, then we headed inside to wait. After a few minutes of awkwardly skimming mom's old books in the living room, she checked her phone again and groaned. "Nothing. Probably sucking Dean's face again." She stared at her phone for another few seconds and sighed. "I don't suppose I could get a ride?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, that should be fine. Lemme go ask dad." I headed up to dad's room, where he was working at his desk on something. I asked about a ride for Amy and he agreed, getting up and stretching with a groan before he followed me downstairs.

When we got down there, Amy rattled off an address, dad said he knew the area, and we all piled into the truck with me sitting in the middle. Our truck only had the one bench-seat style row, not anything fancy. I was mostly coming along because I was curious about the Dallon's place.

We were most of the way through the first song after Dad turned on the radio when we heard a series of crashes behind us. Dad swerved off the road in time to miss the flickering blur that raced past us.

All three of us muttered some manner of expletive over the event, and I pushed Amy and motioned for the door. She got out, and I hopped after her.

"Masks?" I asked, prompting her to start digging through her bag.

"Taylor?" Dad asked, hands still on the wheel, looking a bit shell-shocked as he watched us.

"I have to help." I said. He shook his head, and I pressed on. "I have to help eventually, I might as well start now."

First thing's first. Stop the truck. I could feel it, blocks away now. I dropped, my knee and fist hitting the ground prompting pillars of road to shoot up around and in front of the truck. I wasn't sure it would be enough to make them stop, but the driver slammed on the breaks and started skidding, coming to a stop well before they had to. As I rose, I thrust my fist up, cutting off their retreat with more pillars.
Amy handed me the entire partial pack of cheap masks she'd had in her bag. I grabbed one, pocketed the rest, and tossed her bag into the cab before Dad could argue, shutting the door behind it. Amy looked a tad perplexed by my actions as I put the mask on. Then I grabbed her in a bridal carry and started running.

It had nothing on Glory airlines, I was sure, but she still squealed briefly and clutched on tight as we took off. I made a beeline for a fenced in yard between here and the truck, leaping it with an air assist. By the time we made it there, the residents of the house were still slowly making their way out front to see what the ruckus was, so I knew we were safe for a bit.

Immediately, I shucked my shirt and hoodie, pulling the shirt out to tie it around my head like I'd seen in a diagram online. My masked eyes peered out of the neck-hole as I tied the arms behind my head. Amy was just getting over her surprise and shock then.

"You know it's probably bad if we're seen together, right?"

I raised a fist with one finger out. "You live just down the street." I raised a second. "Saving lives is more important." I dropped my hand and put my hoodie back on.

"I don't think it is." I glared at her, and we heard gunshots. Two of the men who'd gotten out of the truck to run dropped as we looked in that direction. "But you'd just drag me along anyway. Fine." she conceded.

It was a bit easier picking her up when she let me. I vaulted the wall with a gust of air, and started down the street at a wind-propelled sprint. We crossed the intervening blocks in seconds, and I was forced to use airbending to help slow our speed when we got there.

There were three capes here, two were inspecting the truck from a few feet away from it, one in red and black robes, and the other in a red catsuit. The third, a blond man in a black breastplate, was standing over the third and last man from the truck, who was on his front on the ground, hands over his head. His compatriots were groaning on the ground near the pillars to either side of the truck. One clutching his thigh, the other his stomach.

We all stared at each other for a moment, before the girls clustered together near one of the pillars, catsuit holding robe's left arm while her right scribbled something on the asphalt chunk at the top of the pillar, causing it to break free and float in front of them. The man turned towards us, but didn't move after that, gun still pointed at the man on the ground.

"Now this is interesting." He said.

I set Amy down, and she headed straight for gut-wound, the closer of the two injured men. "I'm going to need you to put the gun down." I said firmly.

"Really?" He asked with a chuckle. His features firmed into stoicism and he wiggled the gun slightly. "I don't think you're the one dictating terms, here. You leave, and we won't follow."

I glanced my eyes around. There was a huge slab of asphalt off to the side, which was probably how they got here, if the robed girl was Rune, like I thought. The man was almost certainly Victor, which made the other girl Othala. Situation assessed, I turned my eyes back to him.

Then I tapped my heel to the ground.

The girls shrieked as the ground fell from under them, landing them in a pit. A turn of my foot, grinding it against the asphalt saw the dirt in the pit constricting around them.
"Nope." His eyes were wide as he turned them from his compatriots back to me. "You put down the gun, then-" I let out a pained squawk as the floating piece of asphalt slammed into my face.

So Rune didn't need hand-motions to control things. This was valuable information.

By the time I'd shaken myself back to awareness and kipped up onto my feet, Rune had dug the girls out with trump-granted super-strength, and Victor had regrouped near them. Othala was standing with a hand each on the others' shoulders, and the large mass of asphalt they'd rode in on was hovering ominously nearby.

The gun was pointed at me, now.

"That was rather rude." Victor said, his voice surprisingly calm. "I will reiterate my original offer. Leave, or else."

Okay, so they weren't shooting me. That was good. "Why are you even here?" I asked.

"It should be obvious." He nodded towards the truck.

"It really isn't." I shot back.

"They were assaulting our territory, and we were punishing them for it."

The unwounded man on the ground snarled. "Didn't do nuthin' 'til they started-" he was cut off by a gunshot, and started screaming. By the time my attention was back on Victor, the gun was pointed at me again.

"Pretty sure that was rude." I growled.

We stood there at an impasse for almost half a minute. Victor was angry and stressed, but forcing himself to be more calm. Othala was anxious, but mostly had this weird giddy feeling. It was parts happiness, joy, excitement... I think she was a little turned on by the fighting, though that might have been working with Victor. I'd heard they were close, possibly even lovers or married. Rune was the odd duck out, her feelings not really centered on the fight at all. She was wary and anxious which I assumed were fight related, but her emotions were dominated by shock, confusion, and worry. The sort of compassionate fear one feels for others. That didn't seem right, but I was more worried about the fight. What to try next, how to dodge so that even if I was hit, I'd still be alive for Amy to fix me up, which of them I should prioritize... I was still cycling through possibilities when the world turned purple. Victor dove in front of Othala, a beam of purple energy splashing against him from above me. I turned and looked up, finding Lady Photon in her civilian clothes glaring thunderously at the trio through the shield she'd thrown up between us and them.

"I think we'll be leaving, now." Victor stated, motioning for Rune to bring the platform over. Othala kept her hands on the pair. I knew she needed touch for her power, but holding on like she was seemed significant in a way I couldn't quite understand.

"What makes you so sure of that?" Photon Mom asked, and from her tone I was pretty sure her hands were glowing.

The gun turned to point at Amy. "I can think of a couple reasons."

"You can't." She hissed.

Victor smirked. "I can shoot the wings off a fly, and the rules are a might fuzzy about kneecaps."
Everyone knew Amy couldn't heal herself. As far as they knew, an injury like that would put her in the hospital for months, and might cripple her for life. I wasn't sure I could heal that kind of damage.

Amy joined us in glaring, from where she'd been kneeling next to the leg-shot man, having finished stabilizing gut-shot.

"Fine." Sarah snarled out after a tense few seconds.

The trio took their time climbing on, going one at a time and making sure not to break their contact chain. Victor was last, gun pointed unerringly at Amy, even as they started floating away. By the time they were far enough that I'd doubt his ability to make the shot, they were high enough in the air that taking out their ride would almost certainly kill at least one of them.

There was a crack of air as Dauntless landed nearby like a lightning bolt. "Is everyone okay?" He asked after glancing around.

"Yeah." Amy answered, having gotten back to work.

"Victor, Rune, and Othala were here. They flew off that way." Lady Photon pointed.

He paused for a second. "Armsmaster's on the way now. We might be able to catch them." She nodded, and the two took off into the sky.

I heaved in a breath. "Well, that happened." I walked over to Amy. "Need help?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine." She said, tersely. "You just had to play hero." She added, a few seconds later.

"I can't not help."

After a moment, she sighed. "I know."

I started fixing the place up, after that. Pushing the pillars back down one at a time, filling in the hole I'd dumped the girls into. I was debating whether or not to try fixing the road surface when I heard the motorcycle approaching. By now people had stopped watching from their houses, and were standing nearby, but none had come close enough to try talking to us yet.

The blue chromed bike slowed to a stop just outside the street damage, offloading its matching rider. I'd dreamed of moments like this, meeting the heroes, him in particular. I took a deep breath and pushed the giddy excitement down. Nobody would appreciate the fangirling right now.

Armsmaster observed the damage, then strode over. I was having trouble reading him through the alloys of his suit, and the suspension system in his greaves and boots.

"You're the geokinetic." He stated as fact. He gave me a once-over, then added, "Not much of a costume."

"Because it isn't one." I shot back.

He paused to process the statement, then gave a thoughtful hum. He turned to where Amy was fixing up the last guy. "Everyone is fine?"

"They will be." She answered, and he nodded.

Turning back to me, he said, "Not everyone would jump into a fight, plainclothes."
I shrugged. "Heroes gotta hero."

He chuffed and smirked. "You know we have a team for that."

I blushed a little, not that he could see it. I stifled the fidgeting as much as I could. "I know, but I can't."

The smirk faded a bit. "Are you sure you won't reconsider?"

I heaved in an unsteady breath. "Please, don't."

His face grew stony as he nodded. "Dauntless mentioned Empire capes. What happened?"

The vans full of PRT troopers showing up gave me time to think as I watched them file out and case the scene. Couldn't mention being with Amy when things kicked off, but I didn't have to veer too far from the truth. "Heard crashing, so I investigated. The truck," I indicated the vehicle in question. "Was invisible. I made pillars around it to make it stop, and it did. The capes came flying in, shot the guys..." why wouldn't they have shot me, in that scenario? "I don't think they knew I was here. So I jump out, tell them to stop, they tell me to leave, and we get into a bit of a standoff until Lady Photon showed up. Then they threatened..." Can't call her Amy. "Panacea with the gun, so we let them leave. Dauntless showed up and they flew off."

Armsmaster stared for a beat, then turned to look at Amy, though he was still addressing me. "And ms Dallon?"

I blinked, and shrugged. "I don't know when she showed up." Good, didn't make it sound like a question.

He stared for another beat, and I could imagine his eyes narrowing. Eventually he gave a brief nod. "I'll need a name for my report."

The first thing that came to mind after looking around and ruminating on it for a bit seemed fitting enough. "Terraform."

Armsmaster scowled. "Are you aware that name was used previously?"

"Was it?" Oh no. None of the other options that came to mind sounded anywhere near as good.

He nodded. "One of the tinkers who worked on Sphere's moonbase project. He was hunted down by Mannequin."

I stood in shocked silence for a few seconds. That wasn't great, but... "Was he a hero?" Armsmaster seemed to hesitate, but gave a small nod. "Then it's fine."

At first I thought he was going to argue, but a few moments later, he gave a brief sigh out his nose, and nodded. He glanced around, and asked, "Can you fix the road?"

"Oh, yeah," I perked up and observed the damage. "I was waiting a bit though, it's probably going to smell."

His head tilted slightly and I imagined his brow was quirked. I responded by flashing out a stream of fire along part of the line of former-pillars, then packed the gravel tight in the now-molten tar. Armsmaster had jumped back slightly when I started, and was eyeing me warily.

"Not just a geokinetic, then." It was a statement, but I could hear the request for clarification in his
"Nope." I replied.

"...Grab bag?"

"I don't think so." I shook my head.

Another minute inclination of his head. "Then, what is your power, if you don't mind?"

I shrugged. "Classical elements."

He spent a few seconds processing this, before letting out a slightly impressed hum. He waved a hand to indicate the rest of the damage, said "Carry on." And turned to walk over and talk to Amy.

I squeed internally.

The giddy hop to my step as I turned to get back to work was entirely necessary. Even the rank stench of molten tar couldn't bring my mood down. Though it did stifle my smile a bit when I started tasting the stink after grinning to hard. When I finished, I waited off to the side. It didn't take long for Amy to be done, but instead of heading over to me, she took out her phone. Moments later I felt mine vibrate. I turned away, grabbed it, and noticed I had two texts. One from Amy telling me to meet her two streets over, and one from dad, telling me he was waiting for us at the Dallon's.

I couldn't help the feeling of impending dread as I jogged around a corner and hopped a fence. I did the next couple too, just to be safe, before I found one I was sure to be private. I fixed my shirt and hoodie before taking off the mask. Another hop, and I was off to find Amy.

She was standing around, irritably tapping a foot as she waited. She spotted me coming, and turned with a quirked brow, frowning disapprovingly.

"What?" I asked, causing the frown to intensify. "What'd I do?"

Her heart rate jumped, and she sighed, shaking her head. "Let's just go meet your dad."

"Oh, he sent a text saying he'd meet us there." She froze, turning wide eyes on me, before she cussed and started power-walking down the street.

The walk was quiet and tense as we skipped over another couple blocks and turned. I knew we were there when I recognized one of the cars when we were half a block from it. The house was fairly nice, but all of them were, compared to ours. Everything in the bay got nicer as you went south, at least until you hit Arcadia. Even then, aside from the Boardwalk and the mansions out west near Captain's Hill, the nicest parts of town were still further south, like the Towers and the area around Medhall.

Amy didn't slow as she stormed up the porch steps and opened the door. I followed her in to find Dad sitting on one of the couches, with presumably mr and mrs Dallon on the other. Dad heaved out a relieved sigh when he saw me, mr Dallon gave us a tired smile, and mrs Dallon turned judging eyes on the pair of us. I couldn't help but gulp under her scrutiny.

"Hey, dad." I managed, with a wave.

"You two," Carol snapped, "have some explaining to do."
"You two," Carol snapped, "have some explaining to do."

Her eyes were darting between us, but spent the most time focused on me. She was tense, her heart rate elevated, breathing slow and deep. The sort of reactions I'd expect from a trained combatant expecting a fight. That's when I realized she was focused on me, not just as a new stranger, but a potential threat.

I put my hands up around chest-height in a 'wait' gesture, but that just made her tense more without showing it. Right, capes. "I'm sorry," I said, dropping my hands as soon as I could make it seem natural. "it's my fault we're late."

Amy turned to look at me, surprised. Carol's eyes narrowed and locked on me.

"Erm..." I tried not to wither under the glare, but I was feeling hemmed in and trapped, again. "You probably heard from dad how we got run off the road, right?"

Carol tilted her head slightly in what could loosely be termed a nod. Her husband was much more emotive in his agreement. "We were on our way out to investigate the gunshots when we found mr Hebert in the driveway," He said, motioning towards dad with a small friendly smile. "and I invited him in. By the time we knew you might be in that fight, the shooting had stopped and the fight was probably over." The statement was punctuated with a small shrug.

"Yeah." Fights were over surprisingly quick, compared to how the media portrayed them. Unless you were dealing with an A-class or higher threat, this tended to hold true in cape fights, too. "We were there, but we're fine."

Carol's gaze twitched down slightly, and she rolled her eyes. "Fine, she says..." She muttered, before her eyes pierced into mine again. "And what about Amy? You might think you're fine because she can heal 'anything', but she can't heal dead." She was getting louder, slowly creeping to her feet as she went. "And what if something happened to her? She can't heal herself! Jumping into a gunfight is stupid enough, but dragging a noncombatant into one is unconscionable!" She took a huffing breath as the room stared uneasily at her. "I won't have you filling her head with idiotic notions of running off to find bloody fights to get herself killed or worse in-"

"Excuse me." Dad cut in firmly enough to be heard over her shouting. Carol turned her cutting gaze to him, but he held without openly flinching. I could tell how nervous he was, but it didn't show. He sat there, giving her a displeased look just shy of a glare, leaning forward towards us with his hands laced in his lap. His tone was firm, but low and calm when he continued. "I won't argue with what you're saying- I even agree with most of it- but I will not sit here and listen to you screaming at my daughter." Carol hissed in a breath, muscles clenching as her hackles raised. "If that's all that's happening here, we are going to leave. Otherwise, we should sit down and discuss this, like
The words caused a bit of a stalemate, where she cooled down a little, before she started tensing up again, likely to jump down dad's throat about it. Her husband beat her to it. "I think he's right, dear." Carol turned her attention to the meek and tired man, an entire conversation passing between them in moments, barely slow enough that I could tell it was happening, let alone try to decipher it.

In the end she took a deep breath and heaved it out in a sigh, sitting back down. The mood of the room was still tense, but much better than it'd been since we got here. They were clearly waiting for us to sit, and Amy seemed to be waiting for my cue, but something about that entire interaction was digging at the back of my mind. It took me a moment to realize what. "How did you even know we were in the fight?" A teenager running off to see what might be a cape battle was extremely stupid, but also startlingly common for the Bay. Nothing about what I'd said seemed to indicate we'd done more than stand nearby like most gawkers did.

Carol glared at me. Dad heaved out a short sigh and rubbed at his eyes. Mr Dallon gave a shy smile and scratched rather obviously at his cheek. It took me a second to get it, and when I reached up to touch my own cheek, I drew the hand back with a pained hiss. What the hell? I turned to look for something reflective, and wound up darting over to a particularly glossily framed photo of Victoria to check my face. Sure enough, almost a third of it was an irritated red, with the cheek slowly darkening into a nasty bruise. It'd be one hell of a shiner by morning.

I turned to Amy, who flinched and mouthed a pained 'sorry'. She offered out her hand, and motioned me towards her when I hesitated. No reason not to, I suppose. I gave a half-hearted huff and took her hand, waiting and feeling as the dull ache I hadn't noticed until now started to fade. "There you go." She said quietly.

I murmured my thanks, and led her over to the couch dad was on. They all watched us as we did, Carol's eyes fixed on our clasped hands until we sat and I let go. I wasn't familiar enough with the woman to tell if her tension and apprehension were just her normal state, but I was starting to suspect so. "So..." I muttered, to incite the inquisition.

Dad took point, turning to the Dallons. "Would you like to start with some of your concerns, or should I?" I really shouldn't be surprised at how well he was mediating this with little more than tone and body language, but it was kind of his job, right? Sure he was mainly Head of Hiring, but he was also the Spokesman, lobbying for support at council meetings, sitting in on some of their contract deals to help smooth over negotiations, and drumming up business alongside the other unions.

My dad was kind of amazing, actually.

"Why did you bring Amy with you?" Carol asked, the roiling emotions I could detect peeking through into her calm facade a little.

"Gunshots mean gun wounds. I thought she might be able to save lives." I promptly replied.

"...into the fight?" She reiterated.

I hesitated, but these were heroes. More than that, concerned parents. I felt I had to give them something. "I knew I could keep her safe." Up until the end, anyway.

Carol quirked an eyebrow. "And if you couldn't? If she had been hurt?"

I curled up a bit, hesitating. Amy placed a comforting hand on my knee, and dad cut in. "Taylor has
"Dad, it's okay," I mumbled, taking a deep breath, then another. "I'm a healer." I nearly shouted at the floor. Carol's eyes narrowed, even as her husband's widened. "I'm not as good as Amy is, not as fast, but... I could have healed her."

"And that makes it okay?" Carol hissed.

"Carol,"

"No, Mark." She snapped.

"Taylor," Dad cut in, which annoyed Carol but he didn't seem to care. "Why didn't you wait with me? We could have called it in to the police and kept going."

"PRT." I said. He let out a confused noise. "There were Empire capes there, and the truck that nearly ran us over was tinkertech. ...Besides, they'd already run off. We wouldn't have had any useful information if I hadn't stopped the truck, and at least one of those men could've died if Amy hadn't been there." Amy's 'so-so' hand gesture really didn't help, there.

Carol's pocket dinged, and she dug out her phone while dad talked. "I see. And why didn't you call them after stopping the truck?"

"I-" Huh. I don't know. it seems like the obvious option in hindsight, but it still left a bad taste in my mouth for some reason. I took a while to ponder it. "I think... I didn't trust them? To make it in time, or do their jobs if they got there..."

"Why?" Carol asked, and seemed honestly confused. ...in addition to her usual emotional cocktail.

I stuttered and trailed off, not sure how to answer. I didn't want to talk about the Locker, or anything even tangentially related to it. I didn't want to dwell on how badly the administration had let me down. Dad seemed at a loss for what to say too, but Amy perked up after a few seconds. "Trigger trauma." She stated.

"What?" I asked, turning to her.

"It has to do with what happened, right?"

I winced and hunched down again. "...yeah." I rubbed my arms, but it didn't help the shivers.

"So it's trigger trauma." Amy turned to her parents, looking incredibly offended on my behalf. "Not even a month old trigger trauma."

Had it really only been a month? "Huh. I was comatose through around the 10th, wasn't I?" That had everyone staring again. Dad and Amy giving me sympathetic looks, while the older Dallons looked slightly aghast. I shook my hands out in front of me. "No, I'm fine, I think. I... it's just been a busy month, is all."

"Bit of a roller coaster." Dad chimed in with a small smile.

Mark raised his hands placatingly. "It's fine, we won't bring it up, right dear?"

Carol still stared sharply, but I could tell her emotions were conflicted. "I will want to know why your trigger has you so distrustful of the PRT, at some point."

I winced again. That did sound rather bad, didn't it? "...sure." I nodded hesitantly.
"So you knew she was a cape." She nodded to dad, who nodded back. "And you knew." Amy huffed at her mother's tone, but inclined her head in a vaguely affirmative motion. "Does Victoria know?"

My face crinkled into a cringe. "I don't..." -think so? -have any intention of telling her? -want you to tell her? "...probably not?"

She hummed disapprovingly, but nodded. "The Wards aren't an option for whatever reason?" She asked dad.

Dad nodded. "Taylor wants to form her own hero team. I think having a heroic option that doesn't involve capes tying themselves to the government or outing themselves... no offense..." All three Dallons grimaced in their own way, but didn't actually seem offended. "...will be good for the city."

Carol rubbed her chin. "I can see where it might." She pointed. "And for the record, New Wave isn't currently recruiting anyway."

"That's fine." I said. "I have some leads on recruits, I've got my training handled, and I've even got an order in with Parian for my costumes already." I felt inordinately proud of that part.

"Costumes, plural?" She asked, as if she'd misheard.

Amy leaned forward and put her hand near her mouth to stage whisper. "She's a secret big pharma heiress."

"Ohh." Carol's head tilted up, acknowledging the point. "I assume she's had the standard abduction training, already?"

Wait, like anti-kidnapping? That's a thing? By the time I realized everyone was waiting for me to answer, I'd used up my thinking time. "I... punch good?"

Amy was snickering the whole time. Dad scoffed and smirked, shaking his head. Mark didn't seem sure how to react, so he was politely smiling. Carol failed to stifle a groan.

She took a breath, and I could see her thinking 'not my problem' before she continued. "We would appreciate it if you didn't drag members of New Wave, especially non-combatants, into your fights from now on."

I bristled at the implications there, but dad took over before I could snap at her. "That sounds reasonable. I'm sure trained heroes like yourselves are more than capable of determining their own course of action. Taylor needs to learn to ask, rather than assume a fellow hero will help." I was about to snap at him, when the sour-lemon look on Carol's face made me realize he'd taken my side.

In the end, she clicked her tongue. "Yes, quite." I got the feeling she was giving dad the point in their social fight, rather than actually agreeing with him. "It's getting late, Victoria will be home soon, if you'd like to avoid telling her." From her tone and body language, internal and not, she still didn't approve of keeping her daughter in the dark. She seemed more interested in getting us out of her house though, and it wasn't a bad reason to go. I glanced at dad and we shared a nod, then looked to Amy, who bit back a grimace, but twitched her head toward the door.

I got up, and when I passed Amy and she didn't, I grabbed her wrist and pulled her up. I dragged her as she half-heartedly protested until we wound up by the door, where I hugged her.

Dad had been stopped on his way to follow by Mr Dallon, who'd called him 'Mr Hebert' again.
"Danny, please." Dad asked, holding out his hand.

"Mark." He shook the hand, and grabbed some scrap paper and pen from an end-table, scribbling out a number. "This is my number- not New Wave's, please don't hand it out-" Dad chuckled and nodded as he accepted the scrap. "I know how hard it can be raising a parahuman daughter. I can't promise I'll be able to help, but even if I can't, I can point you at people that can. Don't hesitate to ask."

They shook hands again, more firmly this time. "I won't, thank you."

While that was going on, I was whispering in Amy's ear. "I'm sorry for dragging you into this. Thank you for helping, anyway."

She sighed. "You didn't not have a point..." She pulled away, but kept her hands on my waist. "You didn't have to admit anything, or out yourself, you know." She muttered so the adults wouldn't overhear.

I smiled. "I couldn't throw you under the bus like that."

Her cheeks pinked a bit, and her chest started that frustrated rumbling again. Increased heart rate, muscle tension, elevated breathing... I'm not sure what set her off. She pushed again and turned away.

The adults were staring, by then. Carol with those dark, calculating eyes, and the dads with their soft smiles.

"We should head out." Dad came to our rescue, and started towards us and the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" I asked Amy, who nodded and waved as she backed towards the stairs up to the bedrooms.

We got out to the truck and got in. Dad didn't bother with the radio this time. After a minute or so, he said, "Amy's a nice girl."

"Yeah?" I replied, not sure where he was going with that.

He shook his head with a little smile, and drove us home.

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THU FEB 17

The morning started just like any other. Quick breakfast, workouts, check last night's homework, run to school... I still hadn't spotted anything suspicious within a couple blocks of myself on my run. I didn't know if that meant they'd just given up, or if I couldn't spot them. Sure I had the range to tell where people were and generally what they were up to farther than that, but it was much harder to tell if they were paying attention to me that far off.

I got to school and showered, texting Amy to see if she was at school yet when I was out. I wound up meeting her in the cafeteria for the school's questionable breakfast substitute. Way fewer students showed up for it than lunch, and the quality suffered. I still found Amy working her way through a plate of rubbery sausage and stale pancakes.

"Rough morning?" I asked. Amy usually ate at home, in spite of having to deal with her mother.
She shrugged. "Fine." She stabbed at her food. "Last night was weird, though."

"Sorry?"

"Not you." She waved away, "It's... never mind." She shook her head and went back to picking at her food.

I watched her dispassionately dissect the pressed gluten constructs for a few seconds. "Do... you want something else?"

She shrugged again. "Already hit my fruit quota."

I rolled my eyes. Of all the things to ration for breakfast, they choose the only palatable options? I hopped up and joined the short line, grabbing a couple apples and an instant oatmeal cup. Stupid two-fruit limit. I scanned my ID, poured some hot water from the little table set up after the pay station into the cup, and made my way back to Amy, tossing her one of the apples.

"You didn't have to do that." She grumbled.

"Shut up and eat." My tone was ruined by the small smirk I wore, but it got her smiling again.

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I didn't see Cass in the halls, or at lunch. We didn't share classes, so I couldn't check that way. It wasn't too odd to not see her around, but at lunch? She wasn't outside at the bench, there were a few guys I didn't recognize with my earth senses smoking out there today. She was a big girl though, and didn't need me worrying over her, so I sat next to Amy.

"Taylor!" Kara erupted into my personal space.

"Hi!" I reflexively replied, nearly jumping into Amy's lap.

"Can I see your phone?" She asked with a far-too-innocent smile.

"Why?" I asked in what I hoped was a reasonable tone.

"I need it." She chirped happily.

"...but why?" She had her own phone, I'd seen her on it before.

"I neeeed it." She wheedled, wiggling as she stood there with her fists clenched in front of her mouth, causing her to jiggle in interesting wa- nope.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts. Still straight.

She stood there, pouting at me, her eyes twinkling as her lip quivered.

"At this point, you have three options." Amy stated from beside me. "You can either give her what she wants, wait until she starts fondling you until she finds it-" the grabby handsy motions Kara made weren't helping. "-or you can squirt your drink in her face." She took a sip of her fruit juice. "I am particularly fond of that last one."

I looked down at my own juice, and was immediately reminded of every time Madison ruined my day the same way.

With a heavy sigh, I fished out the phone and handed it over. It was just a phone, after all. Not like
there was anything important on it. I had all the numbers I didn't remember written down at home and I'd never used the internet connection or the camera.

Kara let out a shrill squeal of delight and set upon the device, taking out her own and fiddling with both. Vicky floated over from Amy's other side, giggling and pointing at things, which just set Kara off again.

Amy's hand patted my shoulder. "Whatever comes of this, know that I did warn you." She patted me again. "You were a good friend, and I shall miss you." Pat.

I shrugged her hand off and waved it away. "Fuck off." This just set her to giggling, too. I couldn't keep the grin off my face. This was... nice. Having friends was nice.

Kinda' worried about my phone, now. This is usually when things go wrong with my day. No, bad brain. This isn't Winslow. It's okay to be happy. It is. Really.

There were two more girls pointing at things now. I munched nervously at my food while Amy was busy negotiating social niceties with the girl who'd taken Vicky's seat.

Eventually it was done, and I was given my phone back, along with a slip of folded paper.

"I added a lock screen to your phone. Because you really need to lock your phone." She leaned in and whispered, "It is my birthday." She hovered ominously and tapped the paper. "Never forget my birthday." Then she hopped back and smiled brilliantly. "See you tomorrow, Tay! Toodles!"

The look of desperate alarm I shot my best friend was met with a snort and a shrug.

"Warn you, I did." She said once she'd finished chuckling.

"You really didn't." She shrugged and went back to her food while I checked the damage. I plugged in the new code- 090393- and searched through it. Photos still empty, no new apps, internet still defaults to trying to get me to set it up... I checked the contacts and sighed. Almost three dozen new numbers.

Kara's had a trio of hearts next to it. Because of course it did.

...how did she even do that?
I spent the rest of lunch figuring out how to turn text and symbols into little faces and shapes.

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After school, I made my way out the front doors and started to wonder what I was going to do with the rest of the day. I knew Amy was busy at the hospital, and Vicky was probably going to be there or at the college, since she seemed to plan her study days around Amy's schedule. I was starting to think I really needed to get Dinah's phone number. It was one thing to call her and see what she was up to, but an entirely different situation calling her home- the number I did have- and risk having one of the Alcotts answer and wind up having to ask if their daughter could play today.

The creep factor made me shiver, but I still couldn't help worrying about the girl.

I sent texts off to Cassie and Kara, asking if they wanted to hang out. Cass' came back quickly. A short "Sorry, busy." that rekindled the slight worry from earlier. Had she even come to school
today? Thinking back to what I knew of her, I started to consider that I might not want to know whatever she was up to, today.

Kara's reply broke up my pondering, a much longer "Had plans with some girlfriends today, but you could come too, if you're interested." Except she spelled it differently and added a winky-face at the end.

After my blush receded to the point I didn't think I'd overheat, I politely declined her invitation.

That left me with not much to do for the rest of the day. I'd had a pretty easy time keeping up with my homework just taking an hour or two a night before bed to get it done, so I didn't feel a particular need to study. I didn't have any running around to do, and social activities like going to the movies were things that never appealed to me, solo.

With a shrug, I decided that falling back on training was a good option. It'd been a while since I'd sat down and practiced with my powers, anyway. I sent dad a text saying I'd be 'out late at practice' and took a bus north. The buses didn't go all the way to the Trainyard or Boat Graveyard, but they came closer to there than they did the slums to the southeast.

After I got off the bus and went a few more blocks through the progressively more dilapidated areas leading to the disused and drug-peddler-ridden areas that made up the Merchant's territory, I ducked into an alleyway, slipped on a hoodie, tied my hair back, and put on one of those spare domino masks.

Now that I thought about it, Amy didn't seem to mind that I'd basically swiped her pack of masks last night, but better to make sure. I sent her a text asking if she wanted them back.

Her reply was the text equivalent of a shrug. Then she said she'd just grab another pack from the hospital while she was there. I almost asked her about that, but hesitated. The masks were pretty cheap-looking. Sturdy synthetic fiber things with nylon cord ties and a metal loop to thread the ties through, they were obviously mass-produced. If I saw them in a store somewhere, I wouldn't be surprised if the pack was less than ten bucks. Amy probably had permission to resupply at the hospital, and even if she didn't, it was probably a case of an office worker swiping a box of paperclips from the supply closet. Sure it was illegal and someone in the company might get mad about it, but most of their co-workers either wouldn't care or did the same thing, right? Might be worth bringing up if I remembered later, but not worth potentially starting a text argument while she was working.

As I made my way to the Trainyard, aiming for one of the piles of compacted rusty traincars I'd left last time, I kept my senses peeled. While I walked, I called in three different back-alley meetings I was pretty sure were drug deals to the police using my burner phone. I was a bit surprised I didn't see any other obvious crime about, but people from this area probably preferred to mug people from the other, richer, parts of town. I'd debated just leaving the tips anonymously, but figured there wasn't any harm in admitting to being a cape who preferred not to punch people if I didn't have to. The cops seemed pleasantly surprised, since if I didn't get involved, that cleared up any jurisdiction issues that might crop up with the PRT. Nothing wrong with non-PRT cops busting up non-cape deals and such, I guess. They did tell me that if I got into a fight, it's the PRT I should call, though.

I made it through the no-longer-effective fencing surrounding most of the Trainyard, only having to walk an additional half block to find a hole through it big enough I could simply walk in. Took another five minutes to make my way to where I'd thought the pile was. It didn't look like anyone had picked through it, but I still dropped some rocks on it just to be safe.
I woke up, shaking my head to try and clear the dizziness and ringing. I was in a collapsed shed, pushing little bits of brick and sheet metal rubble off of myself. It took longer than I would've liked to remember what'd been going on, and to check my phone. With how groggy I'd been up until now, I wasn't sure how long I'd been up, but I must've been out for at least half a minute or so, maybe more. I hobbled to my feet and climbed out of the rubble. It looked like a bomb went off.

...which, yeah. That makes sense.

I felt a truck full of people coming to investigate, and was feeling considerably less merciful than I had before being exploded. I hid a little further back among the still-standing walls of one of the larger dilapidated warehouses as they got out and started checking through the wreckage. There were six guys, all of them skinny or with only a bit of paunch, and all of them armed, though I could only find guns on three of them. A couple of the gun guys had done the smart thing, waiting out in the open while their buddies tried to figure out what'd happened.

I decided to hit the watchmen first. Shooting the concrete under their feet up a couple inches made both stumble. One fell over and stayed there long enough for me to pull up slabs from either side of him and lock him down there. The other had rolled as soon as he hit the ground, so I had a rock slam into his gun hand's wrist fast enough to at least sting. I heard him yelp from where I was hiding, cradling his hand. I didn't give myself time to feel bad about hurting him, pulling the floor out from under him again. This time I caught him in the same type of 'stone tent' structure I'd trapped his friend in.

By then the rest of them had scrambled out of the rubble they were looking over, and headed back. They slowed to a stop, looking around confused, while the two on the ground shouted at them. I couldn't hear what was being said, but knew it was probably best to not give them time. I repeated my disarming trick with the one who still had a gun, and ran out from behind the corner. As I went, I had the concrete under their feet push up a little under each foot one at a time, leading them to stumbling mostly in the directions I wanted them to go. Three of them fell together in a heap, and I trapped them by making a shallow pit and rolling them into it, followed by capping it with a thick concrete slab.

The last, I kept stumbling about until I made my way to him and punched him. He fell, groaned, and shuffled on the ground, so I stacked a couple more diagonal slabs on him like the first two.

I surveyed my work, blocking out the shouting as I did so. I took a deep breath and heaved it out. Yeah. That felt good.

With a grin, I fished my burner phone out, the cheaper system having cracked a bit in the explosion. Might need another one soon, I guess. Should also try to keep my personal phone away from fights in the future, to keep it away from potential damage. I flipped through the redial and held the phone to my ear.

"Brockton Bay Police Department." Came the voice of the same lady I'd talked to the last few times.

"Hi! It's Terraform again." I still felt a giddy thrill every time I said it. "I was looking around the Trainyard when something I was poking at exploded. I think it was a trap, since a half dozen guys showed up to investigate a few minutes later."

I'd heard typing while I talked, and the woman's tone was much more serious now. "Are you okay?"

Something in her voice made me pause. "Yeah?" I looked down to actually start checking myself
for injuries. No big clothing tears, no blood I could find... I felt fine, so, "Yeah. I should be fine."

The mic picked up a small sigh of relief. "Good." A little more keyboard tapping. "Where are you, in the Trainyard?"

"Southeast part, uhh..." I looked around, and spotted the building I'd hidden in. "One of the buildings nearby says '442' on it."

"Got it." She said, tapping again. "You said there was an explosion?" I agreed. "Were there any visible tanks, maybe rusty cylinders or fire hazard signs around?" I didn't remember anything like that, and said as much. "Alright. You mentioned guys, were you in a fight?" Something about that tickled the back of my mind, but I couldn't remember what until I answered yes, and she continued with a sigh. "I've already got a team heading your way, but in the future when you get into a fight, that makes it a PRT case. Do you understand?" Her tone was firm, but it didn't sound like an admonishment. Still, I groaned.

"Yeah, I understand." I checked over the thugs again. "With everything going on, I forgot. I'm sorry."

She chuckled. "It's fine, I wish you could call us for anything, but times have changed a bit. Now, the PRT needs calling over this. Would you prefer I handle that?"

I winced. "You wouldn't mind?"

I could hear the shrug in her voice. "Part of the job."

"Alright, yeah. If you would."

A bit more keyboard clicking. "Alright, the guys I sent should be about five minutes out from you. Hang tight, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be here." I paused. "And, thank you."

"Sure thing, Terraform." I could tell she was smiling, as the call disconnected.

Now I just had to wait. I kicked some rocks around for a bit, before I decided I might as well set off any traps at the other piles I'd started last time I was here. I didn't need incredible accuracy for it at this range, just dumping more rubble onto the piles to shake them up like I had this one. A couple more went off like this one had, but the rest didn't. I'm not sure if that meant anything, but it's possible they only found or bothered with a few of them. They all seemed to kick up a bit activity, though. Usually one or two people coming to check on things before leaving.

Then my phone started to ring. When I checked it, it was a call from Dinah's folks. Fantastic timing, that.

With a groan, I checked around. The thugs were quieter now, but not quiet. I wound up running at a wind-assisted-sprint down a few buildings, to one with a stable-looking roof. Then I scaled the side and made sure my footing was stable before I answered, about four seconds after it'd started ringing.

"Taylor!" Cheryl replied to my greeting. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm doing fine," Do I, or don't I? "but I'm a little busy. Going to need to go in a few minutes."

She chuckled. "Oh, I won't keep you. I was hoping to catch you before you made plans for the
weekend. Would you be free Saturday to help Dinah again? She's been doing much better since the weekend, happier and more focused when she studies." I could hear the subtle pleading in her tone.

"Yeah, that's fine. I can drop by Saturday." There were some cars coming, probably the police.

"That's wonderful, dear. Dinah and I will be here whenever you drop by, just like last week."

A car and an SUV, both in police colors, were slowly rounding on the explosion site. "I'll be there. I've got to go, though."

"Of course dear, I'll see you then." I gave one last 'bye' before ending the call, hopping down off the building and floating to the ground on a strong burst of wind. I made my way over just as they were getting out. Four officers and a technician in a tactical vest.

I smoothed down the hair that'd frizzed a bit from the excitement, and dusted myself off. "Hi! I'm Terraform." They paused as I came up to them, then the technician headed off to the blast site and a couple officers peeled off to check the scene. "I'm sorry about calling you out here, I'm told I should've called the PRT?"

"Oh no, miss." The older one, bigger with short hair and stubble, said. "Sometimes it's nice just being remembered by the capes around here." Partly true, with hints of sarcasm not evident in his gruff voice.

"Well..." I muttered, trying to think of ways to help make their trip worth it. "I was out here to train a bit, cleaning the area up a little with my powers. This is one of the places I stopped at last time, I think they trapped it in case I came back." The younger one had a pad out now, and was writing notes. "I remember where the other places were, I could mark them if you have a map?"

The gruff one hummed and left to dig a map of the bay out of a glove box. "You think they might have tried the same thing at these other places?" He asked when he handed it over with a pen.

They both jumped when I made a small table out of the ground to write on, but didn't comment. "Yeah, I think so." I compared the map to the information from my senses a few times, before I felt confident I'd gotten them all right. "Here you go." I said as I pushed the 'table' back into the ground and handed off the map. "I hope this helps."

"Should be worth looking into, yes." There was a strong undercurrent of 'might as well, we're already here' to his words.

We exchanged introductions to pass the time, but it wasn't that long before a couple of PRT wagons rolled up. Two of the officers took off in their car, while the other two and the CSI guy waited with me. Six PRT officers and two more technicians filed out of their vehicles. After they took in the scene, the four that were obviously armed broke off to form a perimeter. One of the techs broke off to inspect the blast site, and the other followed the two storm troopers over to us.

"Terraform?" One asked through an obvious voice modulator.

"That's me." I answered. The PRT tech motioned off to the side, where the police tech followed. The pair exchanged what little data he'd gathered before the PRT showed up.

"We have some questions we'd like you to answer." From the way no one was moving to take notes, I assumed the whole thing was being recorded. I nodded for him to continue. "What happened, that lead to this confrontation?"

I rolled my eyes and relayed the story of coming to train and the explosion that followed. Partway
through, the techs had finished commiserating, and the three headed out. From the way the officer was brandishing the map I'd marked, they were heading off to check the other sites. I kept going through the details of the fight, and then my call to the police.

"And why didn't you call the PRT about a conflict involving a cape?" He asked, once I'd finished. He outwardly sounded rather neutral and monotone, his body language professionally inexpressive. I could tell from my senses though, that he was irritated about the topic.

...probably best I not mention how well I can read them through all of their fancy tech and training.

"I'd already called them a few times about drug deals I'd spotted on my way here, but passed over. I don't know if the explosion rattled my brain, or I was just distracted from the fight, or whatever else, but I just hit redial instead of thinking to look for the right number." Wasn't going to make that mistake again after having it beaten into my brain so many times, today.

"Hrm." I could tell the answer wasn't a satisfactory one, but he was a little less tense about my accidental slight, at least. "We should see to the captives, then."

He led me over to the thugs, who'd already been checked and photographed by one of the techs, and checked on by the pair of troopers armed with those foam sprayers while the last two with real guns kept watch on the yard. "They're all armed, I think." Knew, rather, but they didn't have to know that. "I know that one still has a gun." I pointed out the first guy I'd caught, and he spat some derogatory words my way.

My interrogator motioned one of the foam troopers over, then had me start releasing them. None of them managed to give the armored troops more than a second's trouble before they were cuffed. Even the ones I'd piled together were handled quickly by a trooper each. While they were being boxed up in one of the transports, I headed over to one of the techs.

"Sooo... is this still a crime scene, or can I go back to practicing here when they're gone?" I asked.

The guy shrugged. "If you want to, after what happened. We have everything we needed from the scene."

"Alright, thanks." I immediately started clearing up some of the rubble from the collapsed buildings. It was interesting using the brick and concrete to manipulate the metal attached to it, and pretty soon I had some good piles going. The troopers had, of course, stuck around to film some of my training, before they packed up and headed off.

Then I got into the interesting stuff, smashing more train cars, tearing up old ruined rail, and dismantling some of the worse buildings. About an hour after I started into that, my phone went off again. This time it was Sue.

Greetings exchanged, she cut down to business. "The majority want to support cleaning up the city, and think helping a hero team do it better is a good step forward, there. A few of us aren't so sure," herself included, I knew. "but we've been doing little else but surviving for so long, even a few of the more moderate are becoming restless."

"A couple questions..." she hummed for me to continue. "What do you even want me to help you with, and..." the part I was worried about. "I'm... not sure I want to commit to much, without knowing who I'm helping. I want to meet some of them, first."

She grumbled a bit, then said, "Fair, but complicated. It's going to take a bit of work gathering together such a disparate group, most of us have day jobs, or night jobs, or other obligations..."
hummed in thought. "I can have some of us around sometime over the weekend? It might not be the showing you want, but it's what I can do on short notice."

"That's fine, I just want to put some faces to this shadowy organization I'm supposed to be helping."

She seemed to take the joke well, since she chuckled. "As to the other part, I would be happy with some warning about cape actions that might spur gang retaliation, like if a cape was captured and we could expect violence soon with an escape attempt. Maybe a word about unusual gang movements, or unusual Protectorate movements, that might mean a strike on the gangs soon. Things we can use to keep our heads down." That seemed... not so bad, actually. "The youngsters on the other hand, want to see if you can use any of our information. Hitting storehouses, cutting supply lines, gods help them maybe taking down capes." Sue hissed and I could hear rustling, she sounded incredibly unhappy. "The sorts of things that kick off the sort of violence we try to avoid. Kills people. Makes targets for the gangs." She spat. Then she sighed. "The young want change because they haven't seen what it costs, yet."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. "I'm... sorry?"

"No, child." I could tell she was shaking her head, again. "That you can have this optimism means our generation has done well enough, protecting yours. I can't blame you for dreaming. I just don't believe all of you will live to see the end of fighting for them." There was a deep sorrow to her words. Then she took a deep breath and I could hear her forcing a smile. "But, if it works? If you really can make the city better, safer, then... Maybe it will be worth it."

"I have to try." I forced more confidence than I felt, after all that.

"I know." The resignation in her tone cut deeply. "You want your meeting," She added, to change the topic. "so when did you have in mind for it?"

It was actually a bit of a relief, to move away from all that fatalism. "I've got plans Saturday, maybe Sunday?"

She hummed. "Morning might be best. Night owls not yet to bed, day workers not in yet..." She took a moment to think. "Can get at least six, maybe eight? Will have to see. How early can you manage?"

My face broke into a grin. "I rise with the sun."

"Eight, then. Gives you time to get around town, some time for the nine-to-fivers to get to work. Depends how long it goes."

"Sounds good." Plans made, the call ended.

I didn't have any more trouble from the gangs, probably because of the police and PRT sniffing around. When I thought I had one place cleared enough for now, I'd move on to a new one. This continued into the night, when I finally made my way home to tell dad about my day.
Chapter 1.12 (Self-Defense)

FRI FEB 18

After my normal morning routine, I texted Amy to see what she was up to for today. She replied with a zombified 'shut up or coffee' that had me chuckling. On my run I honestly considered putting on a mask and dashing past Arcadia to a coffee shop near there to get her something, before meeting her at her house and heading to school from there together. While funny, it was an unnecessary risk, and I'd been taking too many of those recently as it was.

Amy was already at school by the time I was done with my shower again. Seated in the cafeteria like before, she'd skipped most of the food options this time, and I repeated my play from yesterday before sitting down next to her, handing her a banana this time. Her stare was nonplussed, almost glaring at me through baggy, slightly bloodshot eyes.

"This better not be a dick joke." She muttered.

I shrugged, cutting mine up into my instant oatmeal. "You know I don't make dick jokes."

She seemed to consider my words for a moment, eyeing the fruit warily before deciding she wasn't at risk of impending pun and started peeling the thing.

"What're your plans for after practice, today?" I asked, mostly to fill the silence. "And why do you look like you haven't slept?"

She eyed me for a moment and huffed a breath out her nose. "Avoiding Carol. Didn't work." She took a quick bite of the fruit. "Vicky wants to hang out, today."

"Is she coming to the practice?"

Amy shook her head. "Nah, she's got a thing." From the disdain in her tone, I guessed the thing involved Dean. Sensing that Amy was looking over my shoulder where Vicky was sitting with him just cemented the idea for me.

"Do... you want me to come along?" I didn't want to sound too pushy or hopeful, but honestly the thought of getting away from it all after whatever Kara had planned seemed like a good idea.

Amy seemed to consider it for a long while, pretending to chew when I knew her fruit didn't need it. I was starting to think she'd turn me down, when she said "Sure. I know Vicky won't mind."

I heaved a little sigh of relief, which had her looking at me oddly, feeling fairly confused. "It's fine. Everything's fine." I said. She wasn't convinced, but dropped it. "I'll see you at lunch, I guess?"

Then I got up and started getting ready for class a little early, rather than risk any awkwardness. She let me go, and I watched in my senses as she sat there, contemplating until the bells started ringing.

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I meandered the halls on the way to lunch. Taking the long way and the occasional wrong turn, spreading my senses out through the school while I thought. I still couldn't feel Cassie anywhere. I was fairly sure I was familiar enough with her to recognize her through the ground, but I was on my fifth or sixth pass through everyone on the school grounds. She just wasn't here.
Also, I was procrastinating on talking with Amy again.

Fishing my phone out of my pocket, I sent Cass a text. 'Are you okay?'

The reply was a succinct 'I'm fine.'

I deleted the original 'You're not at school' and replaced it with 'I can't find you anywhere, are you sure you're okay?'

'Just busy.'

'Busy enough to miss school?'

'Family stuff.'

I could tell she wanted me to drop it, but I didn't want to be the sort of person who did that. 'Do you need help? You know I'll do whatever I can.' There. Fourth time through re-writing it, but it shouldn't go over badly, anyway. I was almost to the cafeteria by the time she replied, despite not changing my wandering path there.

'Maybe. I'll think about it.'

It wasn't much, but it was enough. I sent her an 'okay' and got in the food line, smiling a little.

Amy was sitting with Vicky and her friends, but I didn't see Kara nearby. Wary of another ambush, I slowly sat down. A few moments later my senses spotted her a couple hallways away. With a small sigh, I turned to Amy, who'd been giving me an odd look.

"Yesterday." I summed up. She hummed a noise of realization and nodded upward, in a way that reminded me of something Carol had done while I was over the other day.

We sat in silence for a bit, watching and listening to the chatter around us. Amy was watching the teens around us like a hawk and occasionally poking her sister, while I was keeping an 'eye' on the whole school, and Kara in particular. Eventually the silence got to me. "So, what's Vicky's 'thing' today?"

The girl herself heard me, and cut off her other conversation to answer giddily. "I'm meeting up with the Wards for a joint patrol after school."

Huh. That was interesting. "Can they do that?" I asked Amy.

She shrugged. "They're really not supposed to, but no one cares."

"Hey, if it was a problem, someone would've said something." Vicky pouted. "I do it every week or two, and no one's complained."

Uh-huh. That sounded just weird enough that I was sure something was going on. Either the Wards weren't reporting it, or their superiors weren't passing it on... maybe it was just Glory Girl and her aura getting her way again. Then again, it might be encouraged. Forming rapports with independents to entice them into the government cape groups. That one sounded about right, from what I knew of them.

By the time I was done with my musings, Vicky was already back to her previous conversation, and Kara was finishing up in the lunch line. She made her way straight to us, as I knew she would, trailed by a few other girls.
"Hey, Tay." She giggled at her rhyme, and I warily greeted her in turn. "I've got everything set up for today, but a couple girls wanted to meet you before they'd drop by."

The three girls she'd indicated couldn't be more different, aside from all being white. "This is Abby," Who was large, less in the heavy-but-curvy way Kara was, and more just... round. She was shy and I could tell she was nervous. "Millie," Another shy one, anxious this time. She was short and mousy, and wore glasses. She just looked so... frail. "and Susan." who was tall, around my height, and where the other two had shoulder-ish length brown hair, Susan's was long, lustrous, and dark. If my hair were straight and you tweaked our faces a bit, she could pass as my older sister. Where the others were shy, she just seemed bored.

"O-kay?" I hadn't expected to need to help with this. I had no idea what to tell them. "What can I help you with?"

The two shy ones looked at each other, and seemed to be competing for who'd have to talk first. In the end, Abby stepped up. "Uh, do you... think you... er, can I?" She indicated herself, and I bit back my scathing thoughts at her shyness. Instead I took the time to really assess her, as she fidgeted.

"I don't think you'd do well with a lot of the advanced forms I know-" She deflated a bit. "-but we're probably not going to get to those with just a couple hours a week after school. Anyone can learn the basics." She seemed satisfied with this, and let her friend talk next.

Or she would, if the girl would stop thinking and fidgeting. How had this girl even survived in Brockton until now? "Just... wanted to see. Maybe talk a bit?" I nodded. Getting to know your teacher a little before you'd trust them made sense. I got up and indicated one of the less full tables nearby, and Kara happily lead them over to claim it. I turned to the last girl.

Susan shrugged. "I was just curious. You don't look like much." If it hadn't been for all my experience with Sophia saying things like that, with every inflection imaginable, I probably would've missed the utter neutrality in the statement. It was a fact, like she'd just mentioned it was partly cloudy today.

"You don't, either." Were I anyone else, I might've missed the small smirk that went with her more obvious shrug. Her clothes were nice, but weren't opulent like the socialites' were. She obviously took care of herself, from the look of her hair and the light makeup I could see. If it weren't for her height and hair, she'd be incredibly average at best. Much like myself. "What has you interested practicing with us?"

Her head tilted in a semi-shrug. "Hard to beat free, compared to the other options. Less time commitment, too. Rather focus on studies, but I'd hate to waste the time by not making it to University." By not surviving the bay, she meant. I nodded. That sounded entirely fair. I turned to Amy. "You coming?"

She paused, thinking about it. She turned to gaze somewhat longingly at her sister's back for a moment, before some tension leaked from her body and she nodded. "I might as well." She poked her sister to tell her to watch herself, since she wouldn't be there to do it for her, and followed us over.

Kara was smugly reigning over the now empty- aside from us- table, when we got there. "So! How about we talk a little about ourselves?" When no one took her up on the offer, she continued. "I'm me, and amazing, I like most things, and dislike the rest with a violent passion." She muttered the last part darkly, despite the bright so-wide-her-eyes-were-closed smile she wore. "Pompoms!
You're up." She cheered, as the last girl sat down with us.

Susan rolled her eyes, but spoke up while re-arranging her tray. "Susan Stralson. I like studying, mostly science. I'm going to be going to university for something science-adjacent, possibly engineering, but I'm not sure what, yet."

Kara smirked. "You sure that's everything, cheer-girl?" Susan gave a low grunt as she dug into her food.

"You're a cheerleader?" I asked. I'd felt that she was fit, but I'd thought it was just regular exercise like I was getting.

She shrugged. "Just in it for the scholarship."

"She's good, though. And really flexible." Kara chipped in. Susan cleared her throat without turning from her food, and Kara made an affirmative hum and briefly held her hands up just over the table's edge. The other two girls blushed a little, and I had to wonder what Susan had on her, that Kara would quiet down that quickly.

Kara patted Abby's shoulder, the girl startling a bit. "I... uhm. Abby Gray. I like drawing and music."

"I keep telling you, you should try out for the band." Our cheerful host cut in.

"I don't know..." At Abby's muttering, Kara gave me a rather significant look. What did she want me to say about it? I hardly knew any of them!

"Uh, it doesn't seem so bad?" I tried, but what did I even know about band? Winslow's music department was one of the worse off in that dumpster fire, with the school not willing to buy instruments, and the students usually too poor to afford them either. It was really just an excuse to hang together to avoid the roving gangs and bullies. "After you're in, it's just another crowd, right?" Abby tensed, and Kara made a strangled noise. "I mean, you don't need to stand out at all, just be another face in the group." That seemed to calm nerves a bit.

"Millie?" Kara seemed to want the momentum to keep going, but the shy little freshman seemed barely able to handle the spotlight.

"Uhm... I... I like... things." She started to shiver, and I held a hand out to where she was sitting, on the other side of Amy. She eyed the hand and nodded, but didn't take it. "I... want to be better. More confident."

I knew that feeling. "Don't worry, I'll do what I can to help." She smiled, but still seemed uninterested in my hand, so I brought it back to my side. Well, I guess that just left me and Amy. "I'm Taylor Hebert. I like training and reading." Though I hadn't had much time for books, lately. "And I'm getting into meditation and tutoring, I guess." Scape-Dinah, go!

Kara gave an exaggerated 'wow' and a brief bout of quiet clapping, and everyone turned to Amy. She shrugged, picked at her food some more, and said "Amy Dallon. Not really going to change your minds about me one way or another." with a shrug. That was... honestly incredibly defeatist, in my opinion.

Kara's smile looked a tad brittle as she changed the topic. "So, how're classes going?"

I relayed that I was mostly caught up after Winslow, which brought on the usual round of 'are the
rumors true' and I dutifully relayed that the myths and legends of the dank morass of humanity's leavings were as Mordor-ian as the prophecy had foretold. Everyone else's classes were going fine, and I learned that Abby and Millie were indeed freshman, and Millie was enjoying the hard science classes while Abby was muddling through them, but liking some of the softer topics. Susan was a junior like Kara, but already taking a couple introductory college courses to go with her AP classes. Unlike seniors like Victoria though, all of Susan's college work was in addition to regular school hours, instead of filling in the time.

The rest of lunch was surprisingly pleasant, before we broke up to finish classes for the day.

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I met up with Amy on the way to the gym, where we were supposed to meet Kara. I could tell she was on her way, and figured I might as well let her gather people up before we showed up, so I could avoid the awkward introductions-while-waiting phase and jump straight to training. To this end, I slowed down a bit. "So, who all do you think will be there? How many people signed on?"

Amy shrugged. "Most of Kara's friends will be there. Plus a few curious people who might drop out, evened out a bit by people waiting to see if this is going to be a thing before joining up... maybe twenty people?"

I stopped and stared. She kept walking for a bit, then turned. "What?"

"What?" She mirrored unintentionally. "You didn't think more than a week's drumming up would have no one show up, did you? It's a big school."

"Yeah, but that's..." More people than I thought I could handle. "I might need help."

Amy rolled her eyes. "That's why I'm here to save you. Aren't I the best?" The mostly-deadpan drawl to the question marked it as sarcastic and rhetorical, but I answered anyway.

"You're my hero." I opened my arms and stalked towards her, and she backed away holding up her arms.

She was blushing a little, her heart racing and breathing sharp and unsteady as she backed away. "No hugging!"

I dropped my arms and pouted a little. I didn't think that'd set her off that badly. I really needed to figure out her buttons, so I could avoid pushing them. "Yeah, alright." I muttered, then spoke up a tad louder. "I'm really not going to be getting into more than the basics with them, am I?"

Another shrug. "I really doubt it. You're barely past the basics with me, right?" I nodded. "Don't worry about it. If they're after advanced training, they can bark up a different tree." Or ask nicely for my time, I thought to myself. Though honestly, my time was getting a bit scarce lately. They'd have to make do.

We headed through the main doors to the gym building, letting us in to the balcony that ringed the recessed main court area, and was lined with rooms set aside for the school's different batches of exercise equipment. We headed over to the railing to look down at the court, which was lined with folded-back bleachers along its length, with hallways off the ends to bathrooms, mat storage, some offices, and the tunnel under the road between the buildings, which led to the main locker rooms in Arcadia's basement. The floor was covered in mats, since outside was nice enough for people to use the outdoor courts for basketball games and the like.

I already knew where Kara was, but when I looked, my eyes were immediately drawn to the tall,
firetruck-red-haired amazon towering above their little group. She had to be a senior, and their classes are usually on different floors than my sophomore ones, but I don't remember seeing her in the lunchrooms at all. In fact, looking over the group- of which Amy was sadly correct, being almost two dozen girls- I spotted at least six with dyed hair, given their bright coloring.

"What's with all the hair dye?"

"A lot of girls around, especially at Arcadia, have blonde hair. Usually with blue or green eyes." Amy said, her voice low and serious. "Which isn't really the best thing, considering what city we're in." E88, yeah. After a moment, she continued. "Around when I started high school, there was a bunch of girls who started dying their hair. Turned out, it was something Kara's group started in middle school, and it'd made it here faster than she did." She paused for a second. "Vicky gets away with looking like the 'aryan ideal' because she's obviously a hero, fighting Nazis whenever she can. The hair dying is a sort of extreme passive-aggression the girls from the nicer neighborhoods can sometimes get away with."

Huh. "And Kara?" She was bordering the line between blonde and light brown, herself.

"Usually bright as a peacock. She dyes her hair back to normal every so often, I think to make herself more approachable to lure new people in. Longest I've seen her stay blonde, actually."

That... actually sounded pretty bad. The girl herself was already waving up at us, though. The time to back out had passed. I briefly debated just vaulting the rail, but dismissed it as needless showboating. Amy and I took the stairs.

Kara greeted us, and started through introductions. I recognized Erika, the girl who'd asked me out, and Serei, the girl who'd gone paintballing with Cass and I. When Tracy, the tall dyed-redhead, was pointed out, things clicked together in my head. Even I'd heard a little about her; the star of the basketball team, with near-perfect grades. The other dyed girls stuck in my head after what Amy'd said. Amanda was pretty average, short dyed red hair, I'd usually seen her hanging around Kara, and from the way they'd been flirting the other day, I was pretty sure they were more than friends. Green-haired Tiffany was standing off near Susan, both were cheerleaders, and I could see a family resemblance. Tina was tiny, with regal purple hair to her shoulders, and sharp aristocratic features just starting to poke out from her baby fat. Julia and Stephanie seemed pretty normal despite their blue and canary-yellow hair.

I tried to keep track of the rest, but they all blurred together a bit. I wasn't too worried, I didn't have to memorize everyone today, after all. After the introductions, I said hi to Serei and Erika, then got down to business.

"Okay! So, we're probably not going to get too advanced with a few hours a week practice, but I'm going to show you some basics and how to practice them yourselves if you want. It doesn't really matter why you're here, I know some people want to learn to defend themselves, or have extra exercise they can do, or feel more confident in themselves..." I sent some looks to the girls I'd already talked to, while keeping an eye on the rest. "And hopefully this can help with all of that. We're going to start with falls, basic strikes, and grip-breaks, and over the next few weeks we'll start getting into proper leverage, stances and styles, and some active meditation like Tai-Chi katas to help keep things from getting rusty. That sound good? Any questions?"

I got a few questions about what styles I knew, where I'd trained, some other basic questions as to my qualifications. After that I demonstrated a couple falls, had Amy do the same, then we took the girls two-at-a-time to try it themselves. After a bit, it took Amy snapping "I'll heal you up if you bruise, ya nambies, just do it!" to get the lines moving again. I took the shyer looking girls after that, but twenty minutes in each girl had given a try or two, and none were complaining of injuries.
"Learning falls is pretty important. We'll be starting out every practice with it, just to make sure people have it down. Just in case that's not what you're here for though, we're going to make sure you all actually know how to throw a punch, and more importantly, how not to do it."

We went through some more demonstrations, then I gave everyone the choice of working on strikes with me, or practicing falls with Amy. Four of the girls, Abby and Millie among them, decided they didn't feel like learning to punch yet. Most of the rest seemed eager to move on.

The group spent about half an hour working on that, and partway through Kara stopped her own practice to help the girls near her. The fact that she was also correcting little things like stance and posture, told me she knew her stuff. Far more than I'd thought, making me question again why I was even here. I pushed on, though. Taking the brunt of the teaching work while the other girls trickled in from the falls group, and a couple curious bystanders came up to join in.

Then we started on breaking grabs. We went over basic grappling, and the kinds of grabbing they'd more likely encounter if they were getting mugged or kidnapped. This time after the demonstrations, we split the group three ways to go over it. An hour later, I told the group they could work on whatever they liked for the next half hour or so. Amy took the newcomers and a couple of the others aside to work on falls, Kara took a third of the girls to practice more strikes, while I oversaw the rest practicing grapples and breaks.

"Alright, I think that went pretty well for a first day. Hit the showers everyone, I'll see you next week. Kara? Amy?" The two of them stayed, the rest getting the hint to head off, after a few quick goodbyes. I turned to Amy. "Where's Vicky at? She going to drop by soon?"

She dug out her phone, checked the time and messages. "Yeah, looks like her patrol's almost done. She'll be by in a bit. I can go meet her, I guess?"

I nodded and said 'okay', and she left saying she'd see me in a bit. I turned to Kara, eyeing the girl warily. "We need to talk."

Her usual bright and toothy smile was more subdued than usual, but that just brought her down to looking like a chipper girl having a good day, instead of a manic whirlwind of 'fun'. "Yeah, alright. Where to?"

I checked with my senses, and the lot beside the gym was mostly empty. There were two paths past the building to get to the track field and outdoor courts on the other side of it from Arcadia's main building, and the one on that side was locked up. I motioned for her to follow and she complied.

When we got there, I kept some attention on my senses to ensure we wouldn't be interrupted, but the rest of it was laser-focused on her. "You're a martial artist."

Her smile faltered fractionally, before it returned as she clucked her tongue and replied. "Yup."

"So you didn't need me." It didn't make sense. If she could just teach them herself, why wouldn't she? Hell, a lot of the girls weren't even complete novices, and none of the colored-hairs seemed to not know what they were doing. She probably already was. The confusion and frustration caused me to tense and assume the worst. "You were using me?"

She pouted. "And not even in any of the fun ways, I know, I'm sorry!"

I saw red. Teeth clenched, fists shaking. I hissed, "Why?" I heaved in a deep breath. "I thought you wanted to be friends." And just like all my other 'friends' she'd just betray me, like the sycophants, like Emma, like...
No. Not like Amy.
My eyes welled slightly with tears.

For the first time since I'd met her, her smile dropped completely. Her back straightened, weight shifted, her eyes narrowed. It was like she'd aged two years in as many seconds. "Taylor, honey." She said, sweetly. "No offense, but you're the dorky loner girl. If you start teaching other girls to defend themselves, that makes you cool." I didn't feel very cool, right now. "I'm 'that crazy dyke'. If I start teaching girls how to fight, the Nazis drop all pretense of trying to convince me how great their dicks are, and just fucking shoot me for being the 'next Lustrum'."

I clenched and unclenched my hands a few times. She kept talking. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, but I'm not sorry about giving my girls a place where they can come together, in public, and learn to protect themselves. No more worrying about who might be watching, no waiting for some stalker to pick them off on the way home from a women's shelter or civic center, or never even make it out of an Empire gym, or ABB 'dojo'." She spat the word, almost growling before she drew deep with her nose and kept on. "I'm sorry you're hurting, but I'm not apologizing."

What the hell do I even say to that? Nothing she said pinged anything but truth to my senses. I took deep breaths, started pacing as my heart raced and my body demanded action. Kara stood there, calmly waiting for me to work it out of my system. After a minute or so of active brooding, I turned back to her. "I don't like being manipulated." I growled.

She smirked. "Well, now that you know, it can be more fun for everyone, right?"

I snapped. "And stop with the damned flirting!" I threw my arms out, and almost unleashed a torrent of something to release the pressure of the rage roiling under my skin. "What the hell do I have to do to get you to just stop!?"

Her smile was gone, again. "Ask nicely." When I just stared at her, she shrugged. "I've been waiting for you to tell me to stop, but you didn't. I figured you must like it, at least a little. I know how nice compliments and flirting can be from someone you find attractive." I tilted my head and stared incredulously at her. "Don't you? I know you're at least bi."

I screamed, then. A low, guttural sound as I grabbed my hair and tried so hard not to just end something. I took a deep breath and roared out, "I'm. Not. GAY!"

Kara stood there, shell-shocked for a moment as she tried to process that. "But... I've seen you looking. At Amy, at me..." She watched me hyperventilate as I tried to cool down. "You've got to be interested, right?" She took in my grit-toothed glare, full of gushing tears and a drip of snot, and flagged as some realization I couldn't fathom struck her. "OhhhhhshitI'mso sorry." She said, trailing off into a horrified mutter. After a few seconds holding her hands in front of her mouth, she asked, "Who was she?"

I wanted to rage, to lash out, to stay angry, but all I could feel was honest sincerity and shame in her words. I hiccuped, and started to curl in on myself before she stepped forward to prop me up on her shoulder and lower us to the ground. "Hey," she muttered while I sniffled and snorted, trying to breathe. "hey, it's alright. You're okay. You're going to be fine."

Some distant part of myself wondered how often she'd had to do this, she slipped into the role so well. Somewhere along the way, my phone dinged, but I couldn't care right now. When I felt collected enough, I answered. "My best friend." My voice cracked and croaked with the words. "My only friend."

She took a long, slow inhale, and I heard her mutter 'Ahh, fucked the bitch.' under her breath. "I'm
I sat there for a while as she stroked my hair, trying to think while the cogs of my mind ground slowly through the thick emotional mud gumming everything up. I sighed, then pushed myself unsteadily to my feet. Kara's hands stayed to my sides in case I needed them, but she otherwise didn't help. She watched me staring off, for a second, before she got to her feet too. "Let's get you cleaned up."

She led me through the mostly-deserted halls to one of Arcadia's bathrooms. Empty at this hour, but Kara still went in first in case she needed to distract someone from my predicament. It was an oddly sweet gesture, compounding on others that refused to add up in my muddled mind. I washed my face, and she offered me makeup. At first I declined, but she offered to fix up my eyes a bit, so my crying wasn't as obvious. I relented after that, and she carefully applied product to my cheeks and nose, and around my eyes. It reminded me of when mom would help me dress up, years ago. The thought almost had me crying again. A couple minutes after we'd started, she proclaimed me done. Aside from some redness in the eyes themselves, I looked fine.

With a sigh, I checked my phone. Three texts from Amy, and one from Vicky.

"I should go," I said, stashing it away again.

"Hey," She said from where she'd leaned against the sinks. I looked back. She felt nervous, wary... but she looked determined. "Whatever you decide about me... don't take it out on them? Please?"

I took a breath, held it while I considered, and let it out. "No more flirting?"

She put her hand over her chest and gave a soft smile. "Promise."

I stared at the hand for a few seconds. She didn't feel like she was lying. I nodded, and left. Once out in the hall, I watched her sigh, rub her face, and mutter something. I was already down the hall when she turned to check her makeup, then check her phone.

I met Amy and Vicky by the front of the school. Vicky waved me over, and they watched me carefully as I made my approach. Once I was there, she smiled and said, "Hey. Taylor. You look, good." I could feel the effort it took her to keep it from being a question. I snorted as Amy rolled her eyes at her sister's words.

"Hey. Can we... just go?" I asked, projecting to keep the words above a mutter.

Amy came over, patted my back, and ran a finger along my neckline while her hand was there. I could tell from the mild tingling that my eyes weren't red anymore.

"Yeah, sure." I could tell she was considering her words while we started toward the parting lot. "The Market okay, or would you rather do something else?" At least she remembered I don't like the Boardwalk very much.

"Yeah, that's fine." I'd feel better once we were there, and moving around, keeping from sitting anywhere too long, felt like it'd keep me from wallowing or passing out from emotional drain. I wanted to be fine. Just needed to take the rest of the day one step at a time.
Chapter 1.13 (Dinah and Distractions)

FRI FEB 18

After the last time we went anywhere together, Vicky made sure she grabbed the car on her way back to Arcadia to pick us up. The ride was quiet, but nice. The radio stayed off, Amy only occasionally pecking away at her phone, Vicky started humming once and I could feel her aura creeping out, but she realized it herself and pulled it back when she suddenly went quiet again. Most of the ride was, at least to me, comfortable silence.

We parked in one of the lots near the market, which used to house buildings, before being destroyed by the gangs or otherwise declared derelict and torn down. This part of the city was nice enough to actually have demolitions work done, but not nice enough for people to bother with rebuilding. The ones on the outskirts of the market proper were marked off with parking spaces, while the few inside were crammed with tents and booths. Even from here I could spy some of the little stands set up on the sidewalks outside the proper stores. Booths and tents paying the shops they're in front of to camp there and hopefully feed off each others' business. The city either didn't see anything wrong with it, or didn't care enough to punish the violations. There was usually just enough space to get by without wandering into the street, but a lot of people just walked in the bike lanes on Lord's Street, ignoring that they were inches from a main through road.

"Oh! I know!" Vicky said as we got out. "We should get food. Start the trip off right."

Amy scoffed. "You just want to get tacos again."

Vicky fisted her hands in front of her wide grin and excitedly whispered, "Tacos..."

The scene was absurd enough to get a chuckle out of me, and I could feel the Dallons cheering up, at having broken through my mood. I didn't mind Mexican, so I just followed along, taking in the sights. Vicky called me a heathen when I ordered a burrito.

The Lord's Street Market was the largest shopping center in the city, though all of them claimed they were. The market won, not by volume or foot traffic, but in sheer density. It had the most 'shops' of any of them, packed into half the space of the Boardwalk. I couldn't remember its proper name because I never went there, but the shopping center near the Towers was the biggest by volume. It really only served the local whites though, being deep in Empire territory. The Boardwalk had the others beat hands-down in foot traffic, though. Being the neutral, non-gang territory, high quality, enforced-by-hired-bouncers tourist-friendly experience that it was.

The Market was technically in Merchant territory, though no one seemed to care. Some of the shops hired a handful of the Boardwalk's Enforcers and security guards to keep the peace, but most of the work was done by police stationed in the area.

Some of the stands looked like you'd combined a garage sale with a farmer's market. People selling off anything they could to get by, or get out. Most of the stands had themes; bags, trinkets, soaps, food... anything that could be made from home. The restaurants in the area had mostly been driven out by the convenience of the food stands dotting the sidewalk; There was Vicky's taco stand, a hotdog vendor, what looked like Italian noodles, and a couple Asian stands, from what I could see where we'd stopped to eat. I could feel more of them a ways down out of sight, and past the curve in the road to match the waterfront, but couldn't tell exactly what they served from just that.

After food, we wandered a bit. Amy and I followed Vicky mostly. Pausing to peruse trinkets or
sniff beauty products, heading in to the occasional thrift store. I actually found a few things I liked in a second-hand clothing store. I found the stand Amy had bought my masks at, mostly a few tables full of ceramic utensils like bowls and plates, with the occasional flower vase or urn. One of the walls was hung with masks though, and I could feel spare stock under the tables. For what looked like some guy making things in his basement to sell, the quality was surprising. I rather deliberately had us _not_ stop in there, though. No need to connect myself and Amy, if he recognized her.

The real gem though, was a stand selling stereotypically 'oriental' nick-knacks. Paper wall scrolls, some candles, jars of loose tea, a few rolled up wooden mats...

And fans.

They were cheap things, just wood and paper with some words or drawings on, but I saw them and something _clicked_. I remembered the airbenders in my dreams, and knew it didn't matter how long they'd last if I just got a _box_ of the things, expecting them to break. So I bought ten of them. Enough to practice with, maybe use in a fight, prove to _myself_ that they worked, and whether I should look into better ones.

The rest of the time proceeded the same. I was mostly stuck in burnt-out autopilot along for the ride, unless something caught my attention, or the sisters did something else to pry a reaction out of me, or Vicky's aura slipped. It was a nice trip, with the two of them taking the brunt of the social callings and letting me just... _be_, outside in my own little bubble for a few hours. We stopped for food again a couple hours after dark, some Greek wrap stand at the other end of the market. Then we meandered back to the car, pleasantly full and cheerful enough that I actually chimed in a couple times without being prompted to, which the Dallons were happy about.

It was half past nine when they dropped me off at home. I was in a better mood, but still _exhausted_. So I skipped homework- I had the whole weekend after all- and went straight for a shower and my bed.

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**SAT FEB 19**

I got up around my normal time, despite getting to bed earlier than usual. Now that I thought about it, it was a little weird that I'd been doing fine on six or seven hours every night, when I used to sleep at least ten if I was allowed to. Then I remembered some capes didn't need to sleep _at all_ thanks to their powers, and shrugging my sleep habits off with 'Powers did it' stopped seeming so far-fetched.

Light exercise this morning since I didn't want to need a shower, or show up smelling at Dinah's, then I called to let them know I was on the way over. Dad was already up, so he dropped me off at the Alcott's. He promised to stop for breakfast somewhere before stopping by work to put out any fires there, then he was planning to hang out with some of the guys. It was nice to see dad excited about socializing, again.

So, I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. Cheryl answered again, inviting me in excitedly. Dinah was already at the table when we got there, along with her father. "Dinah, Taylor's here!" She said, happily. Once we were seated, she continued. "Tell her how your classes have been."

Dinah looked slightly mortified to be put on the spot, but the shy girl coughed and fidgeted her way to speaking. "I've... um. Been having a lot less headaches." She fidgeted again, picking at her food. "Been studying easier without the headaches. Catching up."
I waited half a beat to tell if she was going to keep talking before I said, "That's great, Dinah!"

She blushed and hunched a bit, curling to hide. Her mother happily chimed in, in her place. "It's so nice seeing her enjoy life more, without it affecting her studies." Her husband grunted his agreement.

Honestly I was starting to feel... really awkward, sitting here in the middle of this. All the happy gushing and implied praise felt... wrong. I hadn't helped that much, after all. "That's great. I'm happy for her." I wasn't sure what else I could say, but apparently that was enough.

Dinah started talking about her specific classes at her mother's prodding, which filled the silence until Mr. Alcott had to leave for work. We were shuffled off to Dinah's room as soon as we finished eating.

I watched Dinah fidget for a second before I plopped down on her bed. "So, your headaches are better?"

She perked up, almost startled. "Yes! Thank you."

I shrugged. "What'd I do?"

"98% chance meeting Taylor led to my headaches getting better." Dinah said, suddenly and a touch mechanically. "95% chance Taylor had something to do with my headaches getting better."

"...huh." That was actually somewhat frightening. What the hell happened? "I don't... think I actually did anything?" I thought for a second. "I know I didn't mean to do anything." Now that sounded bad... "I mean, I didn't think I could do anything!"

"It's... fine." Dinah said, affecting a shy smile. "I'm just happy my head's better."

I slowly nodded. "And nothing else has changed? Nothing you're worried about?"

She shook her head, then paused. "No, but I'm not getting decimal places anymore." She pondered in a several second pause before continuing. "Like, uhh, a question that used to give 78.984% just gives 75% now."

So, less accurate? It still sounded incredibly useful, though. "And the headaches are gone?"

Dinah shook her head again. She wasn't looking at me, and I wondered if that helped her anxiety. "No, it just takes a lot more questions for them to start. Like, before I'd get to six or seven questions and my head would start to hurt. More than a dozen and I'd need to come home from school. Too many more, and I'd have headaches for days." That was terrible. I know I'd never get through a day without at least that many percentile questions asked at me. She must have been more miserable than I'd thought... "Now I can get fifty questions, easily. More if they're simple ones."

"That's great!" I was honestly happy for her. That sounded much better for surviving a school day.

She nodded happily. "I know. Now I can be useful to your team."

My smile froze, and dropped. "Hey, you know I didn't care about that. I just wanted to help."

"87% chance you're being honest." She said with a nod. "I just... want to be useful." She curled up on herself a bit.

I got up and hugged her to my side with an arm while she stayed sitting. She flinched a bit from the
contact, but I persisted, and she relaxed into the embrace. "You're already the whole reason I'm starting a team. It wouldn't be happening without you."

"55% chance you're just trying to make me feel better."

Dear god this was going to get annoying quick, if she kept doing that. "Is it working?"

She rubbed at her eyes. "A little, yeah."

"Just because I said it to make you feel better, doesn't mean it isn't true." And now to nip a habit in the bud... "And you should avoid second-guessing people with your powers out loud, you don't want to get used to it, then slip and start doing it at school or something."

"84% chance..." She shyly curled up under my arm. "...you're right."

I lifted the arm from her shoulder to pat her head. She squirmed a little, but didn't protest further. Then I went back to sitting. "Now I just need to find more capes for the team..."

"90% chance we'll have three members by the end of next week." Dinah said, not looking up from her desk. "25% chance we'll have four members by the end of the month. 77% chance we'll have four in two weeks."

Wait, "Seriously?" She nodded. "Huh. That's... really surprising."

"It shouldn't be." She said, more firmly than anything she'd said today. "40% chance even the gangs want the city to be better."

A bit of a sobering thought, that. But it made sense for the Empire, at least. Better city proves having them around is a 'good' thing. More money in the city might make the ABB racketeering more profitable, too. Really the only gang that relied on the city being a shithole were the Merchants.

I sighed. "I hope you're right."

She finally looked up from her desk at that, to give me an incredulous look that said 'Of course I am, my powers said so.' and had me giggling at how cute she looked when confused.

"It's fine, it's okay." I said through the dying chuckles. "We should probably get started on schoolwork, though."

After that, we got started on schoolwork, spending a little time brainstorming how to use her power to help with studying and getting answers, because why wouldn't we, since it was an option now? A quick lunch was had, before we got back to work for another couple hours, during which I made sure I had Dinah's personal number, and that it was okay for me to check on her now and then. After that, though?

"You're leaving?" Cheryl asked, sounding a touch disappointed.

I shrugged. "Dinah's catching up just fine, now. There wasn't as much to work on this week."

Which was actually true. "If you still want me to come by in a week or two, we're going to need to start working on getting her ahead in classes, just for something to do."

She hummed thoughtfully. "That would be rather nice, actually. She was already being tutored to get ahead before all this started... maybe the stress was getting to her?" She wondered out loud. She shook her head. "Oh well, it's fine. Here you go, dear." I was offered a pair of crisp bills, the same
amount as last time despite 'working' fewer hours. "Do call if next weekend doesn't work for whatever reason."

I agreed and headed off, detouring north a bit to Captain's Hill on the way home. It was a nice enough day, and I felt like taking the walk. I'd seen the view of the city from the hill dozens of times, but it was nice to visit once in a while.

After basking in the Bay's lopsided skyline for a few minutes, I kept heading north, to the edge of the park where I could find some bus stops. To my surprise, there seemed to be a small crowd milling about near the road. As I got closer I noticed two bright spots of color at its center.

Assault and Battery.

What the hell? First Militia and Velocity, then Militia and Triumph, then Dauntless and Armsmaster -though they hardly counted, since I was masked at the time- but now Assault and Battery? If I walked over now, I could honestly tell dad and Amy I'd met the city's entire Protectorate roster.

In a fit of whimsy, I decided I really should.

I made my way over. There were just a couple dozen people, mostly park-goers, but also the odd business type from one of the nearby offices, or people who stopped their cars nearby to meet the heroes. Most of them had the two sign something, and then backed off, but enough were crowding nearby that it was a tad intimidating. Still, I soldiered on, making my way into their path, rather than trying to push into the throng. A few minutes later, they'd started moving again, and came to where I was standing.

"Hello, there!" Assault said, moving ahead to engage me directly while Battery was waylaid by a pair of girls who looked younger than me. "Did you have something you wanted signed, too?"

I froze, digging around in my pockets for a second. The only things I really had on me were my wallet, the money in it, my phone, pepper spray, and...

The man actually snorted when I pulled the baton Jake had given me from my pocket and held it up.

He uncapped a black permanent marker, scribbled his name on the handle, and nudged Battery. She took one look at the thing and failed to completely stifle a groan. Still, she took the marker and baton, and scribbled her name down, too. "Some sense of humor you've got there, kid." Assault said as he handed the baton back.

I hardly wanted to be called 'kid' anymore, so... "Taylor." I said, holding out my hand.

He raised his, paused partway, and gave me a quick curious look over. "Hebert?"

What the actual fuck?

I drew my hand back. "Yeeees?" I asked nervously.

Battery sighed, slapped her partner upside the head, and moved so she was the closer of the two. "Sorry about him, some paperwork crossed through our department recently, and you were mentioned." While that gave me a reason I was recognized, it still didn't stop the panic and anxiety welling up from it. At least she just felt honestly exasperated, instead of any number of more worrying internal tells. "You don't have to worry, you're hardly in trouble or anything."
I relaxed a bit when my senses couldn't detect any falsehood. Still, no Wards pitch? Maybe they didn't know who I was. ...or maybe there were too many people around, I decided after a quick glance around. Still, no sense offending them. I shook her offered hand, and Assault's after. I felt like I had more of their attention than anyone else in the crowd, even after they'd told me to have a nice day and started on their way. I stood there, not sure what to think or do, as they steadily increased the distance between us.

I heaved in a calming breath. Not much I could do, if they knew more than I wanted them to. Still, kinda' weird they're so far from the boardwalk. As I thought about it on the way to the bus stop, I glanced around. We were only a few blocks away from territory disputed by the gangs, so I suppose it made sense they'd patrol here, on the nicer Empire side of it, if only to show they were around.

The bus and walk home were quiet. The house was empty, but that wasn't unexpected. I gathered up some gear, most importantly the fans, along with my masks, both ceramic and domino. All kitted up in nondescript baggy clothes and double-masked, I made my way up to the Trainyard far faster on foot than I'd manage with the bus.

The first thing I did was experiment with the fans. I could tell using them improved my airbending quite a bit for gusts and bursts, but not so much with trying to slash. After breaking two of them with my experimenting, I decided I really did need better ones.

After that, I went back to training earthbending for the next few hours.

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I was cooking dinner when a car came by, and dad got out, followed by someone familiar. The car was, too, now that I thought about it. Still, wasn't odd enough to make me stop when they let themselves in and came into the kitchen.

"That smells great, honey." Dad said as he came to check on me.

"Mr Dallon?" I asked, recognizing the man who'd followed dad in.

"Mark, please, Taylor." He insisted as he took a seat at the table with dad.

I almost jumped straight to questions, but propriety must. "Anything to drink? I can have tea or coffee going, and we've got some milk and juice."

He hummed. "Tea would be nice, actually."

I could tell dad was slightly tipsy, so after starting the kettle, I grabbed him a glass of water. "So, what's going on?"

Mark chuckled. "Well, your father invited me out to drinks with some of his co-workers, and I decided to go." He shrugged. "I don't drink, so I offered to drive."

"Usually handle that." Dad said. "Nice change of pace." There was silence for a beat before he chuckled. "Still can't believe how long it took anyone to recognize you."

Mark snickered a bit, too. "Well, you did just introduce me as 'Mark, your daughter's friend's dad'. I'm not too surprised."

They kept chatting about things that'd happened while they were out, ostensibly to inform me, but not really pulling me into the conversation. I was fine with it, while I waited for the water to boil
and checked the food. Tea was had, even though dad didn't drink much of his. Mark talked about being surprised at having to break up a couple bar fights, while dad remarked on how few that was, compared to usual. Eventually dinner was almost ready, and I offered Mark some, if he wanted to stay.

He declined, saying he could be getting home. So dad and I ate, and I told him about having met all of the Protectorate capes in the city. He thought the story was more funny than worrying, but I chalked that up to the lingering booze.

After homework, I turned in early. I had a meeting tomorrow morning, after all.
Chapter 1.14 (Haggling)

Chapter Summary

The precoggening! IT BEGINS!

SUN FEB 20

I woke up early, 5am today, to get ready to head out. The text that'd given me the time also came with the explanation that some people were getting off night shifts, and others had day shifts to get to. The early morning or late evening was when the largest number of people I'd want to meet could be around. I'm pretty sure she just didn't want to potentially cut into my sleep on a school night.

I'd almost finished grabbing things for the trip over, when I spotted the pack of domino masks in my bag, and I realized I'd nearly missed something important. So I grabbed my phone and made a call.

"Taylor? Something wrong?" Sue asked after she picked up.

"I... should I wear a mask?" I asked hesitantly.

I could almost see her face scrunching up in confused consternation. "Why ask me? It's up to you. They know they're meeting a hero cape, but I haven't given any names yet." I let out a breath, and she continued when I didn't speak up. "People are going to figure it out either way, but they won't say anything." Ugh. What was even the point of a secret identity!?

"...Thanks, I guess." There must have been more despondency in my voice than I'd intended to let through, because she sighed.

"Not going to say some of our boys aren't idiots- you've met Jake- but they're not stupid. We don't let anyone in this close if we think they can't keep a secret."

"Hell of a job I've done keeping mine..." I muttered angrily, more at myself than anyone else.

Sue chuffed a stifled chuckle. "Taylor, secrets always end in one of two ways. Either everyone who knows it dies, or it will come out, eventually. Always, always, plan for both."

That made sense, but I still rubbed my face and sighed. How to plan for winding up outed? What would happen if I died and it didn't matter anymore? "Thanks, I guess."

"You do you, whichever you choose." Sue said, and I heard the creaking of an old chair through the phone. "Need to meet some people. Talk to you soon."

I managed a quick 'bye' before she hung up, then stared at my phone for a minute. I glanced at the closet, where I'd hidden my ceramic masks, and where I was planning to stash my costumes when I had them. After a bit more pondering, I shuffled over and grabbed one, along with a spare nondescript hoodie to change into. Even if I'd probably be outed eventually, I still wanted to keep my secrets as long as I could.
Those shoved into my bag, I headed out. About halfway to the stop, my phone started ringing. To my surprise, it was Dinah. "Hello?"

"Hey, Taylor." She said, somewhat groggy. It was just after six, so that was as expected in someone her age at this hour, but begged the question of why she was even up yet, on a weekend.

"Hey. You okay? Why are you calling so early?"

"10% chance we'll be overheard if I call now."

Oookay? "Isn't that bad?"

She made a light startled noise. "Oh, oh no! It's actually really good for this sort of thing." She stuttered out. "I just mean, it was 30% ten minutes ago, and it seemed... uhm..."

I took a deep breath, really not liking that 10% was good odds for not being overheard, but I couldn't sense anyone nearby... maybe phone taps or recordings? I shook my head, no sense worrying about it now. "It's okay. What did you want to talk about? And why are you even up so early?"

She gave a slightly frustrated groan, the most hostile sound I'd ever heard from her. "Have to go to church."

"Oh. I'm sorry?" I hadn't even known the Alcotts were religious. Then again, I had no idea what to look for when I wasn't being proselytized at.

Dinah sighed. "It's... it's okay." She took a breath and continued. "There's a 75% chance you'll be in a fight today. 90% chance it's this afternoon."

Wait, what? "Are you-" No, of course she was sure. "You ask those sorts of questions about me?"

"I- I'm sorry, should I not? I just... wanted to help?" Oh geez, kicked the puppy...

"No, you're fine, I'm just a little surprised. I didn't think to ask you to."

That seemed to calm her down a bit. "I... didn't think to until yesterday, either. I'm sorry."

I stifled a sigh. We really needed to work on her confidence... More problems for later. "You don't mind, though? It would be pretty useful knowing if trouble's on the way."

"Oh, no! I don't mind at all." Dinah said quickly. "I've only used about ten questions so far today, that's easy now."

I nodded to myself. Even on a school day, that'd probably be manageable. "Do you mind if I ask a few?"

"Go ahead." She actually sounded a little eager. Probably that desire to prove useful. I felt a little bad taking advantage of that, but she was offering...

"Am I going to be ambushed somehow? Do I have to worry about something happening on the way somewhere, or just when I'm training later today?" I'd already had my training plans set in my head since yesterday, so if something happened this afternoon, that'd be when.

It took her a few seconds. "76% chance of ambush, 10% chance of a fight while you're traveling to a destination, 80% chance while training."
That was good to know. But thinking about it, if I had Dinah on the line already... I paused my trek towards the bus. "I have a meeting with some people about team stuff this morning... do you mind me asking about that?"

"No, it's fine. They've all been easy questions so far." There was some hesitance creeping into her voice, so I'd have to keep this short. Try to limit it to two or three more, at most.

"Alright. What are the chances hostilities break out at my meeting this morning?" Sorry, Sue. Trust, but verify.

"12%"

Not as low as I'd hoped, but still pretty good. "I'm negotiating a deal. What are the chances things go well if I just offer everything I can think of, and ask for everything I've thought of, and whatever they offer?"

She let out a displeased hum. I wasn't sure if it was the complicated wording, or if her power was having more trouble with it than the others. "80% chance things turn out okay."

For a second, I considered asking more questions, but decided against it. "Thank you, Dinah. That's all for now."

"Are you sure?" She asked hesitantly. "I can handle more."

"I don't want to get into the habit of leaning on you too hard." I explained, starting my walk again. "You're probably going to add more questions to your regular routine as the team grows, right?"

"Well..." She trailed off into hesitant noises.

"See? I don't want you hurting yourself. Don't worry, I really do have everything I need to know right now."

"Are you really-?" There was a muffled voice cutting into Dinah's continued insistence on helping. I heard her sigh. "It's breakfast. I... have to go. Call me later? After... you know?"

After the fight, so she'd know I was alright. "Yeah, I can do that. No problem."

Two brief goodbyes later, and I sped my walking back to normal speed, to wind up at the bus stop less than a minute later. That bus took me to the hub near the boardwalk, where I caught the connection heading south. I got off a few blocks from Sue's, ducking into a sketchy alley my powers told me was empty, and changed hoodies. Then I strapped on the masks, drew the hood up to cover them from most angles, and packed up my bag. I hopped up onto a dumpster and jumped up, kicking off the walls of the alleyway until I was rolling to a stop on the roof of a currently-empty and probably unused building. I found a place to stash my bag up there, behind some air units that looked like they needed a tuneup before anyone should risk turning them on, and made my way down the fire escape on the other side of the building. From there, it was just a matter of keeping my head down on the walk to the tenement.

I pressed the door buzzer like last time, but this time the woman waited until she had checked the door before the intercom crackled. "Yes?"

Fighting down a fidget, I turned my masked face fully to the small camera. "I'm... Terraform." I hated the small stutter. I should practice introducing myself in front of a mirror or something. "I'm here to meet..." well, it wasn't like anyone listening wouldn't know who lived here... "To meet with Sue's... group?" What did they even call themselves? I should have asked!
I could feel her hand drift away from her gun as she sighed. It felt like she was muttering to herself, but with the com off, I couldn't hear it. The door clicked a few times as locks were unlatched, and the door opened.

"Get in." She grumbled. I hopped to it, waited for her to re-lock the door, and followed her up. The silent judgment was *excruciatingly* awkward, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

The first thing I noticed when I got to the room was that Jake, Sue, and... I think door-woman's name is Minnie? Weren't the only people I recognized. One of the chairs—which had been pulled out from the table and spread around the room—was occupied by Gerard, messing with his phone.

There were three people I didn't know, though. The one that was actually seated looked a little older than me, *maybe* early twenties. His clothes were thick and stained, his hair matted up like it was halfway towards a terrible attempt at dreadlocks, his eyes unfocused until he noticed me. Then they sharpened in my direction as he gave a sleazy grin and a small wave. The closer of the two standing was a svelte blonde woman around my height, with hair just past her shoulders, and hard ice-blue eyes. The conversation she was having with Jake petered to a halt when we entered. The last was the second-oldest person in the room, after Sue. He was white, looked to be in his mid-to-late 40s, and had short salt-and-pepper hair that looked like it was *probably* light brown, a decade ago. Of all those here, he seemed the most hostile, not bothering to hide the soft glare aimed my way.

A few moments of letting everyone acclimate to my presence, Sue spoke up from her thick-padded chair in the little 'entertainment' nook, with the TV and couch. "Hello, there..." She paused. "Have you chosen a name yet, dear?"

I was sure she already knew my cape name, but was pulling me into the conversation, giving me the chance to introduce myself, instead of being introduced. "Uhm. Hi. I'm Terraform. It's nice to meet you." I said to the group.

The younger woman I didn't know perked up at that. She came a little closer, moving with a confident but elegant stride I wished I could match. She was wearing tight jeans and a nice blouse under one of those thin jackets with a high bottom hem, to show off the wearer's butt and a bit of waist from behind.

I was jealous, and had no idea what to do about it.

"Oh! Terraform!" She held out her hand when she got to me. "It's nice to meet you in person."

That implied we'd interacted in some way, and she *did* sound familiar, but... it took a second to click. "Dispatch lady?" I asked, incredulously.

There was silence for a beat before Jake burst into laughter, Gerard and the boy followed by snickering. The woman's smile had grown strained, but she chuckled anyway. "Yeah, that about sums up my life, right now."

"Aww, don't worry Barbie, they'll let you shoot gangers eventually." Jake called, once his laughter had died down.

"Shut up." She half-heartedly growled, before offering her hand to shake, again. "Sally Barr, BBPD."

I took the hand out of reflex, but cringed back a little anyway. "You're... *a cop*?" I asked hesitantly. It wasn't *bad* that she was a police officer, just... *very confusing*. She certainly didn't *look* like the
stereotypical butch beat cop that popped to mind when I thought of female officers. "Why are you... here?"

Sue snorted. "What, you thought we were one of those criminal gangs?"

"Only a little..." Jake muttered from the other side of the room, setting off Gerard and the boy I didn't know, again.

The fact that no one seemed put off or pinging my lie detection about the implied criminal activity and ganghood was... mildly startling, but I could deal with it. You just didn't make it out of your teenaged years being a lily-white snowflake in the Bay. I've known that for years.

She dropped my hand with a chuckle. “They’re kind of the reason I became a cop.” I leaned back a little, tilting my head and raising an eyebrow, though they couldn’t see that part. “Oh, not like that. Dad’s been on the force since before I was born. They.” She indicated the group around us. “got me out of a pretty bad situation, and pushed me to do more with myself. So I decided to try and clean up the city, like dad wanted to do.” She gave a helpless shrug and a sigh. “But he’s been throwing his weight around to keep me from really helping at all, ‘for my safety’. Dispatch and investigations are important work, but I’d kill for an actual patrol once in a while.”

“Now that you’ve met Barbie,” Jake cut in, causing Sally to whine and motion something violent in his direction, to which he backed off and chuckled. “You already know me and Sue, and Gerard too, I guess.” That got him a flipped bird from across the room. “Minnie you’ve met, but I don’t think you’ve been introduced.” I turned, to see what I expected from my senses- the door woman staring at me with narrowed eyes. “This is Su-Min. She doesn’t like new people, but I’m sure she’ll warm up to you eventually.”

She muttered something, Given that I didn’t know of anywhere else in that part of Asia that did the hyphen-sounding names, it was probably Korean.

Everyone ignored that, though. “This is Arthur,” Jake continued, and I turned back. He indicated the older man, who tilted his head a bit in acknowledgment. “and Vincent.” He nodded to the grungy boy.

“Call me Vinnie.” He said, with what he probably thought was a winning smile. He didn’t look like a Vinnie. At all. His voice was a little deeper than I expected, but I was sure he was the youngest here, aside from myself. From the eyerolls around the room, I decided it was probably alright to just ignore what he’d said.

"Sooo...?" I muttered quietly, trying to move things along.

Sue shrugged. "All of us want the city to be better, but we're not agreed on which is the best way to do it, or even if it can be done. Enough of us wanted to help you that we're here now to see what that might look like." She leaned forward and indicated the room with a wave of her hand. "This is most of what we can bring to the table. Our best informants on the gangs in the city, our management, maintenance, and supplies, all here."

"It's not much," Jake said, breaking some of the growing tension. "but what we've got, we've got."

I wasn't sure I actually knew what I was doing, here. I knew they were a proper group, with time to establish themselves, manpower, an actual group structure, but seeing it staring -or glaring, in a couple cases- me down was something else entirely. I felt like a little kid asking the adults for something, and I hated it. I took a breath, pushing that anger and frustration away. "Well, my team is just myself and a thinker so far," I remembered Sue's advice about keeping the specifics of
thinker powers obscure. "but we're pretty sure we'll have more members over the next few weeks. That's actually part of what I wanted to bring up with you." I took another fortifying breath, trying to make it less obvious than it felt. "I don't actually know where any of the independent capes around town are. I've heard they tend to be 'vaguely south' but nothing besides that, so far." I gulped a little bit, the room wasn't impressed, not uninterested, but I didn't feel much excitement or other strong emotional shifting. "We're not nothing yet, though. I'm pretty versatile, as far as capes go. I haven't had much in the way of fights to tell how strong I am, but I'm pretty sure I'm good there, too."

"What powers do you have?" The older man asked. I hadn't expected Arthur to speak up, especially not so diplomatically, considering what I could see and feel.

"Classical elements." I said, glad to be back on familiar ground. "Earth, Fire, Water, Air. The only one I can make is fire, but I can control the others really well." There was that bloom of awe around the room I was looking for. I could only see it on Sally, Vincent, and Gerard, but I could feel heartbeats picking up and breath halting around the room. "Like I said, very versatile. I'm hoping to do some construction when I'm not doing proper Hero things."

"Like what?" Gerard asked, leaning closer.

"Well, I've already fixed up the roads a bit at one of my fights..." Need to remember to go back to the others and fix them too, if the roads were still messed up. "but I'm pretty sure I can control wet concrete, collapse stone buildings safely, dig out foundations, dig spaces under foundations... the water table here doesn't allow for too much downward digging, but I only need a couple meters to dig out a bolthole or a secret base."

Glances were shared between the group, but I let them have their silent conversation. "That... sounds very useful." Arthur said after a moment.

I nodded. "There's also a bunch of old sewers and storm drains that aren't in use anymore. Collapsed, flooded, some of the new system is just built through the old one, walling it off..." I shrugged. "Anyway, I'm going to start healing at the hospital sometimes, too. When my costume's done."

"You're a healer?" Jake asked, and I could feel his hand gripping at his injured leg outside my normal range of vision.

"Oh, right. Yeah." I'd kind of forgotten he was hurt, honestly. "You want me to take care of that for you?"

His throat bobbed a bit as he nervously swallowed. "Yeah, that'd be pretty cool."

I motioned him to scoot away from the table a bit, and the chair he was in squealed on the floor as he put an extra foot between them and turned to open up more space. "Could someone get me some water? Tap's fine." Arthur, being the closest to the kitchenette, made his way in and came back a few moments later with a glass of water. I startled him a bit, pulling the water into the air and over towards myself before he could cross the room with it. "Pull up your pants?" I asked as I started kneading the blob of water between my hands, focusing energy into it and causing it to glow.

Jake did so, and I found exactly what I expected. A graze by his shin, making it hard for him to put weight on the leg. I just ignored the bandages, letting the water soak through them as I started working on it. "This is going to take a while. Part of why I wanted to do the hospital thing was to get more practice..." It was a little awkward bending over like this, so I hooked another chair with
my leg and pulled it over, setting his foot on it and starting back on the injury. "I'm pretty sure I'll get better with time and practice. Right now I'm limited to bruises, scratches, maybe helping with broken bones a little... surface level stuff." Everyone was watching with varying levels of interest, awe, and trepidation. "Still, half an hour to heal a gunshot's way better than half a year." That was about the right timescale, right? I knew holes like proper gunshot wounds didn't go away in less than a month unless you were some sort of regenerator. I'd never looked into it, but the couple brief nods from around the room made me think my ballpark guess was close enough.

I took a deep breath after another half a minute of working on healing, splitting my attention a bit. "So, we have a thinker, and I can do construction and combat, and a bit of healing... depending on who else we can get to join up, we might have more that we can do. Was there anything else you had in mind for things you wanted us to do?"

There was another beat full of glances before Sue shrugged. "The groups we have the least amount of information on are the PRT and Protectorate. We can plan around the gangs most days, but sometimes a hero raid catches us out. We've lost good people over the years in the crossfire, there."

I took a bit to think on it. Really, without joining the Wards, I had no idea what sort of information I could even get from the PRT or Protectorate. But as long as it didn't get back to the gangs, I couldn't see a reason not to share whatever I did find out. "I'll see what I can do. Not sure it'll be much as an independent, though."

Sue chuckled. "I think you're underestimating the value of gossip, dear."

I shrugged. That sounded like one of those things a normal teenaged girl high school experience would teach, rather than what I got. I pushed the feelings down with a deep breath as I kept working. Getting moody over Winslow wouldn't help at all, here. "So, you have information on the gangs?"

"I get a lot of our Empire information." Gerard cut in. "It's pretty amazing what people say when the only folks around are blonde, blue-eyed, white men." He gave a rueful chuckle and a shake of his head. "I also try to keep an eye out for the DWA, make sure nothing they have going on is going to step on any toes. Everyone's pretty good at that already though, especially the people in charge." Aaand yup. He probably already suspected I was Danny's daughter. Fantastic.

Sally chimed in, over my shoulder. "I mostly just drop info where it needs to go, when we find something the police can actually act on." I could tell her eyes were on the glowing water under my hands. She was watching warily, shuddering a little with an involuntary shiver, rubbing her arms and biting at her lip while she thought I couldn't see it. "I also run relay with the PRT sometimes. They take things a little more seriously when PD dispatch hands info over, and don't tend to follow up on where we got it, if it's good." She shrugged, close enough I'd hear the rustle of her clothes even if I couldn't 'see' her. "Not that we have info on gang capes very often..."

A couple beats later, Vincent coughed. "So uhh, we goin' around, then?" Sue tilted her head in a half-shrug. She might have motioned to him and I just hadn't noticed. "Well, I'm pretty chummy with a bunch of the Merchant dealers. They know me, I know them, we talk, it's all good."

Wait... "You do drugs?" My hands paused and the glow dimmed.

He scoffed. "It's like buying a Nazi a drink. You shoot up with your dealer, they'll tell you
anything. Don't knock it 'till you try it, babe." He gave me a saucy smile and a wink.

Was he... holy shit I think he was. "I am fifteen." I spat with perhaps more venom than needed. *So much eww.*

Watching him choke on his spit was pretty satisfying, though. "Never mind, then." I heard him mutter something about 'jailbait' under his breath, but chose to ignore it. Jake, Sally, and Gerard were chuckling a little at his fumbling, in different ways.

"I, uhh..." Jake rubbed his head as I got back to healing him. "I actually... kinda... run drugs for the ABB." He muttered that last part quietly, but I still heard it.

...and *might* have frozen the water to his leg. "What?" I hissed.

He sucked in a breath at the figurative and literal chill, "Hey, it's not as bad as you think."

I stood up, the chair I'd been sitting at skidding back a little. "Not that bad? You're a literal gangster!"

Jake took a deeper breath and took a glance around the room. My eyes followed as his went. Sue did her half-shrug head tilt, Arthur *actually* shrugged, Vincent didn't seem to care, but he wouldn't. Gerard was stoic, and Sally looked a little sad. "Look... kid." I could tell he wanted to use my name, but didn't. "It's just part of how the world works. If I didn't do it, they'd find *someone* who would. Always another cartel to buy from, and half a dozen guys to call to get whatever the gangs want. So long as there's a buyer, there *will* be people selling and transporting shit." He was getting a bit heated now, but I didn't back down. "At least this way I can use their drug money against them, get an in to get information from them. I know where they keep their drugs, I know where most of their brothels are, where some of their gun stashes are. We can *use* that." He leaned back in his chair. "It's just a fact. If the gangs want drugs, they'll *get* their drugs."

"...mostly from the Merchants." Vincent sniped.

"Shut up." Jake hissed at him.

"What?" the boy smiled, hands raised in an overacted shrug. "Lung doesn't care where the drugs his people resell comes from."

"I just don't think the *politics* of it helps my point any." Jake groused, which caused Vincent to shrug and go back to his phone. He turned back to me. "I know you don't like it, but sometimes people do the wrong thing for the right reasons. The second you think you can take out Lung, I'll be there to point you right at him." He sighed, looked down, and made a vague waving gesture off to the side, further towards ABB territory. "But I can't do that without having an in to get that information. If I press, I can get just about anything I want to know, but I do that too often and they'll catch on."

I thought on it. I hated it, but it made *some* sense. "You'll stop when they're gone?"

He shrugged and smiled. "Never *wanted* to, just too good an in to pass up." He wasn't lying, as far as I could tell. Another few moments of stewing on it, I nodded and sat back down, unfreezing the ice and sparking up the glow again. "That... *really* stung a lot, you know." He muttered.

"Sorry." I sighed out. I gave it a few minutes, people either waiting in the semi-tense silence or taking the time to peck away at their phones while I kept stitching the wound back together. Eventually I got tired of it, and turned first to Su-Min, then to Arthur. "So, what do you do?"
They looked at each other, and Arthur shrugged, going first. "Arthur Kent: Graves shift Custodial lead; Medhall."

I didn't mean any offense, but... "Why does that matter?"

He shrugged. "CEO's Kaiser."

"...what?" I hissed. I surely hadn't heard that right.

Arthur nodded to himself, his hands twitching in a way that was familiar in smokers desperate to relieve stress by lighting up, supported by the pack I could tell was in his back pocket. He tapped his fingers on his thigh instead, shaking his head before he nodded more firmly. "CEO is Kaiser."

He certainly seemed to believe it. "Why would you say that? Why tell me that? Doesn't that break... all the rules?" I was actually starting to freak out a bit, now.

He shrugged again. "Rules are bullshit, and everyone knows it." His fingers tapped out another pattern. "The gangs have ways around them." He raised his hands to list off numbers. "No one can care if you're not caught, even if you do get caught you can just throw out a scapegoat, the rules are a bit fuzzier when it's normals like me breaking them anyway, and there are people that the rules don't apply to either way like the Nine, or people strong enough to openly skirt them and get away with it like Lung..." He threw his hands up and shook his head. "And if the PRT decides to cover it up, none of that shit matters anyway." He gave it a second, while he took a deeper breath. "The rules just don't matter as much as you think they do, kid."

I let that sink in a bit, as I focused back on healing. Again, he seemed to believe everything he was saying. He was angry, frustrated with the system, with the city, with the rules. I was pretty sure he was one of the people Sue'd said agreed with her, that the city couldn't be fixed. That it was best to do what they could to get as many people to leave as possible. He was probably throwing this in my face to show me how insurmountable it was. I knew the E88 were entrenched, but running one of the biggest job-makers in the city? The richest company based solely in the bay? It was pretty scary. "And what do you do with that job?" I asked, finally.

He nodded, like I'd passed some test. "I'm high enough in the system that I can keep track of when the boss blocks himself out as 'busy', or when his favorite flunkies are given 'days off' to take care of whatever they have planned. I've been around since before Allfather had his 'tragic accident'..." he actually finger-quoted it and simpered the words. "so no one suspects it, as far as I can tell. I could try to slip recording devices or something in to meetings, but that'd end bad real quick." He shook his head. "Nah, my thing's eyes-on. ...plus I like to keep some bunkers around town, just in case. Bit of a hobby, y'see." I guess I could, yeah. Could never be too prepared around Brockton. "Hope you don't mind too much me not telling you where they are, being anti-parahuman bunkers and all, and... well..." He gave a shrug, without seeming sorry at all about it.

"Ah." I succinctly summed my feelings with a click of my tongue. Still, I suppose I couldn't fault the guy for feeling outgunned against the Empire.

It was almost another half-minute before Sue cut in. "Su-Min..." She said, indicating the woman, who nodded. "Takes care of the building, and keeps in contact with everyone while I'm busy or working." Made sense, to have someone like that around. I wasn't sure I liked that it was someone so hostile, but I could deal with a bit of bitchiness. I nodded to indicate I'd heard, and kept working. A bit more time passed, and she asked, "Was there anything else you wanted our help with?"

I stopped to think, mostly to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything. "Yeah." I nodded. "Materials. Gear. Anything you can manage. It's usually a tinker thing, people getting outed by the trail getting
their gear leaves, but that can happen for other types of capes, too. And if we ever did get a tinker, we'd need to get them stuff to work with, without throwing up signs screaming where to find them." A tinker would be fantastic, but I didn't have high hopes of it. They were just too high-demand for one to fall into my lap before someone else snatched them up.

Everyone seemed to think on it, even Vincent was staring slightly above his phone at the wall in thought. Gerard muttered "Wouldn't mind some Tinkertech..." loud enough for everyone to hear, and for him to get a few affirmative grunts in agreement.

Sue glanced around, taking in the mood of the group, and nodded. "We don't have much to spare, but we do have some experience with supply chains. It shouldn't be too hard to supply a small team. Especially if you can help fund it with gang money from raids." I nodded. That sounded fine. Better the money went somewhere else than the gangs. I think I might feel a little conflicted using it myself, but if Sue wanted it? I don't think I'd have a problem with that. "And that was everything?" She asked.

I nodded. "You help me find people for my team, help us kit ourselves up, and find us targets to hit once we've got enough people and training to start hitting the gangs." I said it with more firm confidence than I felt, trying to make it sound official. It helped a bit that I was still 'looking' down, with my eyes closed, focused on healing. "In exchange, we'll help add to your intel on the gangs, try to keep you up to date on the heroes too, I can come by and heal when you need it... though it might be better to go to a hospital if you're really hurt..." I muttered that last part. "And... I suppose we can get you some money and stuff from the gang places we hit. And uh... some Tinkertech..." I could hear hissed 'Yes!'es from Gerard and Vincent. "IF we ever get a tinker!" I half-snarled to get the point across. We couldn't give what we didn't have, after all. "But yeah, info, healing, supplies... I can build whatever you need built, if you want that done, too."

"Well?" Sue asked the group. She got affirmations from everyone, even small nods from Su-Min and Arthur, when she turned her attention to them. "That settles it. We'll be working together from now on. You know what to do, go fucking do it." She made shooing motions, which got snickers from everyone but Arthur. Vincent and Gerard left straight away with small waves, Arthur following with another terse nod. Su-Min leaned against the doorframe, probably intent on staying until I left, and Sally came up beside me from her place behind where I was sitting.

"Here." She said, writing down a number on some paper. "Give me a call whenever you're in trouble. I'll rally the cavalry for you." She hopped to attention and gave me a jaunty salute before she headed to the door. "Oh, and send me a text if you change cape phones, yeah?" Oh, right. She probably had my number from calling the police while she was running dispatch...

"Right, yeah!" I said, and she waved and left.

I turned back to Jake, who pulled his eyes up to mine from where he'd been watching Sally's butt as she left. He smiled and shrugged at my blank stare. "So, how much longer do you think it'll take?"

"Not too much, more than halfway done, I think."

A few minutes later, Sue spoke up from rocking in her chair. "You know, if you want us to gather capes for you, you should probably have a time and place to meet picked out." I flinched. I knew I'd been forgetting something! "Did you have anything in mind?"

I shook my head, not sure if she could see it with her head lolled back in her chair. "Not really... maybe a couple weeks out, to give time to find people... I'd probably just wind up picking a park or something public."
Sue nodded. "I'll figure something out?"

"If you wouldn't mind." I answered, and she nodded.

Jake got out his phone to wait out the last ten minutes or so of healing. It wouldn’t have taken nearly as long, if I hadn’t needed to undo a lot of the healing it’d already done, to fix it up without leaving scar tissue where the wound used to be.

When I was done and heading out, I told him, “Now stop getting yourself shot.”

“Already one of my life goals, don’t you worry.” He answered.

I said my goodbyes and headed out, nodding to Su-Min and getting a slight head-tilt in return, after which she followed me out to re-lock the doors behind me. I made my way to the building where I’d left my bag, recovering my things and heading out for training, when I remembered Dinah’s warning from this morning. I didn’t want to just walk right into a trap, but I also didn’t want to back down from a fight unless I had to. So I plugged the new number into my phone and dialed it.

“Terra? Are you okay?” Sally asked, when she answered.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I actually kinda’ liked my name, shortened like that.

She heaved out an audible sigh. “Had me worried, calling so soon. What’s up?”

“I…” How to phrase this… “If I… had it on good authority that I was going to… maaaybe… get ambushed, later today… should I call someone to maybe help, before that happens?”

I could imagine her non-plussed stare into the distance, wherever she was. “Terra…” She muttered darkly. When I didn’t respond, she sighed. “No walking into traps. You’re not allowed. If you’re dead set on doing whatever, anyway, call the PRT. If they won’t send you backup, either don’t fucking go, or call me, and I’ll go with you. Do you understand?” With that commanding tone, I could kind of see her as a cop, now…

“Yes, ma’am.” Was really the only valid reply.

"Good. Text me if they send someone." She said, with a certain note of finality to it. "And Terra?"

"Y-yeah?” I flinched, as I was making my way down to the street.

"You're a good kid." Sally's tone softened considerably. "Take care of yourself."

Then she hung up, and I was left staring at my phone, standing on the last landing of a fire escape. I felt conflicted. On one hand, the way she immediately took charge and dictated the situation to me grated a bit, but on the other? It was nice to feel cared about.

I sniffled, just barely stopping myself from trying to wipe at my eyes with my masks in the way. I squeezed my eyes instead, took a few fortifying breaths, and hopped the last couple meters down to the alleyway below.

The phone picked up on the second ring. "PRT non-emergency helpline, how may I be of assistance?"

"Hello. This is Terraform." I started, as I walked. "I, uhh..."

"Do you need to be transferred to the emergency line?" Generally when a cape called them, that was the one they needed.
"No, I... don't think so? I was going to do some training, and I'm pretty sure a fight's going to break out. I was wondering if I could have some backup on hand, instead of needing to call them in later."

"Okay." They sounded a little confused, but pressed on. "And where were you thinking of doing this at?"

"The Trainyard." I answered, almost immediately. The line went quiet, and I thought I heard a low breath.

"Let me transfer you over." The line clicked and buzzed. I guess it was an emergency call situation after all?

The line picked up again. "Armsmaster." The man himself said, causing me to freeze.

They transferred me to Armsmaster? "Uhh, hi. It's Terraform. I... have a potential ambush situation I think you might want to take advantage of, sir?"

I got the sense he was pausing, stilling some work he'd been in the middle of. "I'm listening."

"I was going to go train today, and I'm pretty sure the Merchants are going to pop up. They did last time, and once before that. I'd say it's good odds something's going to happen."

He hummed, and I thought I could hear soft clicking in the background. "You're training in the Trainyard?" He must have been looking up reports or something.

"Trying to clean it up a bit, two birds and all." Ugh, I can't believe I said that. Stop trying to be hip at the Protectorate hero!

An agitated grunt later, "You're set on doing this there, today? There's been increased gang activity from the Merchants and ABB. I must advise against it."

Had there been? I hadn't really noticed. "Isn't that all the more reason to pull them to somewhere you know they'll be?"

He paused, probably thinking it over, and sighed. "What do you think you'll need?"

I couldn't help the grin. "Just someone to watch my back, just some troops and something to haul people away in should be enough."

There was some more of the soft clicking, followed by a low grumble. "Aegis and Dauntless are in the area. They'll rendezvous with you at the southeast entrance, on 16th street."

Wait, I was getting capes? "Are you sure?" I couldn't help asking.

A soft chuff, probably a scoff. "They'll be there in ten, unless you need more time?"

Ten minutes to get across the whole city? I could probably manage in three, if I cut loose. "That's fine."

A couple more clicks. "Armsmaster, out." The line cut dead.
Chapter 1.15 (Bad Trips)

Chapter Summary

The original version of the Mush fight was bad, and I only recently got around to fixing it.
The original confrontation with Danny was riotously bad.
Literally. The thread actually rioted. It was purged the next day. I am assured both of these are improvements over the originals.

SUN FEB 20

I sent Sally a text, saying 'They're sending capes.' and getting a short 'kk' back.

That done, I cinched down my pack and stretched, shaking the kinks from sitting for half an hour out of my joints. Then I got down in a sprinter's start, and shot off. When I got to the more populated sections of the city, I ran diagonally up the side of a building, to start hopping rooftops instead. Which, given I couldn't just maintain my wind-boosted sprint in an uninterrupted straight line, actually made it slower than the ground.

It was fine, though. I still made it with five minutes to wait, picking around the trainyard with my senses and checking for more of those bombs from last time, while keeping an eye out for fliers. It was annoying, knowing anyone that anyone who could fly could still sneak up on me, but there wasn't much I could do about it other than try to get into the habit of looking up. As I craned my neck, I realized that stung a little. Being as depressed and downtrodden as I'd been for so long, looking down had become instinctual, ingrained in a way that was hard to put into words. It wasn't just not showing my face to the bullies, it was... pessimism. Hopelessness. Keep your head down, don't attract attention, look for the good in your place in the muck, stay down where you belong.

I took a breath and sighed it out, unclenching my hands, which were so tight they creaked painfully as I released them. I wasn't that girl anymore. I wouldn't be her anymore. I choose to hope.

I forced a smile onto my face as I waited. I'd heard somewhere that the brain's wired to think you're happy if you're smiling.

I noticed the not-quite-subtle PRT wagon first. Mostly empty from what I could tell, it still had at least four bulky figures in the seats. The air-filled rubber tires still made it hard to see into cars. Dauntless caught my eye next, with his distinct stutter-start flight. It looked a bit like someone wading through thick mud, each step taking them streaking hundreds of feet through the air instead of one or two. Which wasn't to say he was motionless when between them, he just floated slowly instead. It reminded me a bit of Legend actually, with his ability to be a relatively normal flier, or break out near-lightspeed travel in a pinch.

Aegis was much more subtle than a lightning bolt, as it were. A reddish speck in the sky, growing larger as he got closer. I couldn't help but think there must be a mismatch in their cruising speeds, with Dauntless choosing to repeatedly catch up to the Ward, rather than overtake him. The two shot past the PRT van as they made their way closer, and the van parked itself a few blocks away. Maybe I wasn't supposed to know it was there?
My thoughts were interrupted by the pair dropping out of the sky next to me. Aegis had a big, friendly grin as he floated closer. Dauntless' smile was smaller, but I could still see it clearly through the gap in his centurion helmet, beneath where the built-in visor ended. It actually looked to my senses like they were two separate pieces, like my masks.

I shook Aegis' outstretched hand. "Terraform. It's good to see another hero around. I'm Aegis. Wards leader." He had a rather strong grip, but that shouldn't have surprised me, with his super-strength.

"Hi." I said, a little weakly. I still wasn't too keen on meeting people my own age. I had enough people to exhaust myself being around now, and something just felt... off about this. About him. Maybe it was the fact that he would've been my boss if I'd joined the Wards, but some part of me just didn't like him.

"Hello," Dauntless said, saving me from my awkward pause. "It's good to see you again, now that we have time to talk." I shook his hand too. He didn't seem off, like Aegis did. Then again, he wasn't in any sort of leadership position, besides being higher than the Wards in the command chain. It helped that I could tell he was nervous, but hiding it well enough. Something about putting a rising star like Dauntless on edge made me feel powerful.

"Yeah." I muttered, then straightened. No need to be rude, after all. "Thank you for coming to back me up, especially... under the odd circumstances."

"Armsmaster mentioned that, yeah." Dauntless nodded. "We... sort of realized the wording might imply some thinker warning, but we don't tend to find shakers with thinker powers, outside novel uses of their abilities, or things that make using them easier." I could tell he'd started rambling a little, but it was fine.

"It's..." Deflect, deflect. I shouldn't even let on we have a thinker, if it can be helped... "A teammate wanted me to be careful today. Made me call the PRT." Probably not ambiguous enough, but I had to hope Dinah would be a little safer, as long as I kept deflecting.

The pair blinked at that. Aegis cleared his throat. "You have a team?" I made an affirmative noise, and he continued. "How many teammates? Do you mind telling us about them?"

I froze up, my hackles raising. It was fishing for information, which was bad, but so obvious that it was probably just a teenager trying to socialize with a peer. Still, deny, deny... "I'd rather not say." I raised my hands to stall the questions I could tell they wanted to ask. "It's not that I don't trust you, it's just that I can't trust you." I chuckled nervously after that spilled out. That didn't sound fantastic, and they glanced at each other, before Dauntless let out a confused hum.

"Do you... mind telling us why?" He asked.

What was it that Amy'd said? "Trigger trauma. Authority-related. It's complicated." And I really don't want to talk about it.

I could feel his eyes widen behind his visor, and Aegis looked a tad poleaxed. "Ah, that's... okay." Dauntless muttered.

Shaking my head, I added, "That's why I can't join the Wards. I've got... trust issues, and control issues..." I hugged myself, rubbing my arms. At least they were focusing on me now, instead of Dinah. "I just can't take orders from someone I don't already trust, and in a big organization, that's bound to happen eventually."
They shared another look, this one far less nervous. "I can respect that." Dauntless said after turning back to me. "It's good to be conscious of our problems. Let's make better choices, and work towards being better people." Aegis nodded along, and I tilted my head. I was a bit flattered, but... eventually he chuckled. "That's what my therapist says, anyway."

I wanted to ask about him seeing a therapist, it was hard to conceptualize heroes as people with problems of their own, but being a hero myself, I knew it could happen. Aegis nodding along again helped stay my tongue as well. "We get worried about independents." Aegis said, waving his hand in a 'what can you do?' motion. "A lot of them aren't willing to join any team, let alone the Wards. It's good that you've got someone to watch your back."

I nodded along, happy they were so quick to drop their recruitment tactics. "That's part of why I'm forming my own team. Dad and I think it'd do the city a lot of good to have an option besides the government capes and outed New Wave." Dinah'd said there were good chances we'd have four capes in a couple weeks, extrapolating that out... "We're hoping to have a solid team in a month or two."

They looked suitably impressed, and not just about the team, from Dauntless' next words. "Your parents know you're a cape?"

That stung more than I thought it would. "...yes." Better that they thought I had a set, to obfuscate my civilian identity as well as possible. It still hurt, like I was disrespecting mom's memory by implying she was still alive.

They didn't seem to notice, and he continued on. "That's another problem young capes have. Too many hide things from their parents, making rash choices and taking needless risks instead."

I bit back the groan at his words. That was part of why I was talking to dad, he'd wanted me to talk to him about these things, and my choices, to make sure I wasn't making foolish mistakes. If I'd called him about today, instead of Sally, I had no doubt he'd tell me to stop heading to the Trainyard, training or not. Had I just ignored him out of habit again, like I used to? I needed to start talking to him again. These bad habits needed to stop.

...oh well, nothing to do about it, today. I grabbed my backpack, slinging it on like it wasn't more than twenty pounds of books and gear, and pointed a thumb through the entryway. "Well, do we want to head in? I can show you some of what I've been doing to train."

"That sounds good." Aegis said. "We might even find ways to help with that."

I hadn't thought of that, but it did sound like a good idea. "I'd like that." I led them over to the nearest of my piles, the one where I'd had that fight last time. I dropped my bag again and took a moment to clean things up. Stuff had shifted a bit, maybe people were digging through the piles or something, it was the work of moments to pile up crushed metal containers and rebar, and re-stack piles of concrete and asphalt rubble, and the small stacks of brick from dismantled buildings. I raised my leg, holding my foot out in an exaggerated stance more for the spectacle of it than anything, and stamped my foot down to no obvious effect. The boys stood around confused, and right when Aegis was about to ask what that was about, an empty shipping container crashed down nearby with a calamitous racket. I casually flicked the wave of gravel ejected by the explosion back towards the ground, and turned to find the other heroes staring at me in horror.

The looks on their faces were hilarious. I couldn't help the ugly, snorting cackle that ripped itself from my throat. They'd backed away a bit, eyeing myself and the partly-crumpled metal box warily. My laughter petered out about ten seconds later. "Haha, oh man, did I need that." I hadn't laughed that hard in... I couldn't even remember, really. "I'll warn you next time. I've gotten very
good at throwing rocks. And throwing things with rocks." I kicked my foot and the gravel under the container surged upward, twisting in midair to land a couple meters closer to us. I kicked again just as it was about to hit, and continued to juggle it right past us to where the foundation of the building I got blown into the other day was. I'd already torn it apart brick by brick, so it was little more than a massive slab of concrete now.

With the container beside the foundation, I strode up to it, taking a solid stance and flicked my hands out a couple of times. The concrete gave a pair of loud cracks as straight splits parted it, carving out a more manageable chunk that I levitated out of the ground with a pair of upward-thrust fists and a grunt of effort. The surface area of the slab was carefully measured at just bigger than the container's sides, and it was almost two feet thick. With deep, steady breaths, I hovered the slab over the container, and gently lowered it down. The container took the weight for a couple seconds, enough that I'd started to wonder if I'd need to help it along, before the rusty steel groaned and squealed, crumpling under more than twenty tons of weight.

Yes, I did look up how much concrete weighed.

When the container stopped crumpling, I pressed the slab down a bit, before lifting it off and setting it to the side. I raised the flattened container by levitating the gravel under it, and deposited it noisily on top of the pile with the rest. I turned to the heroes, noting that Dauntless was staring with wide eyes, and Aegis' mouth was hanging open. My face broke into a wide grin, even though they couldn't see it.

"Any questions?" I asked cheekily.

Aegis gave off a soft, startled wheeze, and Dauntless took a deep breath before asking, "Is... that your upper limit?"

I snorted and shook my head. "Haven't hit it yet." I'm sure I had one, but I was just as sure it was going up at least as fast as I was chasing it down. I probably wouldn't have been able to lift the slab when I started out. Now though? The hardest part was getting it out of the ground.

He paused again. "And you can do that with...?"

"Any of the classical elements, yes." I went over to my bag, grabbing out the old canteen and a couple of paper fans. "Water's a little hard to demonstrate when there's none around, but..." I took the cap off after shoving the fans in my hoodie's pockets. Then I pulled the water out, and started flowing through some simple motions, the water streaming along beside me. I danced with it for a few seconds, then froze it into sharp shards around me with a swirl, the ice spiraling around me for a moment before it unfroze and flowed back into the canteen. They were both giving me weird looks again, but I shrugged and dug out the fans. I flipped them open and spun, leaping into the air and twirling, lashing out at the height of the jump, and causing a small literal tornado to speed out from my trajectory. The space I'd chosen was mostly empty, but I still had to flash out a few wind bursts to keep the gravel from raining down directly on top of us. Without a storm driving it, the wind quickly petered out. Then I closed the fans, holding them in my fists as I punched out a couple fireblasts, leapt up and kicked out a wave of flame, before landing and directing streams of fire to the ground around me. I spun, creating a wide circle of flame, which I pulled up with a rising swirl and raised hands. A swirl of air away from me kept me fairly cool in the middle of a biblical pillar of flame that died down a few seconds later, once the slow breath I'd been letting out ran out.

I hopped over the several-foot-wide trench of charred and semi-molten gravel, making my way back over to my bag. The two were staring again, and I decided to give them time to process what they'd seen. I kept the fans in my pockets, strapped the canteen to my waist, and grabbed the tonfa
out of my bag, slipping them into the waist of my pants, under my hoodie.

"That was..." Dauntless said, regaining his wits. "...very impressive."

I shrugged. "I really don't want to use fire against anyone, but the others are pretty great, yeah."
The two just nodded, still not sure what to make of me, so I said, "I'm gonna drop another container over there, okay?" I pointed to where the other had landed, and the two nodded and backed away. I launched another container into the air and tried to catch it with a mitt of gravel this time, to marginal success. Aegis was floating off to the side near Dauntless, watching me, while the older hero was standing around, talking into a microphone in the headset I wasn't supposed to be able to see through his helmet. Probably updating their information on me while it was fresh in his mind, but that was okay. I hadn't shown off the peak of my abilities, and I was okay with looking a bit scary.

We lived in the same city as Lung and a gang of Nazis with their own personal living blender. A bit of scary was more than called for, in comparison.

This continued for a while, them watching me crush containers, and making or listening to reports on their radios. Eventually Aegis offered to help with some target practice, and I started shooting bits of gravel at him while he tried to dodge. "So what are your powers, anyway? You're an Alexandria package, right?" I asked conversationally, also trying to distract him to land a few more hits. My aim was pretty spot on most of the time, but it was hard to change trajectories after I'd launched something, so the little stones weren't too hard to dodge if he focused on one of them. I felt sending out too many at once wasn't very sporting, even though I could've saturated the air with projectiles. Even so, I was sending three to five rocks at him every second, the hand motions directing them looking not entirely unlike someone trying to swat a pesky bug away from their face.

I was self-aware enough to know I looked silly right now, but I was hitting him more often than missing, so I counted it as a win.

"It's actually... redundant biology... and flight..." he managed, as I kept pelting him. He was having a harder time dodging and talking, so I took pity on him and lowered my rate of fire a bit.

"Adaptive biology, I mean. I can make myself stronger or tougher, but the real strength of it is making myself able to see from part of my skin if I'm blinded, or pump blood with my spleen if my heart's damaged, or anything like that, really."

Wait... "So you can change how your organs work, too? Even if nothing's wrong?"

He nodded, which was odd, since he was still dodging in midair. "Yeah. Can make organs work better, or differently. Why?"

That'd explain why he felt so off to me. If his heartbeat, breathing, and other tells didn't line up with what I was expecting from a normal person. I think the term was 'uncanny valley'? Seeing something not quite right, but close enough to what you expect that it should be right... "No reason." I lied.

I wasn't sure how he took that, not being able to see him with my senses, but he seemed to just accept it at face value. I upped the rate I was firing rocks back to normal, and things continued for the next few minutes.

Then I felt a couple of vehicles drive up nearby, a car and a truck, and figured this was what I was waiting for. I felt a bit excited to take more goons off the street, and my face split into another grin. I didn't say anything to the heroes, that would just give away my senses, after all. The men
unloaded from the vehicles, nine of them in total. One was gesturing about, probably giving orders. They started spreading out, and one of the shorter, dumpier ones started to *shred*.

I stumbled a bit, watching the portly stickman slowly collapse into a mass of tendrils, skin flaying, bones and organs liquifying, muscles peeling themselves into strands... I shook my head and coughed. Aegis flew down and asked if I was okay, but I waved him off.

What the *fuck* was that!?

And then I noticed the detritus in the area clumping together, about where the man's body *used* to be. "Oh, shit." I muttered, watching the humanoid form building itself, already larger than both their transports combined. Was this worth giving away my secret? I could bury Mush now, and that might take him out of the fight. But it would also tell the heroes I could see through walls and buildings. The worst part of my powers was how easily I could violate privacy, and I had no idea how the PRT, let alone the public, would handle it.

No, this was fine.
I can take him.

The first of the men rounded the corners behind the nearby standing buildings, and shuffled back to tell his friends where we were. They weren't very quiet about it, and I had to wonder if I was getting better at sensing sounds at range, or if they were just *that* bad at stealth. Either way, I had the opening I needed.

"I think we might have company." I said, waving over at the group.

Aegis' head perked in that direction, and I figured he was doing something to increase his hearing. Either way, he tapped the side of his helmet and said "Incoming." Dauntless perked up at that, readying his lance.

Leader-guy was waving his hands again. I had no idea what orders were left to give, but with Mush here... wait. If this guy was giving Mush orders, then he was probably...

About when I realized that, Mush's construct slammed its shoulder into the rear of the building they were hiding behind. The body absorbed the wall as it started to collapse, and thin tentacle whips of trash were slammed into the walls on his way through. The whole thing started to cave in on itself, and by the time he barreled out the front of the building, Mush had doubled his size.

"Holy *fuck.*" Wasn't this guy supposed to be a C-lister? The Merchants were so small more than half the city didn't know what they were called! Mush rolled to the side, giving us our first clear view of Skidmark and the rest of the goons, half of whom were holding guns, and the rest were grabbing whatever Mush hadn't picked up, rushing the bits over to a brightly glowing violet strip I couldn't see with my senses and- "Fuck!" *Dodging now!*

I'd barely rolled away in time for the cinderblock to dig a trench a quarter mile behind me, instead of splattering me across the ground. Okay, no. Playtime was over. I raised a hill between us and the ad-hoc *railgun* and punched a clod of gravel-laden dirt right into Skiddy's crotch from under his feet hard enough to lift him off the ground. He'd been layering *more* fields over the existing ones. Probably to punch through the mound of dirt and gravel protecting us. That was *not* okay. As he landed and started collapsing to his knees, a wave of my hand brought a hand-sized mass of gravel up to slap him hard enough that he crumpled to the ground unconscious.

*Fuck* that asshole.
Mush stopped where he’d been, halfway between the building and my piles of rubble and scrap. The tops of the piles were starting to drag themselves towards him, and I could just barely make out tiny threads linking each of the pieces to the mass. The giant stood fully upright, staring back in confusion at his fallen leader, not seeming to notice as Dauntless blasted holes through his body. The electrical nature of the attack wasn’t lending itself well to this fight, the steel an excellent conductor letting the charge flow between bits of metal until it hit the ground, while the brick and mortar and concrete that made up the majority of his golem body was an excellent insulator. The kinetic energy of the lance was blowing chunks away, and the occasional thin hole pierced directly through limbs or the body, but these were filling themselves too quickly for the damage to build up. I stomped my foot to halt the progress of the stone he was dragging towards himself, quickly finding myself struggling. It was like fighting a massive invisible hand trying to pull them along. What the hell was going on?

This seemed to shake him out of his stupor, and he flung one of his arms back towards the pile of containers. The limb thinned as it lengthened, slapping down on the flattened steel. Dauntless took the chance to focus on the thinner section of limb, having more success by the time I got used to the weird force on the rocks and held them steady. Mush was still pulling at the steel though, and I shook my head and let him have the rocks. Better to cut him off entirely, I thought as I sprinted to leap from the top of the hill I’d made earlier. I vaulted myself towards the arm where it was taking damage, rolling headfirst as I pushed myself forward with gusts of wind from my hands. At the height of my jump I lashed my legs out, flashing out first a massive gout of fire with the first, then a wave of wind with the second. The fire seared at the tendrils, the wind gouged at the stone, and I came down with both fists smashing into the ground, tearing a rift into the ground and severing the limb with earthbending.

Mush let out a sound not unlike a deep bass shriek as his body staggered back, apparently able to feel the fact that I’d ripped its arm off practically at the elbow. His tendrils crushed the few containers he’d been able to get against his body like armor, and I started work burying the rest as he lurched away. He didn’t seem able to work with gravel or dirt, so I churned the earth to put tons of the stuff above the larger chunks of detritus. If my guess was right, those tendrils were each pulling with about a ton of force, so this would put them out of his reach.

Aegis had been handling the normals, having flown past Mush and tackled one to the ground. He’d been wrestling their guns away one at a time, tending to leave the men winded and worse off, but some of them had pistols they took out after, or just got up to charge him with knives. One of them had even run away, but the rest were still shooting at him, which made getting into melee a challenge after the first friendly fire incident. They were all still standing near their boss, with Mush bearing down on them, snatching their leader from the ground and pulling Skidmark into his mass.

It was taking too long to handle the thugs, I decided. I thrust my palm up, tearing the top foot of packed soil and gravel from the former alleyway between the next building over and the one they’d demolished. This had the fortuitous effect of causing the massive golem to stumble as it tried to get through there, but that wasn’t my goal. I pulled the fracturing mass towards me, barreling it into the goons who were still standing, knocking them down. Then I just dropped it, covering each of the men in a couple hundred pounds of gravel and dirt clods. They’d dig themselves out, but Aegis was already floating down to catch them as they surfaced.

Dauntless had let up on strikes to Mush’s torso when he pulled in Skidmark, just in case. Another couple bolts to the giant’s stone legs which barely phased it, had him deciding to help Aegis instead. That left the capes to me, and I felt just fine with that. Mush had made it into another alley with two standing buildings to a side by then. When I grabbed the dirt under him and caused it to shudder, pulling the lot like a conveyer belt back towards me, his arms lashed out to the walls. I...
pulled at his body, but between that weird pull that kept them bundled into a humanoid shape and sensing Skidmark unconscious at its core, I didn’t think I could safely bend the body in multiple directions or try to peel him open without accidentally squishing him. The Merchants were trash, but they weren’t worth blood on my hands.

We were at a stalemate, it seemed. He couldn’t move as long as I was holding him and shifting the ground under him, but I couldn’t actually do anything for fear of finishing off Skidmark. The PRT van had finally made it, parking near the entrance. The troopers got out, but seemed content to stay well away from the obvious cape fight for now, checking their gear as they slowly moved to assist with the normals.

That was when another set of vehicles started accelerating abnormally toward us from a couple blocks away. I didn’t know who they were or what’d set them off, but the vans were set to show up in under a minute. I took stock of the area, Aegis and Dauntless a building over digging people out of the ground, the open space of the former building between them and the open hard by the entrance, with the PRT van on the other side of it. I spent half a minute slowly backing up while holding Mush pinned so I’d have a clear line of sight of the vans when they got here. When they did I cursed, catching flashes of red and green as men leaned out the windows to take shots at the troopers in the open.

I let Mush go for the moment, stomping my feet to raise thick but stubby walls between the troopers and the vans. My hands flashed out to snap a fault in the concrete foundation of the former building, before gripping my fists and heaving it up, tearing rents in the remainder as the rebar ripped from what I’d left on the ground. I didn’t have time to spend the focus or effort keeping it neat, I just needed a nice tall barrier. When I got the slab upright, I focused back on Mush. It’d taken him a couple seconds to realize he could move, and I only gave him another couple before yanking him to a halt. He’d still made it to the end of the buildings though, grabbing the corners and trying to drag himself out of the alley. Not giving him the chance, I just yanked the walls, too. He scrabbled and scraped as he was dragged back a few meters, until his arms found purchase in the cement foundations of the buildings beside him, gripping into the rebar mesh as he tore out the stone.

Most of the men were leaping from the vans, hunching near doors or spreading out towards the walls while a couple peppered the troop’s cover to keep them down. Dauntless chose that moment to leap into the air, his boots sending him soaring above the nearby warehouses. I could hear the Asians cry out in surprise, before he used his lance to spear through the engine block of the empty nearest van. There was a small gout of flame as it sputtered and died. Apparently not seeing the honor in standing their ground, the driver of the second nearly empty van gunned it, spewing gravel before the tires caught and sent it rocketing away. I could feel their panic and fear as desperation set in, most of them turning their guns skyward to force Dauntless to hide behind his shield.

The ones who’d been on their way to the walls redoubled their speed, trying to make it to cover. The fire died down as their guns ran out, lightning flashing down to knock the men out one at a time. At least one of the men had a grenade, which seemed pretty obvious in hindsight considering one of their capes was known for using them. They pulled the pin and threw it at the troopers still huddled behind their cover. The men running for the concrete wall stopped as they saw Aegis and the bound up merchants on the other side, lifting their guns to open fire. Most of the shots missed, but one of the merchants had his shoulder pulped before Aegis flew into the line of fire. The grenade hit the ground.

I groaned as I let Mush go again. He was ready this time, shooting across the lot to slam into the next building over, before scrambling to his feet and making a beeline for their ride in. I turned and kicked my foot, a small mitt of gravel launching itself and the grenade away from the troopers. The
idiot who’d thrown it already had another out, but I didn’t want to risk trapping him with live munitions. I turned my attention to the assholes shooting at the prisoners, sweeping them under tides of gravel like I had the Merchants. I ran for the wall, boosting my sprint with a gust and vaulting it. The second grenade was in the air already, and I kicked out a gust to carry it behind a building before it’d land. When I hit the ground, I cratered it. A wave of rock and debris rippled out from me, pulling the nearby goons underground and upturning their smoldering van.

Mush had just grabbed the car and run away with it, setting it down after depositing Skidmark inside, and reforming himself in the driver’s seat. I couldn't stop them now without following them back to their base, or crashing the car. I watched Aegis check the Merchants, and the troopers spring into action. One of them made a beeline for their transport, while the others spread out, heading to back up Aegis or start digging out the ABB.

I sighed. "They're getting away." I muttered.

Loud enough to be overheard it seemed, as Dauntless floated down beside me. “They’re running. It’s what they do when they start losing.” I could hear the grin in his voice, and when he landed I felt how forced it was. “Sometimes they get away, but your ambush happened, and no one got hurt.” He paused, turning to take stock of the injuries around, merchants being tended by one of the troopers, a bloody Aegis standing nearby. He seemed to notice we were talking about him, and waved.

“I’m okay!” He called as cheerfully as he could.

Dauntless chuckled. “Well, no one died, and none of our side were seriously hurt.” We watched the agent who’d run back to their transport jog over to the van, slowing down to a brisk but tense walk. He sprayed the hole, before fiddling with the latch and prying the hood off, hosing the whole block down once he was in. The rest of the tension left Dauntless as he turned back to me. “Everything worked out fine.” He chuckled. “You know, I wasn’t even sure this ambush of yours was going to happen at first.

“Really?” My tone was something between a huff and a whine.

He snorted, and I realized how very teenager I’d sounded just then. “Not every day’s exciting.” He shrugged, smiling wistfully. “I’m kinda’ partial to the ones that aren’t.” That had me feeling pretty bad. Dauntless seemed like a pretty decent guy, who honestly didn’t like fighting very much, and the first thing I did with him was drag him into an ambush. “But that’s okay. Not every win is a perfect one, but today was definitely a win.” He nodded to the groups of gangsters being lined up against my concrete wall. It wasn’t much, but it did make me feel a bit better. “You did good, and it was time well spent on our part. Always keep an eye out for the bright side, Terraform.” I could tell he was putting up a front, projecting confidence for my benefit. My senses ruined it a little, but he was charismatic enough that it would’ve worked otherwise.

I tried to put on my best smile, feeling like he deserved me trying to return the effort. "You can call me Terra, you know."

He held out his hand, and I shook it. "Terra, then."

I started helping after that, righting the van and unpacking the gangsters from the ground one at a time, letting each get pounced by a pair of troopers or Aegis. It was over less than a minute later, and I was pointing them in the direction Mush ran off. Dauntless peeled off to check things out in that direction, but didn't expect to find much. The troopers packed up the Merchant truck and the ABB van, filling up the transport they’d come in and leaving Aegis and I to wait for more backup.
It was only a few minutes to wait for another two PRT vans to show up, which disgorged a dozen troops, most of which split themselves between the various vehicles, checking for bombs or trackers, or other booby-traps while a couple helped Aegis and I load the rest of the gangsters up. When it was determined the vehicles were perfectly safe, the agents fanned out to document the site for records of the fight. I gave a verbal report of what’d happened from my point of view- I only omitted the parts where my earth-senses were involved- and they left me to cleaning things up after that. Dauntless had returned while I was giving my report, but he stayed in the air keeping watch until the rest of the agents left in the trucks that came by to tow the gang’s vehicles away.

After that, I decided it was probably time to call it a night. It wasn’t very dark out, but I had spent most of the day training already… and I needed to talk to dad. Dauntless said goodbye, and Aegis gave me a phone number to call if I ever decided to start patrolling with the Wards.

I made my way home, ducking into an alleyway to change hoodies and de-mask, along with stowing my gear in my bag again. Once back in ‘civvies’, I checked my phones. I was surprised to find a missed call and a few texts. I shot off replies to Amy and Vicky. Amy got an apology for being busy training, and that I’d tell her about it later. Vicky I told I was fine, but spacing out on a lazy Sunday. The last one, though?

‘Hey, Taylor. I tried to call, but it went to voicemail. I know you probably don’t want to hear from me right now, but I wanted you to know that I was sorry. I’d like to get together sometime to clear the air and make amends. I’ll answer’ It hit the character limit and rolled over into a second text, ‘anything you want to know. I’d really like it if we could still be friends. –Kara’

Goddammit, I was already feeling like shit for ignoring dad again, and now this? I was still mad at her. I knew I was still mad, and she knew it too, but… she’d been very kind, there at the end. I was still feeling confused and conflicted about that. I thought on it for another couple blocks of walking, before I decided I couldn’t not give her another chance. I replied, ‘Sure. What’d you have in mind?’ I knew the ball was in my court, and I could be a petty bitch and put this off for weeks if I wanted to, but I knew I shouldn’t.

‘Maybe coffee or tea after school? Does Monday work?’ came back almost instantly. She’d probably been waiting on my reply. It reaffirmed that she probably did feel really bad about what happened.

‘How about Tuesday?’ …just because I was trying to forgive her didn’t mean I couldn’t be a little petty about it. She could stew an extra day. Amy would be busy that day too, so it wasn’t like I’d have plans.

‘Sounds great!’ With that settled for now, I nodded and made my way home.

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“Hey, dad?” I asked when I got home. He was on the couch, watching the news. I dropped my bag on the way in, and sat down.

“Yeah, Taylor? What’s wrong?” He asked, watching me sit.

I paused, not sure how to start. “I… think I might be forgetting. To keep you involved in things.”

“What happened?” He didn’t snap, he never did, with me, but there was a sharpness to his voice I hadn’t heard directed at me in years. After a second staring at me, while my eyes stayed on the TV, he clicked it off with the remote. “Taylor?”
I chewed my lip. “I just… I’ve been training. In the Trainyard. I know we talked about that, but…”

He nodded his head in a ‘go on’ way, but otherwise waited. “…I got into a fight. …again.”

He sucked in a deep breath through his nose, the remote creaking in his hand before he set it down
as he breathed out. “You’re telling me now. That’s what’s important.” He said, more to himself
from what I can tell. “How bad were the fights? Were you hurt? Was anyone else hurt? Are there
bodies?”

“No! No bodies!” I answered quickly. “I got scuffed up a little the first time, but never hurt. I…
called for help today. Aegis got hurt a bit, but part of his power means little wounds don’t matter.”

I saw the tension ebb out of him as I spoke. “I was never in any real danger.” Except that time I
dodged. Best he didn’t find out about that. “I think… I might’ve done better without the
Protectorate. I was holding back a bit. I don’t want them to know about a couple of my powers. I
could’ve won before the fight started, otherwise.” Maybe not the smartest move, but something in
my gut told me it was important.

He took another deep breath and let it out. “Taylor… I know you’re not going to like this, but I
want you to text me every time you’re going to go train, from now on. I want to know where you
are, and when you might be getting into these fights, but most of all… I want you to start running
away.”

“What?” I’d heard him fine, but… run away? When I’d
win?

“It’s that, or you’re grounded.” He said, firmly. I could tell the rage bubbling away in him was
giving away to nerves. He was getting more sad and anxious by the second. “I don’t care about the
gangs, or the city, or anything as much as I care about you, Little Owl.” He broke out mom’s
nickname just to twist the knife, I knew it, but it still hurt. “I want you to start running away from
fights until you have people with you that you won’t hold back around. You get your team, then
you can stay and fight.” That… didn’t sound so unreasonable, I guess. “And if I hear about you
getting into fights and not trying to run, you’re grounded.” I pouted at him and he pointed at me.
“And if you’re grounded and don’t stay grounded…” the finger dropped and he sighed again. “I
know I can’t really keep you from doing anything now, but I’m sure Armsmaster could. You listen
when I try to be your father, or it’s the Wards for you.” He waggled his finger again, trying to be
funny and failing. “Am I understood?”

I scoffed. “We’ve talked about the Wards, dad. You know why they aren’t an option.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Because they’d either start pulling you into fights or paint a target on our
backs. Right?” I looked away first. “Exactly my point, Taylor. If you’re already doing what the
Wards would be doing, you might as well be a Ward.”

“But…” I started, then looked away again.

His stern gaze softened a bit. “What’s really wrong?”

Trapped.” I managed. “It reminds me of Winslow too much.”

“And how would the Wards do that?” He asked, and I gave him an incredulous look. “Just so I
know where you’re coming from.”

I shook my head, but started talking anyway. “If I join the Wards, I’ll start getting into fights, sure,
but I’d have no say in which fights I’d get called away from. The ones where lives are on the line,
or where I could make a difference. You know how fast I’m getting stronger, in a month or two I
can probably take Lung if I wanted." Dad nearly had a heart attack, there. "But the Wards would keep me benched from real fights for at least two more years." I stood up and started pacing in front of the couch. "Then there’s the Wards themselves. What if they’re assholes? Or just like the Trio?" I realized then that dad might not know what I meant. "Like the girls at Winslow. I couldn’t get away if I was on the team. And then there’s the chain of command. What if I get an order I don’t like, from someone I can’t trust? I’d be AWOL faster than you can yell ‘villain.’" I snarled.

"This... really bothers you, doesn't it?" He felt numb. Shocked into stillness. The nerves were swiftly bubbling back to the surface, but for that brief moment when his blood vessels were so tight and his muscles were so loose, he just felt... lost.

I nodded. "Yeah. It... really does."

An aborted bit of laughter burbled out of him, before he choked it down. His eyes were starting to mist over a bit. He covered it up by rubbing at his face like he was tired, but I knew it was there. I thought about giving him a moment, letting him gather himself up, but I'd given him years in the past... "Dad?"

He heaved in a deep, wet breath, and chuckled ruefully. "I'm scared, kiddo." He shook his head, blinking rapidly. "I don't... handle scared well." I took the time to move back over to the couch and sit down. He didn't follow me with his eyes, and that was a bad sign. "I can deal with angry... I thought I could handle sad... scared?" He was smiling, but he wasn't happy. His hands were clenching, and his muscles tense. He was trying very hard not to be angry with me. "Scared's only good for making you angry or sad."

I needed to shut this down, before he blew up. "Dad, I..."

He raised his hand, cutting me off. "No, I get it." He swallowed thickly. "You're strong now. I get it. But I don't get it." His hands clenched out a pattern for a few seconds. "You're still my little girl. Her little girl." I looked away. A fine time to start protecting me, dad. Maybe something on my face gave it away, he was looking at me now... "I know I haven't been a good father, but... I thought I was doing okay. At least after..." After his intervention. He sighed and shook his head again. "I'm trying, but there's nothing I can do. I can't punch Hookwolf, I can't break Lung's kneecaps, I can't even..." He trailed off, his breathing growing heavier.

And now he was breaking down. I needed to cut him off. "Hey, you want me to be safe? We should talk about this, instead of just dictating terms." Try to get him back on familiar ground. "You want me to start texting you when I go places? That'll take me a few seconds, I can do that. But I'm not going to stop fighting if someone needs me." Take the bait, dad...

"But... you'll go if you don't have to stay?" He asked pointedly, and I cheered a little inside.

"If I'm just training, I can leave before anyone shows up." Except a flier, but now was not the time for that.

He was calming down a bit now. He always did better with something to fight, or fight for. That's part of why he fell apart for so long, rushing headlong into fighting for his boys, and leaving me in the dust. I could see how I wouldn't merit fighting for if I didn't tell him I needed it, I didn't forgive it, it didn't make it better, but I think I understood. "Can you find places to train that aren't in open gang territory?"

I thought about it, and gave a slow nod. "I want to clean up some of my mess in the Trainyard..." He gave me a sharp look, but I pressed on. "Just to bury my trash so they can't use it. I wanted to recycle it, but..." He was debating it, and eventually nodded. "I think I have some projects coming
up, fixing some things for people. I could also start trying to get contracts with the city for tearing
down buildings, or maybe putting *up* buildings, after I get my costume.” Which should be done by
the weekend, or early next week.

He nodded at that, then again, stronger. "That sounds good." We waited, until the silence grew
slightly awkward. "I'm... sorry. About earlier."

"Threatening me with the Wards?" I asked, injecting a touch of incredulous teenaged sass.

Dad smiled and nodded. "I thought, even if you were angry with me, you'd still be *here* to be
angry..." He trailed off, muttering. "Hey, if I wanted to meet your team, or see you working,
would... I have to wear a mask?"

I bumped his shoulder with mine. "Probably, you doof." He grumbled at my name-calling. "Unless
you wanted to go as Danny 'Head of Hiring for the DWA' Hebert, and I was working in the docks,
or something."

He nodded, considering it. "Anything else?"

My stomach chose that moment to growl rather loudly. I blushed and muttered, “I… *might* have
skipped lunch?""

He snorted, then broke down into chuckles. “Well, let's order a few pizzas, and you can tell me
about these fights of yours. Deal?”

I smiled. It'd help give him an idea of how strong I was getting, which would probably help his
worrying. “Deal.”

...probably downplay the railgun and maybe skip the bomb part of that first story, though.
Chapter 1.16 (Trouble in Paradise)

Chapter Summary

Minor content warning, probably not enough to alter tags around, but there's a reference to past sexual assault. No details, but might want to skim if that'd tank your mood anyway.

MON FEB 21

As I jogged to school, I realized how tired I was getting, of keeping an eye out for Emma and Sophia. Even if they tracked me down, what were they going to do? They were just normal people, and as dad said last night, I could just... leave. Retreat. Run away. They weren't a part of my life anymore, and I didn't have to entertain their sick notions that I was part of theirs.

I still kept vigilant, though. Because it was a good habit to get into.

After my shower, I found Amy in the cafeteria again. In what was becoming a morning ritual for us, I grabbed a small second breakfast and made my way over. "Your mom still giving you trouble?"

She scoffed into her corn flakes. "Carol's being a bit much, yeah."

"Anything I can do to help?" I asked as I handed over a banana.

She eyed the fruit warily as she contemplated her personal problems. "Maybe. She doesn't like you, but... I don't know what'd help."

Maybe some patrols with New Wave? "I dunno, we'll think of something."

She hummed and abandoned her mostly-empty bowl to peel her fruit.

"By the way..." I said, as I saw her taking a bite. "It is a dick joke, today."

She choked on her phallic fruitstick, then started coughing and sputtering before she growled "Betch!" through her rapidly-unfilling mouth. Try as she might, she couldn't fight the smile off her face.

I chuckled as I started on my food. Today felt like it was going to be a good day.

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I was heading to lunch, scanning the school as was becoming habit now, mostly checking for Kara and Amy. My sweep found something surprising though. I stopped and stepped out of the flowing crowd to ponder it. Up on the third floor, in the Senior classrooms, I saw a familiar figure unpacking her lunch. A gaggle of girls and a couple boys stuck around to chat, but even now I could see them splitting off and heading down to lunch. I guess this explained why I'd never seen Tracy in the cafeteria, but it seemed weird to me that she'd be eating in the classroom. Was that even allowed?
My thoughts rumbled through my head, wondering if this was normal, if I should say something, do something, or even care. In the end, I headed to the lunch room and got in line while I kept an eye on her. Kara was sitting with Amy and Vicky, so I did kind of want to avoid their table for today...

Mind made up, I waited until all the adults in the room were looking away before I snuck out into the halls with my tray. I didn't think it was against the rules, but I was feeling paranoid, and it didn't take much additional time or effort to be sneaky about it. By the time I did that, Tracy was sitting alone in the classroom. Something about it felt oddly familiar, and I sped my walking to get there sooner.

When I got there, she blinked owlishly at me as I opened the door, and quickly swallowed the bite of sandwich she'd been chewing. "Oh. Hello, Taylor." She said, glancing down at my tray, then surreptitiously around the room without moving her head, then glanced down at her own food before looking back toward the door and giving me a once-over. All of this took barely three seconds. "Did you need something?"

"Not really, I just..." Dammit, now I needed a reason to have come looking for her! "...didn't see you at lunch, and asked around to see if you were okay?"

"Oh, that's very kind of you. I'm perfectly fine, though." She lied with a smile.

I didn't want to just leave it at that, so I asked, "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

She pondered the question for a moment, before she nodded. "Sure, if you don't mind my company."

"Why would I mind?" I asked as I strode to the seat next to hers.

"Oh, no reason, I don't know why I said it." She demurred, without my senses I'd have no idea she was lying again.

Part of me wanted to ask if she was okay, again, but that would be stupid. She'd just answer the same way. Still, I did want to get to the bottom of things... "You're on the basketball team, right?"

Her smile didn't fade, but I could feel her mood fluctuate darkly. "Yes?"

"You like being on the team?" I hedged.

Her smile faded a bit, and her eyes twitched down. "I do." Another lie. "The competitions can be fun, and my teammates are all very friendly." It felt... muddled? She wasn't lying, but something about what she said was still off.

"Are you thinking of playing professionally?" I knew women's sports weren't as lucrative as men's, but pro leagues for female teams were a thing.

"That's the plan." She chuckled, a slight edge of nerves cutting into her voice. "At least long enough to get through university." It was muddled again. Even if it was the plan, I don't think she liked the plan.

"I didn't think you'd need a sports scholarship, with your grades."

Her smile was brittle as she chuckled. "It is double-dipping a bit, isn't it?" She felt nervous, and I couldn't figure out why. "There's no reason I can't be athletic and intelligent, though." Another confusing lie.
We faded into silence after that, digging in to our lunches. I wasn't sure where to go from here, but I couldn't help if I had no idea what was wrong. A few minutes later, her mood started fluctuating again, and I caught her trying to say something, and stopping short.

"Yes?" I asked, and she shied away. "It's okay, what were you going to say?"

She flinched. "Are... you jealous?"

"What?" Seriously, what? "Not really, no. I don't really like sports, but I'm plenty athletic, and my grades are terrible, but that's because I've been stuck at Winslow," With those fucking bitches, "for the past couple years. I'm catching up, now." I was pretty content with how my life was going now. "Is that what you've been worried about?"

She shuffled a bit, fidgeting in her seat. “I’m… they…” She took a deeper breath and let it out slowly. “People tend to put me on a pedestal, for better or worse.”

I had to stop and wonder what that would be like. I'd been slightly above average all my life before Winslow, but up at the top? Basically undisputed? “I’m sorry.” I said, trying to sound contrite. “You must be under a lot of stress.”

“Oh no,” she chuckled, “it’s fine. I’m fine.” More lies. “You don’t have to worry about me.” That part, at least, she seemed to believe.

"Well, if you ever do think you need help... you can always call me."

She smiled. "Thank you." It was heartfelt, but I think we both knew she wasn't going to. Maybe she didn't know me well enough yet, or couldn't think of how I might help, but the offer was out there.

I dug my phone out of my pocket and tapped through my contacts. I asked her if she was the 'Tracy S.' I had listed, and she confirmed it. I sent her a 'This is Taylor, now you have my number' text, and we settled down to a fairly companionable silence until I asked about basketball games.

She gave a quick story of some of her experiences with home and away games, and then asked me about some of the training I did. I told her about dad's co-workers teaching me a lot, and she actually seemed fairly interested, asking a few questions as I summed up the who and what, there.

Eventually though, the bell rang and I said goodbye, before rushing back to the cafeteria to turn in my tray before classes started back up.

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Amy and I decided we were past due for another trip to Tukson’s. The bus rides were short, and while we were on them, I sent dad a text that we were going to be at a bookstore today, more to get back into the habit of keeping him in the loop than because he'd really care. I wasn’t training, and I was spending time with a friend. He’d be happy I was spending the day almost anywhere, given those facts.

Tukson himself was reading at the front desk again, when we came in. I thought I caught something about ‘ninjas’ in the title before he noticed us and snapped it shut, setting it down behind the counter. “Tea room?” He asked as he stood.

“Is it open?” I asked. We’d already started following him upstairs.

He gave a rueful chuckle and said, “Sure is, girls.” He let us into the room, and left to get our usual tea. We sat ourselves down, and Amy dug out her phone. I debated waiting for the tea before
asking, but decided I might as well start now.

“Sooo… How’s Kara?” I hadn’t spoken to Amy since this morning, and I was curious.

She smirked and glanced over. “Sweating bullets. What’d you do?”

I shrugged. “Scheduled our ‘make-up’ get-together for tomorrow, and avoided her since then.”

The chuckle Amy let out was positively evil. “Oh yeah, that’d do it. She’s good people, but sometimes earns herself a kick in the ovaries. Love watching people collect on that.”

My mind blanked in mild horror for a moment, before I schooled myself into mock surprise, holding my hand up to my mouth before I spoke. “My word, Amy! I didn’t know you were that sort of girl.”

She grinned, not bothering to look up from her phone. “A voyeur, or a sadist? ’Cause my power don’t work on whips.”

My face broke out in a massive blush, and I regretted not waiting for the tea. I’d love to have something to hide behind, right now.

Of course, that’s when Tukson knocked on the door. Amy cheerily called for him to come in, while I mewled in displeasure and covered my face with my hands.

Even with my eyes covered, I could tell his eyebrow quirked up. “Am I interrupting something?”

Amy smirked at me, as if asking me if there was anything wrong. After a second, I realized she wasn’t going to answer, and mumbled “No, everything’s fine.” against my palms.

Tukson smothered a chuckle and set the tea down on the table. I felt him wink at Amy as he pulled away, which set her to blushing, too. Her heart rate sped up and she huffed at him. Not so fun when it’s you the fun’s poked at, is it Amy?

I stuck my tongue out at her and she looked away, grumbling. Even if he probably knew I was a cape, I still waited until he was halfway to the stairs after shutting the door to change the subject. "So, I was thinking about your mom, and... Vicky."

Amy made a curious noise, then perked up in realization. "You don't have to tell my sister just because Carol'd be a little less of a bitch.”

I choked down the immediate denial, instead taking a moment to properly formulate it. "That's what got me thinking about it, but it's not the main reason I'm considering it." I poured our tea while I thought about it. "Vicky's my friend too. I want to tell her, it'd be nice to have more people that get it that I can talk to. I just... wanted to get your opinion, first." Her heart sped up slightly as she watched the steam waft off her cup. "You were my friend first, and you know her better than I do."

Her face flushed a little as I watched her think. "Well, she's not likely to tell anyone else. She tells me everything because she knows I'm a steel trap and likes to vent sometimes." She was hesitant, a little unsure. She glanced up and caught the hard look I was aiming her way. "Well, if we ask her not to tell Dean, anyway." Her stomach flipped speaking about him, but otherwise her body'd leveled out into seeming entirely truthful.

"You think she'd tell him secret identities unless asked not to?" Amy puffed up a little indignantly, but glanced away. "Amy..."
"We're not the only capes at Arcadia." Amy said quickly, almost snapping. She paused for a beat before continuing. "It's no secret the Wards go, but it's not just them, either. Vicky knows who the Wards are, and at least one other cape. She knows, so I know, and Dean knows..." I could sense a strong 'but' she couldn't bring herself to finish. Something about what she'd said didn't sit right, and I was sure there was something I was missing. After a few seconds thinking about it, I decided I wasn't going to figure it out right now. I could always unpack it later. It hurt a bit, that Amy wasn't just telling me, but that I knew I could attribute to those control-freak tendencies that kept cropping up recently. It wasn't fair to demand she spill secrets that, were they mine, I'd also demand she keep.

I heaved out a sigh. "But you're sure she won't say anything, if we told her not to?"

Amy nodded. "Yeah." She was telling the truth, as far as I could tell. "Vicky's a good person, she's just..."

I smirked. "Wired differently than us introverts?"

She scoffed. "Was going to say 'weirdly naive about some things' but that works, too." She drew in a slow breath and held it for a second. "But, if you want to, I think... you should tell her."

I took a deep breath in thought, hiding it as sniffing my tea. I took a sip and started thinking out loud. "I do want more friends I can talk to about cape stuff, and I feel weird that she's the only person in your family that doesn't know, despite being my friend." Immediate family, anyway. "I think... I should tell her, yeah."

After that, we changed the subject to meditating. I was starting to run out of things to teach her, so I decided to tell her about my 'chi' feelings and see if she could find and manipulate something similar. We spent a few hours on it, and she just wound up frustrated with it. It seemed our powers were too different for that to carry over. We spent the rest of our time calming down with regular mental exercises, then split up to head home.

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**TUE FEB 22**

I woke up to a couple of frantic texts from Amy, asking me to meet her at school as soon as possible. Given that, I skipped my morning workout and pre-school breakfast, and headed straight for the door. I considered going all-out to get there faster, but figured it was a bad idea. I sent her a text saying I'd be there in half an hour to an hour, and jogged normally.

It'd been sprinkling a bit again, and wanting to meet up with Amy, I didn't have the benefit of heading right to the showers after getting in. Instead, I popped into a bathroom stall and pulled the water out of my clothes, flushing it down the toilet and leaving when I was sure no one who'd seen me enter wet was around to notice I was dry now. I double-checked my phone, and made my way to the classroom Amy said to meet her at.

"Taylor!" She cheered as I came in. She hopped to her feet and made her way over, vibrating with excitement despite the dark bags under her eyes. I didn't think she'd slept last night.

"Are you okay?" I asked worriedly, looking her over with my eyes and senses. She seemed fine, aside from the lack of sleep.

"I'm great!" She sang. Was she on drugs? I should check her for drugs. "My powers are better! They're doing... they're letting..." She chattered half-formed sentences for a couple seconds, and I
stopped her when she came too close, by softly grabbing her shoulders.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I had no idea what to look for, for drugs. All the signs on her face could be explained by not sleeping, and she didn't seem hurt. I wasn't sure if my senses were fine enough to detect track marks from needles, but if they were, she didn't have any.

She nodded excitedly, and I let my hands drop. "Better than that." She took my hands with hers and grinned. "I can touch you!" Her heart was racing, and her cheeks started reddening after she'd said it.

"Yeah?" I drew the word out over a couple seconds, trying to figure out what was wrong.

"I can't see you!" She cheered with that unsettlingly wide smile. "Can't feel you! Can't... well I can, but..." She trailed off, muttering. "I can... I can..." Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, and she pulled my hands down with hers, causing me to lean forward. Then she stretched up slightly until her lips met mine.

My heart stopped, and my brain short-circuited. When the sharp, alarming confusion locking up my thoughts began to fade, I couldn't help but think it felt... nice. She smelled nice, and her lips were soft... but a bit dry. I could feel the ridge of a small crack in her lips against my own. A clinical part of my brain wondered if I should offer her some water, if she was dehydrated, and then blood rushed to my face as the thought spiraled into considering deepening the kiss, and I pulled away.

"Amy? What?" I snapped, shaking my head. My thoughts were starting to haze up again, probably from the nuclear blush I was sporting.

"I..." Her grin dropped abruptly, her face paling as she hopped backwards and dropped my hands like I'd shocked her. "I'm sorry. I just..."

She'd started hyperventilating. "Stop. Breathe." I held up my hands and took several breaths myself, encouraging her to do the same. I probably needed them, honestly. "I'm not mad, just... what the fuck, Amy?"

"I'm sorry," She said quickly. "I just..." She looked like she was going to start hyperventilating again, so I heaved a quick, loud deep breath to remind her not to. She took a deeper breath of her own and continued. "I don't see you with my power, when I touch you." She bit her lip and glanced to the side, obviously thinking hard, but didn't seem like she was trying to lie. "My powers got weird last night, when I came home and started meditating more. I figured out what'd happened when touching Vicky didn't do anything..." She blushed a bit, but I didn't press. "I checked with Mark and Carol, too. I can just... turn it off now."

I let out a hum of realization. She'd hinted pretty hard that her interactions with other people were hindered by her powers never turning off, which meant things like relationships were almost impossible. I could feel she was emotional, and knew she had been since before I'd gotten to the room. I also knew she was gay, and I was a girl... She'd gotten too excited to contain herself anymore, with how new and life-changing this development was. That made perfect sense.

It had nothing to do with her maybe liking me, I was sure. Nobody liked me that way. They couldn't. I wasn't pretty or likable enough.

I nodded to myself. The world made sense, again.

"That's great. I can see why you were excited." I gave her a soft disarming smile, and all of the
energy seemed to slowly drain out of her. She was getting sad, and I had no idea why. "Hey, are you okay? This is a good thing, right?" I thought for a second. "Oh no, you still have your powers, right?" She hadn't mentioned turning her touch powers back on, yet. Maybe that's what was going on?

"Oh." She muttered softly. She shook her head, and I wondered if we were talking about the same thing, anymore. "No, I can turn it back on. It's fine."

She was definitely not fine. "It's okay. It'll be okay." I muttered as I closed the distance. She pulled away slightly, but didn't fight the loose hug I pulled her into. "Hey, you're not busy Wednesday, right?" She looked at me, confused, and shook her head. "Well we can hang out, see what's changed. Do some power testing. That'd be good, right?"

She was a mass of conflicting emotions I couldn't make sense of, but she gripped me a little tighter, and nodded. "Yeah. That sounds good."

Amy wasn't okay, but she wasn't spiraling into what looked startlingly like depression, anymore. I'll take it. "I need a shower. Meet you at breakfast?"

She nodded, and I let her go. I kept a figurative eye on her while I headed to the locker rooms, and she seemed to be doing okay. A few minutes for a quick shower, and I made my way up to where she was picking at her food. I got more than usual to eat, because I'd skipped food at home, but still gave Amy an apple when I sat down, which got a small smile out of her. We talked about assignments until the bells started ringing, and split off to our classes.

---

When lunch came around, I made my way to the cafeteria. It'd probably be weird to try talking to Tracy again so soon, so I decided to stay for lunch today. After getting my food, I made my way closer to Vicky's table, and stopped when I met Amy's eyes across the room. Her heart skipped, and she glanced away. It hurt a little bit, but I'd been hovering recently... maybe she needed space. Add in that Kara was sitting with them and I was still feeling a little petty about the last time we'd interacted...

I looked around, scanning the room. I spotted Cassie at her usual table, and I let out a relieved sigh. She was coming to school again, which had to be a good thing. I set my food down for a second, and sent her a text. 'Want to hang out for lunch?'

She checked her phone a couple seconds later, and started looking around the room. When she caught sight of me, I gave a little wave. She froze for a couple seconds, and I could feel the conflict in her emotions, though I had no idea what'd caused it. It'd settled down moments later though, and she seemed to come to a decision. She made her excuses to leave, and picked up the lunch she hadn't even started eating yet.

I met her across the room, at a table with just one older boy who was studying while eating. He glanced up and proceeded to ignore us in favor of his book. It would've been nice to talk outside, but it was still wet out, even if the rain wasn't as bad as this morning.

"Good to see you're okay. I was worried." Her heart rate picked up a little, and some other signs pointed to her appreciating the sentiment, even as she made a noise to that effect. "Do you want..." I paused, feeling her mood drop a bit, and aborted asking about her family. "...any help catching up on assignments?"

"Nah," She said, smiling a little. "My grades are pretty good, I can take the hit. Thanks, though."
Yeah, I wouldn't want my family's dirty laundry aired in public either, now that I thought about it. Thinking quickly, I dug my phone out before the silence could get awkward, and started typing away. "Good to hear, still. Offer's there." Knowing I had to keep talking or she might think I was being pushy, I grabbed for the only big thing I had on my civilian schedule. "Hey, I know you don't do sports, but you're still active. Ever do martial arts stuff?" Typing while talking was slower, and I'd lowered my phone to my lap to look like I'd already sent the message, so when I hit send after I finished talking, I hoped it looked like I wasn't sending it to her.

Her phone dinged, and she dug it out. I knew what it said. 'Family stuff?'

She frowned and tapped a couple keys. My phone beeped at me, but I ignored it while she answered. "Yeah, little bit. Why?"

I shrugged. "Just wondering if you might want to drop by to the practice I'm doing at the gym on Fridays, now." That said, I looked at my phone. Just normal girls doing normal girl things, having two or three conversations at once with entirely different people because phones. Yup.

...I felt like a dork, hoping I looked normal as hard as I was.

Her answer was a simple 'Y'. I started typing.

"I think I heard about that. You sure I'd be welcome?" I fumbled a little, considering it. Kara's group were pretty firmly anti-Empire in particular, weren't they? And they probably knew Cass was at least sort of part of that... shit.

"Yeah, I don't think anyone would mind too much, especially if I said something," 'Wanna talk about it?' Send.

"Seems like asking for trouble..." She muttered, ignoring her phone for a bit before answering. She seemed to catch on to what I'm doing, since she pretended to send her message, then held her phone under the table for a bit before actually sending it.

"Well, Serei was there last time, and you get along with her, right?"

She bit her lip, and seemed to be considering our mutual Asian acquaintance. "I'll think about it." She said, and when that topic seemed dropped, I checked my phone. 'N', she'd sent.

"Well, how was your weekend besides... all that." I asked, hoping to keep her engaged.

She talked about watching shows and movies, and I lied about reading books. We ate while we swapped recommendations, until her phone dinged again. She checked it and sighed, finishing up her food before getting up. "I've gotta run. Talk to you later?" She asked, and I gave her a little wave in response. I dug out my phone as she walked back over to her old table, and typed out another message.

'Well, if you ever DO want to talk, I'm here for you.'

I finished the rest of my food, kicking my feet up and crossing my legs, so my feet weren't touching the linoleum directly anymore. I really didn't want to watch Cass until she replied, which was what'd happen if I didn't. Felt hovery and stalkerish, even if she'd never know.

Food done, I hopped up to drop my tray off. Cassie had already left, it seemed. So I made my way out and headed towards my next class.

Before the repeaters switched off, I got one last text. 'Thanks.' I smiled, feeling better about her
situation now that I'd put myself out there for her. I was kind of hoping she did drop by on Friday. It'd be nice to have more reasons to hang out.

---

Kara had wanted to meet up at a little coffee shop near the Boardwalk, and I'd succinctly responded that I'd be there. At the time I'd wanted to make her sweat, but now it felt a little mean. I beat her there, and I wondered if this was to make me feel more comfortable. Let me scope the place out, pick where to sit, be the one already seated and in control when she showed up. If it was, it was working, at least a little.

When she did show up, she wasn't alone. Two of the girls from Friday were with her. A slightly larger girl a couple inches shorter than me with blue hair, and a thin girl an inch shorter than her with bright yellow hair. Julia and Stephanie, I thought. They made their way over to the booth I'd picked for being out of the way and more private, stopping well within earshot, but far enough to not seem encroaching on my space or hemming me in.

"Thanks, you two. Have fun on your date!" Kara said to the others. Stephanie smiled brightly and started for the door with a wave, while Julia eyed me warily for a second before nodding and following.

Kara smiled at their retreating backs until they made it to the door, then turned her grin on me as she finished the trek to sit opposite me in the booth. "Well, while they're out painting the town green... how have you been?"

It took my brain a moment to parse the incorrect reference, after which I felt my face heating at the implications of what I realized was a double-entendre. "I've been fine." I said, perhaps too quickly.

"It's okay to not be okay." She said with a wry smirk and pleading eyes.

I sighed, gave the question some actual thought, and answered again. "I've been okay, just... busy."

"Good busy, or stressful busy?" Her smirk drooped a bit, her tone slightly more serious.

I shrugged. "Bit of both?"

She pondered that for a second before she nodded, and stood back up. "You want anything?" She asked, waving slightly over toward the counter.

Tea didn't sound very good, and I wasn't sure how well this place did there, anyway. Straight-up coffee was gross, but I wouldn't mind it if it wasn't black. "Something chocolate?"

She hummed and tapped her chin a couple times. "Regular milk, or soy?"

I shrugged. "Regular's fine."

She nodded and strode up to the counter. I heard her order a couple of mocha lattes, and waited while she paid and came back over.

We sat in steadily less comfortable silence, until she broke first. "I'm sorry." She said earnestly, and honestly. "I said some pretty shitty things, and not thinking they'd actually hurt you doesn't make it not shitty." She took a deep breath. "I already said I'd stop flirting with you, and you can ask me anything you want to know about me. Is there anything else I can do to make it up to you?"

I glanced away. I couldn't think of anything I wanted from her. It's not like she had resources I
needed, or contacts she hadn't already stuck in my phone, or people she wasn't already trying to
introduce me to through our Friday practice. Trying to demand things she might have left a bad
taste in my mouth. "Why are you so..." I lifted my hands, trying to be polite, but then giving up and
indicating all of her. "You?"

She briefly looked like she was sucking on a lemon. "Someone has to be." Her look transitioned
into a pout, and she pinned me with her wide, wet gaze. "Are you sure you wanna know?" She half-
whined. "It's kind of a long story."

I raised an eyebrow imperiously, as if daring her to deny she'd offered up anything.

Kara sighed, then shrugged and shook her head. "Well, alright." The raised hands from her wide
shrug landed on the table, where one started tapping fingers, and she clicked her tongue while
staring off into the distance off to my side. "I was always a big girl." She started finally. "Not fat,
just... older than everyone else, and an early bloomer on top of that. Classmates always treated me
like I was hot shit, because I was smart, and bigger than them. The teachers listened to me more,
because I was closer to being like them, and people pick up on that." She shook her head and
sighed. "Sure I got picked on, but not any more than anyone else. I was pretty, decently popular,
and bigger than the boys. I wasn't messed with often."

She licked her lips and paused, stalling until her name was called with our order. She got up to
collect it, and set our drinks between us before flopping back into her seat.

She spun her cup slowly on the table, watching the steam rise off of it. "Kids grow up, though." I
could tell she was irritated. Getting angry, feeling sick. Hiding it well. "Some better than others."
She sucked on her tongue, and kept spinning her cup, keeping her hands busy. "Some faster
than others. I got all the attention, got boobs first, had hips first, beat most of the girls a year up to it."
She tilted her head and took another slow breath, still not looking at me. I had a sinking feeling
about where this story was going. "Stayed popular, got all the attention. Boys started paying
attention. Got interested in things." She shrugged. "Bunch of boys took an interest, didn't
take no for an answer, and..." She sighed, taking a pull from her drink. It clicked back down on the
table louder than expected. "They went to juvie. They're out now, but... that's my problem, not
yours."

"I'm sorry." I wasn't sure what else to say. I didn't think they let people out that fast for that sort of
thing, but they were kids, and I didn't know the system very well regardless.

She waved me off with a fake smile. "Don't be, that wasn't the point." She took another sip of her
coffee, and I decided to try mine. It wasn't bad. "It was about then, I realized I had to do things
myself to get anything done." Her head tilted a little to either side a couple times. "Take charge,
take the lead, and fake it 'till you make it." She shrugged again, and managed a smirk that wasn't
quite so wooden. "That's me."

I swallowed, thickly. I grew up in Brockton Bay, and I wasn't an idiot. I'd imagined that sort of
thing happening to me in the past, and I'd bet every other girl our age had, too. It wasn't just
possible, I'd heard enough horror stories to know it wasn't even that unlikely. Every time I'd
thought of it though, it was always the gangs. Always some monolithic evil, souring the world with
their crimes and perversions. Other teenagers, though? Classmates? Kids?

"So, the girls...?" I started, trying to move away from the uncomfortable pit my thoughts were
sinking into.

"We keep each other safe." Kara said, finally meeting my eyes. "I try to make sure they're smart,
trained, connected..." She shook her head. "Tend to settle for 'not stupid', honestly. Stay together,
"And that's why you need me for the training?" I asked, trying to piece the rest together.

"I don't need you." Kara nearly growled, leaning forward slightly, fingers tightening around her cup. She closed her eyes, leaned back, and took a deep breath. "Sorry. Sorry about that." She met my eyes again. "People know me. They know what I'm about. A lot of them don't like it. They get scared, or don't like being told they're ignorant, or any number of things. At this point, if I try to do anything big, it's just a spectacle to be watched and mostly ignored."

"But, people know you're behind all this." That was the confusing part, to me.

She rolled her eyes and nodded. "I'm hoping that part gets drowned out after a few weeks. People know you know me, but you're still new enough to make your own waves. Thing about school networking is, only the schemers care about last month. You know me, but you're closer to Amy. She's friends with me, but she isn't part of my clique. Any luck, you'll wind up the head of your own social structure, or if that doesn't interest you, part of hers." I almost pointed out that this would be another case of not giving someone a choice before having her agenda foisted off on them, but she'd known Amy longer than I had. If she still thought that was a good idea, she deserved whatever Amy thought up as punishment. "All I want from you, is what you're already doing. Help people, and be flashy enough about it that you're not stuck in someone else's shadow."

It almost sounded like she was asking me to be a hero. "I don't think I understand."

For a brief moment, it almost looked like she was going to snap at me. She visibly restrained herself, and took another breath. "Sorry. What don't you understand?"

She was still worked up from her story. I'm not sure I could keep my composure so well after talking about the Locker. Maybe it was the distance from it, it'd been years for her, after all. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to be some... icon, or idol, or whatever. I'm not..." Good enough. Never good enough. "It just isn't me."

Her gaze softened, and much of the tension bled out of her. "Oh, honey. You don't have to be some charismatic master manipulator. Just be you, and never let anyone else tell you what that 'you' is." I knew it was a platitude, and in my case an empty one, but I still felt my face heat up. I still shyly curled in on myself a little. "I wanted your help because I could tell that you're strong. When we met, I saw a shy, adorable geek of a beanpole I wanted to protect. But when I found you and Amy in the gym? You were in your element. You knew exactly what you were doing, no hesitation, no shy awkwardness. You were in control, and you knew it." She leaned forward, over our drinks. I'd started smiling a little, despite myself. "But more than anything, I saw that you were gentle with it. You could've hurt her. A lot of the hack teachers out there would say you should have hurt her, just to drive the lessons home. But you were patient, and kind, and strong." She reached out and poked my chest, well above the slight rise of my breasts. "It wasn't just the strength I wanted you to share. It was the patience and kindness." Her hand dropped and she grinned. "And you delivered. That lesson was amazing!" She sighed, looking wistful. "I'm just sorry it ended the way that it did."

Her words and emotions were out of sync. Not that she was lying, but she wasn't nearly as excited as she seemed to be. It resonated with her earlier words- faking it until she made it. She was trying to cheer me up. Cheer me on. It clicked in my head then, that she was something of a cheerleader. Propping people up, egging them on to do better. To do good. Maybe it was just a stroke of optimism, wanting it to be true, but it felt right, in my gut.

"I'm still not sure I get it, but... thanks." I muttered, and she smiled. "I think, as long as things are just going how they were, that I'll be okay. I can figure out how to deal with anything else when it
We sat there, sipping our drinks in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Seemingly out of the blue, she asked, "Are you okay?"

"What do you mean?" I returned, a bit confused.

"I looked into it, after last time. Found out... what happened." The Locker.

My hands seized up around my cup, my teeth ground together, my eyes narrowed as I sucked in a hissing breath.

Of course she looked me up. It'd be stupid not to, after I flipped out at her. I couldn't help feeling slightly betrayed, though.

She backed away in her seat. Not fearfully, but giving me space. I didn't lash out. I could have, and wanted to, but the rational part of my mind was aware we were in a fairly nice and quiet public business establishment that wouldn't take well to violent outbursts. So I waited.

"It was like that for me, too." She said, after giving me a minute. "Everything set me off. School, friends, going outside. I got violent, got put in the system." She paused, brought her cup up like she was going to drink, swirled the little that remained in thought, and set it back down. "I'm sorry I didn't notice. Your composure's pretty ridiculous, considering..." she trailed off with a shrug. "I didn't get shipped off because I had a sympathetic woman judge. I got mandatory therapy, house arrest, home schooling... lasted about half a year. Some community service after that." She sighed and leaned back into my space. I'd calmed down enough to allow it. "What I'm trying to get at is, it might not seem like a good thing, it might seem like you're giving up control or saying that you're weak, but... therapy can help." I visibly bristled at the last part, because that was how it felt.

"You're not weak, but you're hurting. It's okay to see a doctor, when you're hurt." I knew, rationally, that she was right. If I were sitting there across from me? If it was her having trouble controlling herself just from having the topic raised? I'd be the one suggesting therapy. I knew it. I just didn't like it.

"I'll think about it." I said finally, finishing off my lukewarm drink.

"Just wanted to put the thought in your head." She said with a nod.

The silence lasted another half minute or so, before I sighed and slipped out of the booth. "I should go... decompress a bit."

She nodded. "Would you mind staying a few minutes?" She asked, digging out her phone. "It's the one time you don't remember safety in numbers that gets you, after all."

I didn't think she'd have to worry, being in a coffee shop and all, but... she had to have her reasons. I nodded and sat back down. She poked through her contacts and dialed a number.

"Hey, Mandy. Could you pick me up? ...Yeah. ...Yes." I could only hear the muffled buzz of talking from the other end, not pick out real words. She glanced at me. "...She's okay. ...Alright, see you then."

"Mandy?" I asked, willfully ignoring that they'd been talking about me.

"Amanda." Kara corrected. "Should be here in ten or so."

"Ah." I remembered her, now.
She got up and nodded toward the counter again. "You want another?" When I declined, she bouncily walked her way to the counter, and I could feel her mood improving. She had fun acting silly, and probably needed the emotional boost. She waited by the counter for the drink- some chai concoction- and returned with it when it was done. I spent the last few minutes of the wait actively people-watching around the nearby blocks. Kara only took one sip of the drink near the end of the wait, more out of boredom than anything.

When the slightly stocky girl with short dyed-red hair came in, I recognized her instantly. Kara cheered and hopped up, bouncing over and presenting the to-go cup of herbs and spices pretending to be tea. Amanda chuckled and took it, and the two shared a lingering kiss. I looked away, but could still see it through my feet. Kara turned back and waved, catching my attention. Mandy nodded my way, and seemed to appreciate that I'd waited with her girlfriend.

Kara seemed to struggle internally for a second, before striding back over. "Remember you've got my number. Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

I nodded and forced my small smile a little wider for her. She waved again and the two left, heading a block further away from the Boardwalk to where Amanda had managed to find a parking space for the little car they got into. I sat there for a few more minutes, my mind drifting, going back over the conversation, considering what she'd said... stamping down the shy jealously at the pair's casual intimacy, and the thoughts of how no one could ever want me the same way that trailed after it.

In the end I sighed, turning in my cup and heading out the door. I'd blocked off the rest of my day for letting off steam just in case, but now I just felt drained. Still, might as well finish up what I meant to do today. I sent dad a text that I was heading off to clean up my mess in the Trainyard so I didn't feel like going back until the Merchants were cleared out. I told him I was going to run, wasn't going to fight, that he didn't have to worry. I wasn't sure what to make of his short replies, but hoped he was taking it well. He hadn't asked me not to go, after all.

The bus home was just like every other ride home. I swapped my school things out of my backpack, filling it with my cape gear and spare clothes. Then I walked a few blocks east, waited for the coast to clear, and hopped the fence to a backyard where the only occupants were busy on the wrong side of the house to see me. I changed into my temporary cape gear and hoisted my bag again, taking off at a run and then kicking up a tailwind to sprint the last dozen blocks to the Trainyard in under half a minute.

When I got there, I stashed my bag on top of one of the warehouses, and started making my way between the piles of junk I'd left out. I'd hoped to have them recycled, and was still hopeful I could have that done someday, but for now leaving piles of what was essentially weak steel plating for Mush to grab up? Fantastically terrible idea.

So I got to work burying them. It had to be deep enough to not be easy to get to, but not so deep they could never be dug out without my help. I had to dodge underground lines and the few sewer tunnels in the area, which took a bit of thought in a couple cases. Still, it wasn't even an hour before I was done. I still had the rest of the day, and was already here... I decided to get one last round of work put in. I could bury the trash fast enough if I saw someone coming, after all. I spend a couple noisy hours working through the backlog of looted or empty crates, before the repetition really started getting to me. I hadn't set out to practice or train, after all. No feelings of backing out or giving up to contend with, today.

It was still relatively early in the day, even though it was starting to get dark out. I didn't want to just go home. So I grabbed my bag and headed south. I didn't really have anywhere in mind, so I
just kept going until I found something interesting. When I hit the commercial sector, I stopped. This was the ritzier part of town, with Medhall, the Towers, and the shopping mall. All of it was deep in Empire territory, and they discouraged serving non-whites, but if you ignored the racial monochrome, it was one of the better parts of town. I wound up poking around a bit, doing the stereotypical 'super' thing of finding a few taller buildings to climb and perch on for a bit while inspecting the skyline. It was a nice view, but I didn't see the appeal when I could get something similar standing on the hills bordering the city.

After finding an alley with no obvious cameras to de-cape in, I started meandering my way home. One house a few blocks away caught my eye on the trip, though. It had a pair of cars out front, and another pulled up on the curb. It was the guy struggling with a large package that'd caught my attention. A crate with a large dog inside. That wouldn't have seemed too out of place with pets being a thing, except a casual sweep of the house revealed a dozen more.

Who needed that many dogs? And why keep them caged up?

I stopped walking, turning my full attention on the building. That was when I realized two of the people in one of the back rooms were wearing masks. Both men, both seemed to be heavy masks... Metal, animal shaped. If these were Hookwolf and Stormtiger, the weird bucket thing next to the woman they were with made a bit more sense. Cricket, said to wear a cagelike helmet.

The problem was, I wasn't sure what to do with the information. Dad didn't want me fighting, and as strong as I knew I was, the thought of fighting fucking Hookwolf was still daunting if only by reputation. I was sure I could take him, but the collateral damage from the fight would be absurd to bring to a residential suburb like the one they were in. My best bet was an ambush, and the only things I could think of would destroy the house and probably hurt the dogs. I could just sink the whole thing into the ground, but that might be too slow if I was trying to keep it intact.

The stalemate I found myself in was incredibly frustrating. I wanted to stop them, but I realized I didn't care about fighting them. I pulled out my phone and considered my options. I'd called the non-emergency line last time, maybe I should try the emergency line? I dialed and waited.

"PRT Emergency." The crisp deep tones came less than two rings in. I was so surprised by it that they continued. "Please state your name and the nature of your emergency." Right, if you're in immediate danger, you're still supposed to call 911. This sort of line assumed there was time for names.

I still spent half a second hesitantly humming out an 'um', unfortunately. "I'm Terraform. I'm... not in danger, but I found something?" When he told me to go on, I nodded. "I found a house full of dogs, with some people in masks. I think it's Stormtiger, Hookwolf an-"

"Do not engage. Do. Not. Engage." The man barked in my ear. "If you're still near the building, move away."

I stuttered a bit more before I could speak. "Oh, I'm not fighting. I'm not even near there anymore." I'm not stupid, I wanted to say, but that'd be unproductive.

"Good. Please continue." I heard typing in the background as I started walking again, and he'd gone from sounding distant but professional to deathly serious. I suppose the situation called for it.

"Right, I think the people in the masks were Stormtiger, Hookwolf, and Cricket. There were a few more people, but it was mostly dogs." I gave him the address, after that.

"Anything else?" I told him I didn't have any other useful information. "You did good, reporting
"this instead of running in and getting yourself killed."

"What's going to happen, now?"

"Can't say." The man said, hesitance creeping into his voice for the first time. "The important thing is, that it's our problem now. We're aware of it now thanks to you, and we'll find a way to use this information. Your job now is staying safe."

"I guess..." I muttered. "Thanks." The call ended after the basic 'good evening' exchange, and I stopped to stare at my phone for a bit. That... didn't feel as good as it should have, I think. I shook my head and sped up, soon enough passing near Arcadia and where New Wave lived. It was definitely edging into 'evening' by the time I got near home.

I slowed again, inspecting the car in the driveway. There was someone in it, and two people in the house. Dad, and someone older, with a weird metal cane. My thoughts ground to a halt in realization, and I sped up again. I stopped by the fancy looking car to find a young woman in a crisp but inexpensive-looking suit in the driver's seat. She gave a little wave when she looked up from her phone and noticed me standing between the car and the house door. I returned it awkwardly and made my way inside.

"In here." Dad called from the kitchen, and I dropped my bag on the way there.

He was sitting at the table, coffee in hand. Across from him sat a thin figure in a much nicer skirt suit than the woman from the car had. Her hands rested on the cane in her lap, her back straight with rigid, immaculate posture. I stared at the whitening gray hair in the low bun behind her head, giving way to sharp hawk-like features under a thin coat of sagging wrinkles as she turned to look at me. For a moment, all I saw were the hints of familiarity that made my chest ache, before I met the woman's hard gaze.

"...Hi, Gram."
Interludes Compilation B

Chapter Summary

The last of the interludes I used to stick at the end of updates. Starting Update 14, ending Update 22. Probably going to just have them be their own chapters from now on.

WED FEB 9

Sophia was walking home with Emma, talking about the 'outing' they had planned for tonight, when her phone rang. She looked, recognized the number, and cursed.

"Sorry Ems, I've gotta take this." She held up the phone. "Meet you at your place?"

"Sure thing, hero." Emma said with a bright smile, and headed off, already grabbing her own phone to call for a pick-up. She was getting in shape, but still didn't like to work if she didn't have to.

Sophia chuckled, and answered the phone. "What?" She snapped.

"Piggot wants a report on what happened at Winslow." Her handler said without preamble. "To that girl in the locker. Filed by tomorrow, or you'll get punishment duty."

"What the fuck?" Sophia hissed, confused. "Why the hell would Piggy even care?"

"Someone out of town is looking into it, and your report isn't on file."

"Why is it a PRT thing in the first place?"

She heard a sigh from the other line. "Because I pulled rank, when your name came up."

"What?" Sophia deadpanned.

"The police had you as a person of interest, and Dragon's written up programs that scan files for Wards names, and alert the appropriate people. For you, that meant me. So I covered for you."

"I didn't ask you to do that!" She snapped.

A rueful chuckle from the other end. "I know, but they were going to finger you for it, all the evidence was there if they wanted to piece it together."

"Who cares? It's just Hebert. No one cares what happens to her."

"Piggot cares, because she hates you." Her handler sniped venomously. "Just file the damned report, keep your head down, and pray that girl didn't trigger." The line went dead.

Sophia sneered at the phone when she pulled it away. So Hebert was coming back to haunt her? She spent a few minutes plotting out how everything would shake out, depending on what actually came out of this.
This was fine. Predators could roll with the punches, even if they didn't see it coming.

She still needed to pay Hebert back for their last meeting, too.

Sophia smirked, and brought up her contacts to make a call.

"Hey Ems? Change of plans."

---

TUE FEB 15

Hebert had gotten weird. Emma said she'd never been a morning person, which threw their stakeout Thursday morning through a loop when she left right after they showed up. This is why you *always* show up hours early to a stakeout. They knew Hebert went to Arcadia now, and used bikes to beat her there. Then they took the time and checked the routes she could have taken. She didn't have time to stop anywhere off the path, and Emma knew there wasn't any coffee places or the like along it. They were late to class, but neither cared.

Friday they'd staked out a couple places along the path between Hebert's and Arcadia. The routes were 'safe' enough that sheep like her wouldn't bother varying it up often, so all they had to do was pin it down a bit. Sure enough, she passed by both of them.

The weekend they'd spent planning plans B, C, and D, in case things went wrong. Monday was another stakeout along the route, which came up hits again.

Now though, they'd decided to follow her. They were confident in her path, and had plans to break off every now and then, bracket her on either side along other streets for a bit, then meet up to make it less likely they'd be noticed. Hebert's pace made that hard to manage reasonably, though. They'd only bothered once before things went to shit.

All of a sudden the girl froze and stared at them, like she *recognized* them. Sophia was pretty good with 'hide your face' disguises, but she had *nothing* on Emma when it came to cosmetics. By the time she was done with them, Sophia had been confident you'd need to know what you were looking for to tell who they were. The fact that Hebert managed, without even looking right at them until after she'd been spooked?

That stunk of Thinker bullshit, to Sophia's training.

Then the girl *moved.*

They tried to keep up, but Hebert was *gone.* The only plus to the situation was that the direction she'd cut down was heading *away* from Arcadia, which meant she was turning again. So they followed, slowing down so Sophia could watch the ground for signs. Kicked up puddles from last night's rain, bubbles in the damp from pounding feet, scuff marks to indicate a turn... she hadn't found anything until she saw footprints in the grass. She reached down to confirm they were recent, then saw how spaced they were. Running, long legs, high speed. The kind of thing you saw with high level sprinters.

She made her way to the fence the steps led to without deviating. The house was a couple meters away, no way to parkour off those walls without leaving prints, so she checked the barrier itself.

The fence was a rickety old thing, meant to give the illusion of enclosure, rather than actually provide the home any defense. The uselessness of the thing affronted Sophia on a personal level, but that wasn't what she was focused on. She took a hand to the worn, weathered wood, and drug a
nail over it, leaving a bright, lighter mark in the grain. She checked all along the top of it, but found
nothing. Double-checking the tracks in the grass, she could only conclude that Hebert had leapt the
damn thing, not even bothering with a handhold.

A white girl with no training having two-meter vertical ups? Not fucking possible.

Hebert was definitely a cape.

"Shit." She muttered.

Emma came up behind, having lagged to catch her breath. "Is she..?"

Sophia tilted her head side-to-side, not really a shake, just a need to move while thinking. "Plan B, I
guess." She said after a few seconds.

Ems sucked in a hissed breath, but nodded. "Alright, I'll start getting things ready." She was sad,
Sophia could tell, but so was she, at least a little.

The two headed off, separating to handle their own parts of the plan. They didn't lend any thought
at all to missing school to do it.

It wasn't like school would matter anymore, anyway.

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Winslow / FRI FEB 18

She checked her phone for the third time since she got to school. She was hidden away in one of
the nooks she'd found Taylor hiding in, once. Better than the bathrooms, everyone wanted in there
before class, and better than up on the roof where the druggies were doping up to breeze through
the school day in a stupor. The cafeteria was dangerous. She couldn't be seen sitting with Julia,
because Stephanie hated her, and couldn't sit with Stephanie because she'd cheated on Darren, who
was now dating Caroline, who was the new up-and-comer vying for a spot at the top of the bitch
heap, and nobody liked her, except the jocks fucking her. Too dangerous to cross them, yet.

And those were just the factions she knew had a shot at the top. Jessie and Conner had been front-
runners last week, until Jessie was pulled from school to have an abortion, and Conner was shot for
being gay. Kristie, Valerie and Natalie all had followings big enough they had to be appeased, but
not big enough to push for the top yet, Madison thought.

If only Emma would answer her fucking phone.

The bell rang. No way in hell was she messing up her chance for a transfer to Arcadia by letting her
grades slip. Even one absence could cost her, now that she wasn't coasting on Taylor's stolen
homework. She grabbed her bag and held it in front of her, holding it for comfort, and so her hands
would be too busy to check her phone again.

On the way to class, the loud bang of a locker being slammed startled her into stopping and
looking behind her. She almost panicked when one of the brutes down the hall's eyes locked on
hers. Startle the sheep, pick out the prey. A tactic Sophia'd used more than once. She watched his
blue eyes rake down her body, hidden as it was. Saw his blonde hair, bleached even brighter, cut
short enough it didn't wave when his head moved. Saw the smirk on his face when his eyes came
back to hers. She turned and kept going. Had to run away. Had to get away.

It wasn't just the cliques that were bubbling up in a roiling mess just about to burst.
The gangs were acting up, too.

They knew the social cliques were shifting, the neutrals were faltering, dying out. *Up for grabs.*

Madison made it to class without any other hassle. She couldn't be seen freaking out. Couldn't let her breath hitch and catch. Deep breaths, slow breaths. Useless to whichever clique took top spot if she was seen to be weak. She just needed to wait until she knew which one was going to win.

She was running out of time.

She sent Emma another text. The girl's family said she was staying with Sophia. Sophia's family said they were staying at Emma's. She didn't know what was going on. She'd checked the hospitals' records, but hadn't found either of them there. Nor in the police records, arrest reports, mental hospitals... She'd checked for transfers, and only found *Taylor's.* She wasn't sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, she hated it wasn't her that had an easy life at Arcadia now. On the other... at least *someone* got out. Even if it was the meat she'd had to help beat down to earn her keep at the top.

A place that was crumbling, so much faster than she'd thought possible.

She had to pick a side. It was only a matter of time, of *days,* before the school forgot she'd been at the top once. She grabbed out her notebook, jotting down the things she knew, the rumors she'd heard since getting here. The seating arrangements in her class. Whatever she could remember of her run to class. Everything could be important, for figuring out what to do next. She didn't have Emma's natural talent for this. She'd have to make due.

Everything was so much easier online. She didn't have to worry about who anyone was, or what they could do, or what they were thinking. She didn't have to honestly consider being some Empire thug's bedwarmer just to stay out of the Merchant's drug dens, or the ABB's brothels...

She checked her phone again.

She missed when the world made sense.
She missed when she felt safe.
God help her, she was even starting to miss *Taylor.*

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**FRI FEB 18**

Vicky and I managed to beat Carol home, despite how late we were getting in. Mark was in the basement doing his thing, and Vicky immediately charged up to the bathroom to claim it for a shower. I shook my head and smiled at her antics, before heading upstairs to read until she was done.

Partway through a particularly lurid chapter, my phone dinged. I checked my phone, finding a new message from Kara on PHO.

*Neon_Rainbow (9:38PM):* I fucked up.

I sighed. I could just see her moping at her computer. So I got up, started mine from sleep mode, and clicked through to the chat.

*CarmillaCantEven (9:40PM):* It *is* Friday, huh?
*Neon_Rainbow (9:40PM):* Oh that cuts deep.
Neon_Rainbow (9:40PM): Not even pretending and asking what happened.
CarmillaCantEven (9:41PM): You made Taylor cry.
CarmillaCantEven (9:41PM): Was pretty fucking obvious.
Neon_Rainbow (9:41PM): I'm sorry.
CarmillaCantEven (9:41PM): Tell Taylor.
Neon_Rainbow (9:41PM): I did.
Neon_Rainbow (9:41PM): She just shut down. Not sure she heard me.
Neon_Rainbow (9:41PM): Don't want to bother her tonight about it.
Neon_Rainbow (9:42PM): Also don't have her PHO handle.
CarmillaCantEven (9:42PM): Pretty sure she doesn't have one.

Note to self. Help Taylor get her 'Terraform' account and verify it. A quick check showed it was taken, but the user hadn't been active in over a year. I'd need to brush up on the rules for claiming dead accounts if you've got a valid claim to the name. With the revolving door to the morgue some cities were for young indies, there were a lot of dead accounts lying around. I turned my attention back to the chat.

Neon_Rainbow (9:42PM): Really?
Neon_Rainbow (9:42PM): That seems weird to me.
Neon_Rainbow (9:42PM): But yeah, didn't want to ruin her night trying to say sorry again.
Neon_Rainbow (9:42PM): It can wait until tomorrow.
Neon_Rainbow (9:43PM): Or Monday.
CarmillaCantEven (9:44PM): You sure she'd want to hear it?
Neon_Rainbow (9:44PM): No idea. I hope so.
CarmillaCantEven (9:44PM): What even happened?
Neon_Rainbow (9:44PM): I don't know.
Neon_Rainbow (9:44PM): I didn't tell her I could fight, so she jumped to thinking I was using her to teach the girls?
Neon_Rainbow (9:44PM): It didn't seem like a big deal, so I told her I wasn't sorry...

I groaned, rubbing my face with both hands, trying to comprehend how badly Taylor would actually take that.

Neon_Rainbow (9:45PM): Ran right under a brick sack full of trust issues I didn't know was there.
Neon_Rainbow (9:45PM): And now I don't know if I can fix it.
CarmillaCantEven (9:45PM): Maybe stop trying to *fix* people?
Neon_Rainbow (9:45PM): I just want to help...
CarmillaCantEven (9:45PM): You're a whole barrel too much for most people, let alone the ones with actual problems.
CarmillaCantEven (9:45PM): Maybe lay the fuck off?
Neon_Rainbow (9:46PM): Are you saying I'm a tall drink of water, or calling me fat? D':
CarmillaCantEven (9:46PM): Yes.
Neon_Rainbow (9:46PM): :<
Neon_Rainbow (9:46PM): Anyway, I already told her I'd stop with the flirting.
CarmillaCantEven (9:47PM): Good. *Please* tell me you didn't do anything to make it worse? Say anything else? You know you get intense sometimes.
Neon_Rainbow (9:47PM): Shit, yeah. Mentioned the empire fucks. Said they'd shoot me if I tried to manage solo.

I took a deep breath, got up from my chair, and went downstairs to steal some of Carol's aspirin. It was looking to be one of those kinds of nights.

Neon_Rainbow (9:49PM): Amy?
Neon_Rainbow (9:50PM): You there?
CarmillaCantEven (9:52PM): Shut the fuck up, I'm medicating.
CarmillaCantEven (9:52PM): You have no idea how bad you fucked up.
Neon_Rainbow (9:52PM): Explain, please?
CarmillaCantEven (9:52PM): Taylor has a hero complex.
CarmillaCantEven (9:52PM): You just told her you need saving, after making her hate you.

After a couple minutes of no replies, I imagined she was stewing pretty poorly.

CarmillaCantEven (9:54PM): You fucked up.
Neon_Rainbow (9:55PM): I fucked up.
CarmillaCantEven (9:55PM): You also told her you were painting a target on her back, with the empire stuff.
CarmillaCantEven (9:56PM): Tell that to my aunt.
Not aunt Sarah, of course.
Neon_Rainbow (9:57PM): Bad night.
Neon_Rainbow (9:57PM): You know what I mean though? It's family rules. No one wants another example made of them for breaking that.
CarmillaCantEven (9:58PM): Please tell me you told *Taylor* that?

I waited, imagining her slamming her head into the wall next to her desk. It was oddly cathartic, now that the pills were taking the edge off my growing headache.

CarmillaCantEven (9:59PM): Fix your shit, Campbell.
CarmillaCantEven (9:59PM): Full disclosure.
CarmillaCantEven (9:59PM): Tomorrow.
Neon_Rainbow (10:00PM): Kill me?
CarmillaCantEven (10:00PM): Ask Taylor.
CarmillaCantEven (10:00PM): I'm done with you, tonight.

I closed the chat window, rose from my desk chair, and flopped down onto my bed. There were no new notifications from my phone as I let the stress drain out over the course of several minutes. This was broken by a knock at my door, to which I grunted. It opened, and I turned my head to see Vicky- clad only in a towel and a healthy blush from the hot water, another wrapped around her hair- standing in the door.

"Hey Ames, shower's free." And with that, she floated away toward her room.

Oh yeah, I knew what I was doing in the shower tonight. I deserved it, after Kara's bullshit. In the end, mine almost lasted longer than Vicky's had.

---

TUE FEB 22

I sighed as I slid down into 'my' chair in the hospital's upstairs break room. A pleasantly squooshy thing set in one of the far corners of the room, I hadn't found anyone else using it after the first month or so after getting my powers and starting to heal here. There was another in the other corner, but this one was mine. I groaned as I lifted myself back up into something vaguely
approximating proper posture. There was the table in the center, with standard meeting room chairs around it. A few pictures lined the walls, and a few fake potted plants dotted the floor. Part of why I liked this break room so much was its lack of windows. Past the rest was the entrance door to one side, and the fat extension to the 'L' shape of the room on the other. A countertop lined the entire far wall from where I sat, continuing into a little kitchenette where the overnights could make their own food when the cafes and kitchens closed for the night, or whatever other reason. I stared at the line of coffee pots, wondering if it'd be worth it to get back up to get some, but dismissed the thought.

I was *comfy*, dammit.

With a herculean effort, I grabbed my phone instead of drifting off to sleep. If someone caught me sleeping, they might send me home early, and I'd have to deal with Carol being 'disappointed' again. I fully intended to stay as long as they let me, and then collapse into bed as soon as I got home. An entirely different sort of disappointment from Carol, but thankfully one that was *tomorrow* Amy's problem, unlike all the other options.

I dismissed a few messages, until I found one from Kara, from half an hour ago.

'You okay? You looked like shit, at lunch.'

I snorted, and tapped out a reply. "Didn't sleep. Kissed Taylor. Found out she's straight." I muttered out loud. Send. Let her choke on *that* for a hot second.

'No she isn't.' Popped up shortly thereafter. 'She's hurt, not straight.'

I frowned, and asked her how she knew that.

'SECRET! Don't give up! You can bag that hot set of legs if you give her some time and help her realize she's still bi.'

"Is she drunk again?" I muttered, then put words to text to ask.

'Do these look like the words of a sloshed woman? Your. Girl. Is. Not. Straight. Never give up. Never lose hope. I'd bet your virginity on it.'

I snorted, but couldn't help the smile, or the heat in my cheeks. My alarm going off distracted me from my thoughts, and I dragged myself to my feet. Then I trudged over to the coffee machines, pulled a thermos out of the cupboard underneath, and poured myself four cups worth of caffeine sludge, before capping it and pouring a fifth into a proper cup. I pulled a quarter of it and hissed as the heat and bitterness hit me.

Still, as I went back to the grind of mending thankless assholes because I'd be a monster not to, I never lost that little smile.

---

**TUE FEB 22**

Not for the first time today, Cassandra Herren wondered why the everloving *fuck* the Merchants decided *now* was the perfect time to get their dank panties in a twist. She was high in the air, and her costume was only *so* water resistant. She was cold and miserable, and *oh yeah*.

There was a *fucking Endbringer* due any day now!
Kaiser never failed to drag at least half their capes to deal with them. Not the fights, never the fights, thank God, but she'd seen what each of them could do. This would be her first time back at the same Endbringer's mess, since she was too new to the group for the first one since she joined. That was still three too many dead cities she'd never unvisit.

She shook her head, trying to clear the thoughts. No sense dwelling on it. It'd happen when it happened, and she'd be border guard with the rest of the fliers anyway. Safe in the air, watching to make sure none of the poor fucks caught in the Smurf's way managed to get out before they could put up the fences. The heroes could handle guarding that until the proper walls were up.

It was times like these she was sad she'd had to quit smoking. First her uncle tried to make her quit because 'you can't run while you're hacking up a lung', then having to hide it around the family because they took a dim view to smoke damage and burn marks, and now living with Kathy 'I will fucking whip you if you stink up my house with that shit' Herren...

She sighed. That wasn't fair to Katherine. Cass knew she was just lashing out from feeling stressed and cranky. Kathy was a sweetheart, she just had ideas about her white-picket-home and cigarettes had no place in it.

So, here she was. Floating up around the ABB / Merchant borders, watching the fights on Kaiser's orders. She couldn't even use her phone to pass the time and just keep an ear out, with the rain. Just barely wet enough that she might slip and drop the thing. Sure she could use her power to hold it, but that did weird things to touch-screens if she didn't manage to tag the right part of the case, and only that part. She was sure Kaiser knew, and that's why she got the shiny cutting-edge one after last time, instead of the durable waterproof one she wanted.

Fucking asshole, throwing money in her face just to watch her choke on it.

It wasn't like there was anything to see, either. She wasn't supposed to care about anything but cape fights, and none of either gang's capes had been seen since the weekend. It was about when she thought that, that she heard a crash that couldn't have come from anything mundane.

She listened for the crashes or explosions that would've followed a mundane crash that loud, just in case.

Not hearing anything for a while, she waited until there was another crash, and followed it. Two more crashes later, and she was floating high above the Trainyard, pulling her binoculars up from where they hung around her neck. It took another crash, but she found it. Some cape was... crushing shipping containers?

It took a second for her to recognize the powers, and her blood ran cold.

Terraform.

Taylor.

She still wasn't sure what to think of that dorky girl that kept trying to be friendly with her. Half of her was sure the girl knew she was Rune, and was trying to make her go straight. The rest just thought she was an idiot with no social skills. Some lost puppy that had no idea how the world worked.

Cass was a gangster. Rune was a supervillain. Taylor was a gawky nobody. Terraform was a hero.

There should have been no point of friendly interaction between them, but... The idiot was just so fucking endearing. Like a little kid you wanted to lie to about how the world
was, just so they wouldn't cry. Or get themselves killed. ...or both. Taylor just kept trying to be friendly, and push her way into Cass' life, or now pull Cass into hers, with that stupid martial arts crap.

Cass could brawl, and that was good enough.

If only the part that wanted to go would just shut up!
She wasn't allowed to have friends. She had contacts. Acquaintances. Patsies. Everyone either hated her, tolerated her, or wanted to use her to get ahead in their gang. People weren't allowed to just... like spending time with her.

It was so fucking confusing.

Cass didn't care about the Empire. They were just some big money her family were sucking up to. It was her family that she'd never be able to get away from. They were great now, but she could see the writing on the walls. Soon enough she'd be older, and the family would want more connections, and she'd get married off.

The best she could see right now being Theo. At least she could train that doormat.

She knew her power wasn't great. It was strong, but had its tiers. Usually her power was overkill, a bad impact at the wrong place? She'd killed at least a dozen people by now, all of them accidents. She had fights she was fine with, but then the threats immediately shot right past what she could handle. The narrow band where she was useful just didn't pop up often. Ironically enough, Terraform fell right into it.

Cass was sure that time she'd beaned her would have killed a squishy normal.

She barked out a sad laugh. What, was she planning on playing rivals with the same girl she was friends with while the masks were off? That'd be fucking retarded. Good for a laugh, though.

...so why was she crying?

She sniffled and floated away. There was no way she could drop down there and talk. Either she'd get attacked for being a Nazi, or... what? They'd just be chummy for no reason? Oh! She knew! She'd just tell Taylor who she was! There was no way that could end poorly!

...goddamn did she miss having peers. Everyone at school was either beneath her or hated her, all the normals in the E88 were either scared or brown-nosing, all the capes thought she was just a kid that was only good for a ride once in a while...

...she missed having boyfriends.
The only people stupid enough to touch her were the idiots who didn't remember what happened to the last guy Derek caught her with. All the good ways to blow off steam weren't allowed. No cigs, no drugs, no sex... They were supposed to be fucking supervillains! What was even the point if she wasn't allowed to have fun!?

She made it to the warehouse where she was keeping her stuff this week. She didn't care what Kaiser thought, she was taking the rest of the day off. She stripped out of her wet costume, shoving it into a bag and toweling off before putting on something dry. A nice waterproof coat on top of it, and she started the walk home.

...home. Kathy's house. Her and Derek. They were nice enough. Kathy was a sweetheart homemaker who just wanted to be a mom, Derek was an asshole with the stolen skills to pretend not to be unless you had to live with him, and her? She was stuck. The Empire just owned too
much of the city. They had the cops, Medhall had the Mayor and administration in their pockets, they were the biggest cape group in the city, had the most money and manpower...

She didn't care about the Empire.
But she hated being trapped.

It took her years to see it, but this gang? This city? Her family?
It was just a bigger cell. Pretty gilded cages. Fake freedom full of chains.

Her power let her fly.
She just wanted to be free.

...she just wanted a choice.

She made it home, stuck her damp coat on the rack, tossed her bag of soggy robes into the laundry room, and slumped her way into the living room. She could hear Kathy puttering away in the kitchen, and knew Derek was busy wrangling the rest of the Herren boys today. She didn't want to watch TV, didn't want to read... she pulled out her phone, and checked through her messages. Suckups, fake friends, PHO threads she couldn't give a damn about... she clicked back through her texts, and her scanning stopped when she found Taylor's.

Just a girl, who wanted to be her friend.
'I'm here for you.'

She wiped her eyes again. Maybe she would drop by to their stupid fucking martial arts thing. She had no idea what the colorsquad would think of her, though. Probably try to push her away from Taylor, convince her she was just another Aryan breeder. Cass didn't care what they thought. Despite herself, she found she did care what Taylor thought, though. How to get her point across without burning too many bridges?

An idea struck her. Oh, Derek was going to hate it. He'd twig on it almost immediately, but he wasn't allowed to beat her, and if she made it into a bonding thing with Kathy? Half the girly things Cass did were because she didn't care one way or the other, and the rest because they made her cousin happy.

She hopped up and went to the kitchen. Kathy was working a rolling pin on some dough, baking pies or something. Absolutely covered in flour, and loving every second of it. She glanced over when she heard Cass come in, and the girl cringed a little inwardly. Kathy was still wearing that stupid eyepatch with the same rune on it that she wore in her Othala costume. Her hair was up to keep it out of the flour, and it usually covered the patch itself... but how that woman had the audacity to walk around the city with that thing on, Cass had no idea.

She cleared her throat to hide her feelings on the matter. "Hey, Kath?"

"Yeah?" The homemaker asked, setting her things aside and rubbing her hands on her apron, accomplishing precisely nothing with the action, as covered as both were.

"Do you... would you mind helping me dye my hair?"
Interlude 1 (Gram)

Chapter Summary

The first of the full and proper Interlude segments.
Kinda' really unhappy with how the PHO part is translating over, but not much I can do without sinking a load of time into fiddling with it. DX

MON FEB 21

Rosalind wasn't impressed by the sights of the city, as the car crested the hills on its outskirts. Compared to the likes of Boston and New York, it was always something of a particularly uppity fishing town. The downward spiral after the riots was inevitable, probably would have happened regardless, though taking decades instead of years to achieve the same results. The bits that weren't run down or worse were drab and mediocre. Even shining Medhall and the Protectorate ENE were on par with the average for America's great cities, at best.

As they made their way into the city proper, she went over the news articles and forum threads she and her assistant had found over the weekend to prepare for the trip, one last time.

---

Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards

You are currently logged in, BabaGa95

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 by user custom preference.

Topic: Turf War XIX: These subtitles aren't funny anymore
In: Boards ► US ► East Coast ► Brockton Bay

Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)

Posted on February 6, 2011:

Hornet's nest got kicked again. ABB VS Merchants, by the look of it.

Skirmishes breaking out all across their borders. Only good news is, no cape fights yet. Current theory is payback for Lung killing Brick, but this doesn't mesh well with the Merchant's 'hold ground or fall back' MO. Looking into what sparked off a Merchant land-grab, but details are sparse.

The E88 are suspiciously quiet so far, too.

EDIT: Rumor is there was some sort of truce on, and the Merchants claim the ABB broke it.

EDIT2: Okay, so the E88 are being quiet about their expansion, just walking in and tagging new blocks unopposed for now.

EDIT3: Apparently Lung's out of town, which might explain everyone's boldness.

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► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Fighting near Washington and Hazel. Stay safe, people.

► 10K_GUTS

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Broheim_ Dragon always takes back what's his, whether we like it or not. You'll see.

► FestivityBeast (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 21, 2011:

keep telling yougys lungs NOT STUPID hes git something planned stop edging on that moth father!

► Broheim_ (Temp-banned)

Replied on February 21, 2011:
10K_GUTS Say that to my face, chink.

► Assssault (Unverified Cape) (Cape Geek)
Replied on February 21, 2011:
You okay there, FestivityBeast?
Someone take Fes's happy juice before he hurts himself again! D:

► SerialPuncher
Replied on February 21, 2011:
Assssault or breaks his phone to kill his autocorrupt.
Moth Father. XD XD XD

► Judge (Moderator)
Replied on February 21, 2011:
Cool it down, Broheim_
Come back tomorrow.

► Glory Girl (Hero) (New Wave)
Replied on February 21, 2011:
Assssault SerialPuncher can you NOT right now?
Found three bodies in that park on Charleston. Merchants.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 40, 41, 42

♦ Topic: Locker Girl's Revenge?
In: Boards ► US ► East Coast ► Brockton Bay
Cronchborgor (Original Poster)

Posted on February 19, 2011:

Hey, so those girls who shoved that one girl into her locker haven't been seen in a week.

I thought that whole thing fizzled out? Hadn't seen any cops since the first couple days, but maybe something happened.

Anyone know what's going on?

Is locker girl dead?

(Showing Page 1 of 1)

► StompsMvGee

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Sounds like BS. I bet nothing happened.

► Shrewdinger (Unverified Rodent)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

I dunno man, cops came by after school a couple days ago. Probs something up.

► SpecificProtagonist (Cape Groupie)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Oh, shit.

► WereNewt (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

I think I heard about that. Sounds fucked up.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX (Temp-banned)

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Hey, I know her! That's [REDACTED]!

I wonder if she got powers from the locker? What sort of powers do you think they'd be?

➤ **SpecificProtagonist** (Cape Groupie)

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Seriously not cool, void.

➤ **WereNewt** (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Wish I could punch people through screens, right now.

➤ **Alathea** (Moderator)

Replied on February 20, 2011:

THREAD LOCKED

XxVoid_CowboyxX, you should know better than to pick at secret identities, even if you don't know they're a cape. What if the gangs kidnapped her over your insensitive post? Sit in the corner and think about what you did for a while.

This whole topic is asking for trouble. Removal pending.

**End of Page. 1**
As ENE's resident Cape Recruitment Officer, (self-appointed, TYVM) I must say this new prospect is a rather hot commodity!

Rumor has it she can breathe fire! No word yet on any other powers.

Come on, new girl! Join the good guys! We have cake! And pensions! But mostly the cake!

EDIT: Powers confirmed to include fire immunity.

EDIT2: She's on record as 'Spitfire' now. Thanks mods for the thread title change.

EDIT3: Aww, I think she's taken. Oh well, I'll get the next one for you, Miss Director, Ma'am!

(Showing Page 45 of 45)

► Tim20

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Still don't get what the big deal is, she spits fire in the same city as Lung. Everyone's already as fireproof as they're going to get.

► Bagrat (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Rumor has it she's been seen around Faultline's crew.

Spitfire, any confirmation on a teamup?

► Assssault (Original Poster) (Unverified Cape) (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Bagrat Aww man, really? That sucks.

► CarlCalamatous

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Tim20 Never underestimate the power of fire!

The solution is ALWAYS more fire!
Spitfire (Verified Cape)

Replied on February 21, 2011:
Bagrat I'd prefer not to say, right now.

The Great Gingoro (Verified Stage Magician)

Replied on February 21, 2011:
That sounds like a yes to me!

SpecificProtagonist (Cape Groupie)

Replied on February 21, 2011:
I ship it.

DockWalkers

Replied on February 21, 2011:
CarlCalamatous Please not in my damn city, thank you.

Spitfire (Verified Cape)

Replied on February 21, 2011:
SpecificProtagonist Eww
The Great Gingoro No

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 43, 44, 45

Topic: Terraform

In: Boards ► US ► East Coast ► Brockton Bay
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)

Posted on February 18, 2011:

Our newest hero has decided on a name! And being the Guy (in the Know) that I am, (and in desperate need of some good news around here) I’ve started a proper thread for her.

She’s a young woman, probably Wards age, and has been tentatively rated as a mid-level Shaker/Blaster combo. Her thing is elemental powers, and yes she is the geokinetic who’s been running around for the past week or two.

(Showing Page 1 of 6)

► Glory Girl (Hero) (New Wave)

Replied on February 18, 2011:

I wonder if she’s considered joining New Wave?

► GingerVitis

Replied on February 18, 2011:

First!

EDIT: FUCK

► GameOfPwns

Replied on February 19, 2011:

GingerVitis Haha, get wrecked.

► Calypo42

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Stay safe, hero girl!

► Assssault (Unverified Cape) (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 19, 2011:
Glory Girl No poaching! D:<

► **Vista** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied on February 19, 2011:
Maybe she’d like the Wards? It’d be great not being the only girl on the team anymore!

► **CarmillaCantEven**
Replied on February 19, 2011:
Glory Girl
Not everyone likes the spotlight, remember?

► **Clockblocker** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied on February 19, 2011:
Vista What about SS?

► **SpecificProtagonist** (Cape Groupie) (Threadbanned)
Replied on February 19, 2011:
I wonder if she’s single, and what her preferences are…?

► **Vista** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied on February 19, 2011:
Clockblocker Unlike you, I think I know a girl when I see one. ;P

**End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6**

(Showing Page 2 of 6)

► **crashb0t**
Replied on February 19, 2011:
SpecificProtagonist Eww, isn’t she still a kid?

► Reave (Verified PRT Agent)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

One of these days, we’ll figure out how you get these scoops of yours, Bagrat…

Can confirm she met with Armsmaster the other night, and claimed to be uninterested in joining any teams right now, but did affirm her status as a hero.

► Shadow Stalker (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Vista What, jealous little kitten finally big enough to get herself spayed?

► RSThis

Replied on February 19, 2011:

I think I saw her running around the other day.

Girl needs new threads.

► Assssault (Unverified Cape) (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Vista Ouch, brutal. XD

Shadow Stalker Not cool. Do I need to report you to the boss-lady?

► SpecificProtagonist (Cape Groupie) (Threadbanned)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Crashb0t Hey, everyone has their ways to handle stress. Some people smoke, or drink, or play video games, whatever.

I write TerraXVista lewds I’m never going to be allowed to post anywhere. That’s how I’m dealing with the difficult time I’ve had for the past couple weeks.
What I'm trying to say is, *gimme the deets!*

▶ Needs_More_Cowbell

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Wait, was she the one that stared down Victor last week?

▶ Alathea (Moderator)

Replied on February 19, 2011:

Shadow Stalker Take the sniping somewhere else, it's off topic.

SpecificProtagonist That is about three flavors of *not okay* too many. Three day threadban.

▶ Steve488

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Needs_More_Cowbell Fake news

Victor's never solo. Either he's got at least Othala for another cape, or at least a dozen guys with him. No way some newbie would scare him off.

▶ Lenzflare

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Pretty sure he *did* have Othala and Rune with him, and *still* left.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(Showing Page 3 of 6)

▶ Glitzglam

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Needs_More_Cowbell No, it was definitely her.
► **Stardust16**

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Wait, wasn't Panacea there, too?

► **Assssault** (Unverified Cape) (Cape Geek)

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Stardust16 That sounds like a great question for the Panacea thread. :D

New girl's got chops, though! I like her already!

► **Purple Fox**

Replied on February 20, 2011:

But if she was with Panacea, does that mean she's joining New Wave?

► **TragicAlpaca**

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Purple Fox Didn't someone say she wasn't joining teams?

► **SerialPuncher**

Replied on February 20, 2011:

NW is kinda meh anyway.

Eight capes sure, all busy with school and day jobs.

Maybe she's biding time before going villain?

► **GingerVitis**

Replied on February 20, 2011:

SerialPuncher NO! Bad! No more villains!

She's a good girl!
Lady Photon (Hero) (New Wave)

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Terraform is not affiliated with New Wave, no.

While I'm here, I did see her, at the end of that conflict with Victor, Rune, and Othala.

Sorry, but I don't have any more details.

Purple Fox

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Well shit, it's Photon Mom!

Lady Photon Hiieee!

Kinda' sucks she isn't joining a team though, indies don't last long.

SerialPuncher

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Ahhh

Don't beam me, photon mom D:

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(Showing Page 4 of 6)

CarlCalamatous

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Wait, can she do fire?

Aegis (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)

Replied on February 20, 2011:

I met up with her earlier, along with Dauntless, and I've got to say, she's actually really scary. I'm
glad she's a hero.

And yeah, she does fire. Lots of fire.

► CarlCalamatous

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Sweet!

► SerialPuncher

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Aegis come on, man, you can't just leave us without details!

► All Seeing Eye (Unverified Cape)

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Didn't even talk about her starting her own team? :D

► GingerVitis

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Wait, she is?

► Stardust16

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Good for her.

► Calypso42

Replied on February 20, 2011:
Glad she's getting a team.

► StanInLaw
Replied on February 20, 2011:
Yeah, gonna have to agree.
Aegis we need details.

► **Aegis** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied on February 20, 2011:
Not sure what all I should say.
Like she keeps saying, classic elements. Water, fire, earth, wind. Scary with all of them.
REALLY glad she's on our side. D:

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(Showing Page 5 of 6)

► **Snugaloo**
Replied on February 20, 2011:
AMA soon?

► **Lenzflare**
Replied on February 20, 2011:
I don't think she has an account.

► **The Winged One**
Replied on February 20, 2011:
She seems nice.

► **All Seeing Eye** (Unverified Cape)
Replied on February 20, 2011:
Aww, it looks like Terraform hasn't logged in for almost a year.
Oh well, name's up for grabs, right?

► Purple Fox

Replied on February 20, 2011:

All Seeing Eye That is completely disrespectful! What if they're a dead hero?

The Winged One You think everyone is nice. XD

► The Winged One

Replied on February 20, 2011:

Purple Fox They usually are. ^_^

► MoistOwlette

Replied on February 21, 2011:

So, just gotta put this out there because no one else is bringing it up...

Do Stormtiger and Lung have something they need to tell us?

► Stardust16

Replied on February 21, 2011:

MoistOwlette

First? Eww.

Second? Eww

I don't think she's a dragon or a nazi.

► Steve488

Replied on February 21, 2011:

But is she Asian?

Aegis Did she sound Asian?

► Purple Fox
Steve488 Are you really asking that?

Bearing in mind that I'm replying to a thread where someone implied the topic cape is a Nazi butt-baby.

I really hope TF never reads her thread, now...

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

(Showing Page 6 of 6)

► MoistOwlette

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Purple Fox

You just got to type the words 'nazi butt baby' unironically.

You're welcome. ;P

► Alathea (Moderator)

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Steve488 No prying into potential cape identities.

MoistOwlette Take your weird kinks back to the cape fic subforum, and please remember there are reasons most people don't write villain fics. Don't drag that into some new cape's thread.

► MoistOwlette

Replied on February 21, 2011:

*Hisses and flees*

► Aegis (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Steve488 Yeah, I don't feel comfortable answering that.
Steve488

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Yeah I'm sorry. That was a stupid way to ask that.

Aegis So ARE her wind powers anything like Stormtiger's?

GingerVitis

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Aegis Did she sound cute? ;D

Stardust16

Replied on February 21, 2011:

GingerVitis Ugh, stop it

Why are the boys always horning on the girl capes? Especially the underage ones?

Purple Fox

Replied on February 21, 2011:

Stardust16 Boys are gonna boys, girlfriend. DX

Steve488 I'm more interested in those earth powers. I wonder what all she can do with them? Her name kind of implies that's her main power, after all.

---

It was unlikely Taylor was this Spitfire girl, what with joining that mercenary crew… She closed the threads on her tablet, one by one, finished by the time they made it to the hotel she'd be staying at. She waved the driver off to unload, as she made her way up. It was a woman, of course. Rosalind always hired women for close personal positions, if she could manage it. It made her feel like a queen, surrounded by a coterie of handmaidens. Assistants, drivers, and especially bodyguards. A professional woman was less likely subverted, in her experience.

She'd wondered, on idle nights, if this habit of surrounding herself with strong women had anything to do with Annette's... tendencies. In the end, she decided it couldn't have been foreseen, if there was something to it.
The rest of the afternoon was spent making calls to reiterate meeting plans for the morning. No reason not to check on local investments while she was here, after all. That most of these investments were months, even weeks new, was irrelevant. She needed a local power base, to support her granddaughter with. All of it would be Taylor's eventually, though she'd long given up the thought of grooming her granddaughter as a proper heiress, habits died hard. Attempts would have to be made. If they failed? She'd just leave the plans in place as they were.

Taylor would never want for much in life, even with a fraction of Rosalind's estate, and the local investments. The majority would go towards a trust, and set towards doling out trust funds to any of Taylor's biological children and grandchildren, ad infinitum. Of course, there was always the chance that Taylor would wind up a spinster, or- given her mother's college habits- end up one of the gays. That would just mean doling money out to predetermined charities instead. Assuming she didn't squander what she did receive regardless, Taylor and any non-biological children would still be comfortable for the rest of their lives.

---

**TUE FEB 22**

After a morning of meetings with companies she'd invested in with local offices, a stop in at Medhall to get the Cliff Notes presentation of their last few board meetings from one of their stooges, and tours of the local hospitals politely groveling for donations- which they would receive, if only small polite ones- Rosalind turned her attention to the crux of her trip to Brockton Bay.

Hebert worked a 9-to-5, so she'd invited herself to their home at 6. They found his beat-up old truck in the driveway, and she let herself out. Her driver could entertain herself for a while, and as Rosalind made her way to the door, she did indeed catch the young woman idly tapping away at a smartphone out of the corner of her eye. Her usual driver was at least refined enough to keep books on hand for times like these.

The home itself wasn't much to look at. It might have been a fine, if quaint little place at one point, but the chipped paint and unkempt shrubbery did it little service, and she poked her cane through the rotten step in front of the door with disdain. Her own blood, living in squalor like this? It was just shy of infuriating.

She took a deep, steadying breath. This was not the time for anger. That could come later. She stepped over the hole in the stairs, and knocked on the door with her cane. It took at least a minute too long for Hebert to answer the door, and when he did, his face tightened nearly to a grimace, and she sneered right back.

"Oh, you." He muttered, just barely loud enough she heard it. He gave a grumbling sigh and nodded his head towards the interior. "Come on in."

Rose let herself past him, and he shut the door behind her. She remembered where the kitchen was, and led the way there, seating herself, before her lips thinned as he took a seat across from her. "Not even going to offer a beverage?"

He shrugged. "You’re welcome to my coffee if you want it, but Taylor’s the tea drinker. You want a proper cup, you’ll have to wait for her to get home."

She wasn’t sure he was even aware of how many slights he was making against her, and decided he probably wasn’t intentionally spitting on her primarily English heritage. She gripped her cane in her lap, and let out a breath. No use holding the low-brow to her standards when Annette clearly
hadn’t bothered to train him properly. “This is fine.” She lied. “Where is Taylor?”

“Text she sent me said she was out training. She’ll be home in a few hours, unless you want me to call her?”

She thought on it for a moment, but perhaps this was advantageous. “Soon, perhaps. I did have some questions.” He grunted and nodded, so she continued. “What have you been doing for her?”

She’d done her research into the Heberts once she’d learned of Annette’s marriage, of course. Her husband to be was the temperamental troubled child of a violent alcoholic ex-sailor. Bad stock from a bad home. It still amazed her that she’d never gotten any reports of the man beating his wife, with his temper and her headstrong nature. But, Taylor seemed happy enough, so the man had at least continued his trend of self-control at home.

Daniel was a middle-management union worker in a dying city, though. The amount of real aid he could give a budding cape was limited, even making broad and generous assumptions with his connections and resources. She was curious what he’d managed to do with what little he had, though.

His fists clenched white at the implication that he hadn’t been sufficiently providing for his daughter, but the fight drained out of him quickly enough. “I’ve tried to be her sounding board. Keep her making safe choices. She doesn’t want to join any of the established groups, but she’s willing to make her own team.” He shrugged. “I felt pushing her towards that was a good idea. Keeps her safer, makes the city better, it’s basically a no-lose proposition.” That it was also what Taylor wanted was telling, and she wondered how much control the man actually had over his daughter. “Her hero costume should be done, soon. She wanted to start doing more PR work when it is, and I was thinking about putting in word to the city about some of what she can do. Not sure I can actually pull it off without painting that there’s a non-professional connection between us, though.”

“It’s good that you’ve held off on that.” She said, tapping a thoughtful pattern on the table. “I’m here, officially, in response to my granddaughter’s recent trauma. If I make donations to the local police and New Wave under the premise of making the city safer for her, it wouldn’t seem odd if I show some support for a new independent hero or her team. Even less so if I’m seen making overtures to that local mercenary group or the PRT.” She’d done her research on Faultline, and the woman wasn’t willing to take jobs in their home city for anything less than an exorbitant amount several times her already high regular rates, which Rosalind wasn’t currently willing to pay. “Generalities are our strength here, making sweeping gestures of aid and support for all lawful capes and their projects, and including hers in the mix. We can focus on direct support after we’ve made connections with her cape persona through these overtures.”

He made a noise somewhere between a reluctant hum and an impressed grunt. "That's a good point. We need to think long-term." He paused to rub the stubble on his chin as he thought. "Taylor's agreed to not start any fights or get in over her head for now, and I believe her, but that'll only last so long before something happens and she thinks she has to act." He pulled the hand from his face and waved it in a helpless half-shrug. "We don't have forever. She says her powers get stronger with training, and that they're tied to martial arts. I've been setting her up with some of the guys who know that stuff, and a couple people I trust with contacts of their own." He slumped slightly in his chair. "She's confident. really confident. I just..." He choked slightly on the words, growing quiet and looking away. Taylor's leash was a long one, it seemed. Good to know, if disappointing.

Perhaps a small mercy? "Tell me about Lustrum." Rose said, changing the subject.
The man across from her flinched. "Ah, hell..." He quietly grumbled, rising to his feet and making his way over to the coffee pot. "How do you take it?" He asked, grabbing a pair of mugs.

"Black is fine." If the drink was going to be substandard anyway, it might as well do so as predictably as possible.

Hebert poured the pair of mugs, and brought them back over to the table. "What do you want to know?" He asked with more strength after the short break to gather himself.

Straight to the point. "Is Taylor in any danger from what's left of her following?"

The man rubbed his chin for a couple seconds. "Honestly, probably not." He took a pull from his mug. “Annette told me once, that she thought maybe a third of Lustrom’s gang managed to go to ground and get away. Sadly, pretty good numbers from the Law’s point of view. Big gangs like that, you’re usually lucky to get half the foot level hands with the leadership, when they’re taken down.” He stared into the mug for a moment, lost in thought. He shook his head and continued. “Still, it was more than a decade ago. The only ones still in prison should be the leaders, the ones who they could prove were involved in the actual violence, and the ones that were especially belligerent at their trials. Most of the gang itself is back on the streets. People like that are watched, though. More than that, they know they're watched. Without someone like Lustrum ro rally around, they won't even be talking to each other."

Rose nodded, that matched up with what she knew of the situation. "Good enough. What about local threats?"

He gave her a shrewd look over his mug. "I feel like I'm being tested. You've already looked into all of this, haven't you?"

As undignified as it was, she rolled her eyes. "Of course I did. You are a local source, however. I want to hear the state of the city in your words."

He thought on that, and clicked his tongue. "Right, well... on the topic of Lustrum, a few of her people came back here after they got out, or after things calmed down. Some never left. Annette only talked to a couple of them, from what I knew. They'd keep eyes on each other though, just to make sure nothing the others did came back on them." He took another drink, eyes wandering in thought. "Shouldn't have any trouble from them."

He paused, then took a deep breath to start again. "The big gangs in town are the Empire and the ABB. The biggest cape group in the city, including the heroes, is the Empire 88. White supremacists, neo-Nazis, rednecks, anyone white enough with nowhere else to go..." He shook his head sadly. "Lot of people, lot of capes. Rumor is they've got connections to other groups around the country, and at least one overseas. Every time they start losing too badly, they always get new capes from somewhere. They might try to recruit Taylor, if they think she's white. Although, she's already had one fight with some of them, so they might skip trying." He stopped to tap the table as he thought. "They spend most of their time posturing, trying to look big and important. Most of their business is kept quieter; money laundering, gun running, racketeering... they have some fighting rings with people and dogs, and a little bit of drug peddling, but that's about as loud and obvious as they get when they're not fighting."

His hands clenched around his mug, and he sighed. "The ABB, on the other hand... they're the loud ones. Demanding protection money, running brothels... word is, full of girls they snatch off the streets. I've heard they have a couple casinos somewhere... They're the ones between everyone else. The empire on one side, the heroes on another, a couple little gangs... they hold all that with just a couple capes. Lung is... by far the strongest cape in the bay. No one fights Lung, if they can
help it." He shook his head and sighed again. "They get away with a lot, because of that."

Rose watched him lapse into silence, and took a drink of the coffee he'd gotten her. It was cheap and stale, but not the worst she'd ever had. "And what about these 'little gangs' you mentioned?"

He perked up, surprised for a moment. "Well, up north there's the Merchants. Drug peddlers backed by a few capes, they're pretty quiet. If you're not Asian enough for the 'Asian Bad Boys' or too homeless or not white enough for the E88, chances are you'll wind up with the Merchants at some point. Don't tend to hear from people like that again." He tapped the table again. "There's another gang down south, past the slums. I only know about them because some of the Dockworkers live there. Mostly thieves, but I've heard a few disappearances are on them instead of the Asians. I don't know how they keep the ABB out, but between them and the Protectorate helping guard the airport down there? Somehow they manage it." He said with a shrug. "Half the reason I want to get the ferry running again is to stop people having to go through the slums and risk getting mugged, or leave the city just to commute around it to stay safe. A lot of the services bringing tourists in from the airport go the long way around, even." his voice was raising by the end of it, and he'd raised his hands to start gesturing the points. He seemed to catch sight of them and pause, groaning as he rubbed his face for a moment. "I'm sure you don't want to hear me go on about the ferry..."

"Maybe later." Rose acceded. It could be useful to have a strong bargaining chip with the man. "You were saying?"

"Right..." He took a beat to gather himself. "That's the gangs that've stayed around. There's always some thieves or normal gangs popping up under the big gang's feet, but they never do much or last long. You mentioned Faultline's crew earlier, but I've never heard of them doing anything around the Bay. Always jobs abroad." Or things he hadn't heard about. "They shouldn't be a problem either."

The conversation shifted to business, after that. A summary of how the Dockworkers were doing, his opinions of various business around the city, including several Rose had investments in, and his take on the City Administration's dealings of late.

And yes, she did let him prattle on a bit about the ferry he wanted to get working again.

All told, it was maybe an hour before they heard the door click unlocked and open.

"In here." Hebert called, heaving a small sigh of relief that he hid behind a pull from his mug.

She heard the rustling behind her, and turned to find the willowy girl staring. She looked so much like Annette. Thinner and taller, but still as gawky as her daughter had been at that age. She had her father's eyes and chin, but the nose, lips, and cheeks were familiar.

"...Hi, Gram." Taylor sounded surprised, meek, not a little bit terrified.

Rose could feel her stern countenance soften slightly, as she took in the sight of her daughter's daughter. They hadn't met in person since before Annette died. She took a deep breath to tamp down the ache in her chest, as she nodded to the girl with a slight smile. "Hello, Taylor."
Chapter 1.17 (Teammate #3)

Chapter Summary

End of Arc 1
Miiight slow down the updates a bit, starting soonish. Not much left to catch up on.

TUE FEB 22

"...Hey, Gram."

I bit back a flinch at how squeaky that sounded. I wasn't some terrified little girl about to get scolded, even though Gram had always invoked those feelings in the past, on some level. Whenever she'd visit, there'd be this underlying tension, like she wanted to dole out lashings for every little thing, but was deferring to mom. Always mom, never dad.

I had no idea how long they'd been here, together, alone, but neither seemed like they'd been screaming, which... high bar for positive interactions, there. Dad looked fine, Gram looked... less stern, now.

"Hello, Taylor."

Right. Talking. Deep breath. Stop panicking. Why was I panicking? I thought, while I took my time making my way to the table. It took a bit before it clicked. Mom. Gram was mom's mom. I was scared this wouldn't go well, and I'd lose another link to mom.

I took another calming breath as I sat down. "So, how was your trip?" I felt stupid the second the words left my lips, but at least I'd said something.

"Adequate." The old woman nodded. "I'm not that far away. It was about the same time by car as it would have been waiting in the airports."

I knew Gram wasn't 'owns her own private jet' rich, but I'd always thought of first class being quite a bit faster than otherwise. It was possible I was wrong, since I'd been too young to remember it, the last time I'd been on a plane. Ironically enough, I think it was Gram who picked up the tab for that vacation to celebrate mom graduating and getting her teaching license.

"And how long are you going to be staying for?" I asked next.

She shared a brief glance with Dad, and seemed amused. "That eager to be rid of me?" She asked, turning back to me. I sputtered out denials and she smirked. "Don't worry, dear. I think at least two weeks, no more than four." Her smile smoothed into her natural glower. "Don't want the board getting ideas." She mumbled to herself. When she caught me looking confused, she added, "The people are quick to say that politicians and lawyers are the worst of the worst, but at least they are predictable. A businessman will buy the power of the others, and you never know what they're going to do with it."

I steadfastly ignored that she was a businesswoman. "Right..." I muttered and forced a chuckle. "And you're... in town for business too?" I was hedging, but Gram always seemed like the sort to
make every hour of her time count, and every trip add at least two or three irons to the fire.

She shared a glance with dad, who was sitting there quietly, sipping at his coffee. I wasn't sure what to make of the two apparently being in cahoots about something. It seemed so unlike them. "Yes. I've already done my preliminary rounds through businesses in the area I have investments in, now I'm going to focus on scouting new investment opportunities, and personal projects." I was about to ask what sort of 'personal projects' but she must have seen it coming. With a smirk, she cut me off. "I've discussed a rough plan of action with your father, and it includes a bit of targeted philanthropy. The plan does assume you're not interested in simply leaving Brockton Bay, but..." I could tell Dad's hands were tightening around his cup as she spoke. She seemed... smug and determined? She didn't show it, but that's how she felt. Dad was a tense, anxious, angry mess, but hiding it fairly well. "I have to ask. Would you be willing to move somewhere safer? Perhaps New York, or perhaps private schooling in an area with lower Parahuman activity?"

I gulped. This might be it. Her putting her foot down and making demands. "No." I said, trying to inject as much calm firmness into my voice as I could.

"Are you sure? There are any number of commuting and training options available, and-" I held my hand up to stop her. I could tell she was actually, honestly worried about me, but it was tempered to an edge by something uglier I couldn't place. I didn't like the calculating glint in her eye when she started trying to list benefits. A moment's thought and a large part of me balked at the idea of being bought away from my home.

"No." The word was firm and laced with anger as I repeated it. "This is my home."

I could feel the cogs turning in her mind, flashes of emotion behind her stony glower, betrayed by the intensity of her dissecting stare. She took a deeper breath, quiet and hidden but for my senses, and her eyes closed as she started to exhale, some of the tension leaving her without her posture shifting at all. I let my hand drop then, and she nodded. "I can understand the sentiment..." Dad visibly slumped a little as he came to realize there wouldn't be a fight over this. Gram's eyes opened and snapped to mine, a touch of silent pleading leaking into her gaze. "I know there's at least one private institution in the area, a more regimented learning environment could do a world of good for-" she trailed off about a second after I'd raised my index finger between us.

"I don't want to go to Catholic School." I was feeling more confident. She'd already shown she wasn't going to insist on everything, which left me feeling like I had the power here. I still tried to keep it out of my voice though, speaking calmly but firmly. I didn't want this to sound like an argument. I knew in her shoes, I'd try to win any arguments that came up. "I already talked to dad about it, and we decided on Arcadia. I'm not even religious, and I'm making friends again." I couldn't help the emotion there. It still felt... I'm not sure 'wonderful' or 'amazing' or 'surprising' fit, but... it felt good to feel wanted, at least a little, despite my every instinct still trying to disbelieve it. "I want to stay where they are."

Her eyes took on that calculating mien again. I could feel the swell of emotions within her, frustration, indignation, disappointment, but it died down and left the woman sadly thinking. "A young woman's social ties are one of her most significant assets..." She closed her eyes and nodded. 

"We have days to catch up, you'll have to tell me about these friends of yours, at some point." The demand was soft and conversational, but I knew small talk was a weapon for social types, and Gram was rarely a woman of idle words. I nodded, and she very slightly responded with her own. Her eyes unfocused for a moment. "Where was I?" She clicked her tongue and took a deeper breath, giving another, deeper nod. "Targeted philanthropy. I'm going to be making donations to local services; the hospitals, police, fire department. I will not be making a donation to the Protectorate or PRT, to make a point."
She was angry, and I didn't understand it. "Why?"

Gram gave dad an incredulous look that mirrored her frustration well, but hiding the slight shock and surprise I could feel. Dad felt a bit contrite, but shrugged and held his ground in their silent argument. She sighed quietly and turned back to me. "Shortly after you were hospitalized, the PRT took control of the investigations into your case. I was not able to find out why, but they appear to have not made any significant effort to investigate the case, and no effort to find non-parahuman culprits."

"What?" I muttered, feeling shocked and numb, but I could feel a bubbling swell of rage and betrayal trying to claw its way out of the pit my emotions had fallen into. I turned pleading eyes on dad, who glanced away.

"The police... said they were taking the case back up. You've been a lot happier lately. I didn't want to bother you with it."

I took a deep breath. I was getting angry. I took another. I wanted to scream. I took another. They were starting to feel worried. I held the next one, clenching my hands until they hurt, and my eyes to stave off the rage-tears trying to escape. I let it out slowly, turning red eyes on dad. "You should have told me." It took effort to keep my voice calm, but less than I was expecting.

Dad looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he just grabbed his coffee again and nodded.

"As I said, I have no intention of supporting them for the moment." Gram said, cutting through the mood. "I'm going to make a point of supporting the other heroic groups in the city, including yours once you've gained some publicity. For now this merely entails a donation to New Wave, and attempts to open dialogue any more neutral groups."

"Amy's family?" I asked, slightly confused as my mind latched onto that detail. Gram quirked an eyebrow at me, the gesture imperiously demanding elaboration. "Amy's been my best friend since I started at Arcadia. Vicky's my friend too, but..." I trailed off, shaking my head. The details didn't matter. "They're the Dallon sisters. Part of New Wave."

Gram hummed, her eyes focusing into the distance as they regained that calculating intensity. "Interesting." She softly stated a moment later. A few seconds after, she met my eyes again. "Amy is... Panacea, yes? The healer who can see biology?" I nodded, confused again. "Very interesting. I'll need to keep that in mind." I could tell she was tapping her fingers along the cane in her lap, an outward expression of her intrigue and thought. "Regardless, I'm also going to be looking for new investments, and overseeing the existing ones while I'm here. I'd like it if you'd accompany me for some of these events, Taylor."

I cocked my head quizzically. "What? Why?"

Her tiny smile grew into a wry smirk, and I could feel she felt slightly conflicted. "I will not be here forever, Taylor. One day you will inherit part or all of my estate. While you could always leave its management to your executor, it would be in your best interest to learn as much as you can for when the time comes."

"Executor?" I knew that basically amounted to 'the person you trust to do things you can't', since mom had an executor for her will after she died, I wasn't positive I understood it completely in this context.

Gram looked like she'd sucked a lemon, flares of indignation and dissapointment drowning out
everything else. "You can think of them like an accountant, or an assistant. They are paid to manage an estate, including properties, finances, taxes, and in some cases investments. They are almost always lawyers or family members, and have only the authority you give them."

Okay, about what I thought, then. I nodded. "Can I think about it? It's just going to some meetings, right?"

She stared for a moment, before nodding. "Meetings with the bank to facilitate payments, transfers, buyouts... meetings with small companies to negotiate... the most high profile meeting I have planned is with Medhall. I've received permission to sit in on next month's board meeting."

I choked a bit. "Medhall?" Wasn't that run by Nazis?

She nodded, seeming confused by my shock. "Yes, dear. We own three percent of Medhall Pharmaceuticals." I goggled at that, staring at her with my mouth just slightly agape. "It may not sound like much, but it's rather significant for a non-founder in this sort of market."

"That's crazy." I muttered. Gram couldn't possibly know the CEO was apparently Kaiser. How many of his company's top people were sympathizers? Or capes? If I went to the meeting, would I wind up meeting Kaiser? How many of his capes would be there? Would they recognize me?

I slid my head into my hands, leaning on the table. Gram and dad both asked if something was wrong, or if I was okay. I waved them off. "I'm fine, just... a little overwhelmed." At this point I just wanted to lay down, try to sleep, and just decompress after all that'd happened today. How to ask Gram to leave politely, though? I shook my head and pushed myself to my feet. "I'm going to start on dinner. Do you want to stay, or...?"

She seemed to politely consider it, but I already knew her answer. "I think I'll decline, tonight." She lifted the metal cane from her lap and set it on the floor to help push herself to her feet. Something still felt off about it, but I couldn't tell what. "I will be by again tomorrow afternoon, after you'll be free from school." She said to me, before turning to dad. I could tell she still didn't like him, but she didn't seem to hate him. She gave him a small nod. "Hebert."

I led the way to the door, letting her outside. I saw her driver hop to action, nearly scrambling out of the car to open the rear door for Gram. When she was seated, and the young woman powerwalking back to the driver's seat, I gave gram a small wave, and got an obvious inclination of her head in return.

After that, I made my way back into the kitchen, intentionally ignoring dad.

It took him nearly half a minute to try and say something. "Taylor..." He choked after that, the words failing him.

"I'm still mad at you." I said as I kept checking what we had available and grabbing pans, never turning to properly acknowledge him.

"I'm sorry." He said, a few moments later.

I paused very briefly, before I kept cooking. "I know."

He reached a hand out toward me, his mouth parting open slightly. He felt confused, sad, a little shame. The hand dropped. His mouth closed, and he grit his teeth. He really wasn't very good at being sad, but didn't want to be angry with me. He softly slid the chair away from the table and made his way upstairs to find some busy work, to feel useful.
I didn't think he remembered I could see every bit of that, even turned away from him.

Dinner didn't take long to make, and I took mine up to my room to eat at my desk. It was probably cold by the time dad went down to get his. I spent a couple hours studying ahead, but gave up after that to try and sleep off my bad mood.

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**WED FEB 23**

I got up early, getting ready for school and avoiding dad. I'd cooled off a lot overnight, but I still felt like being a petty teenager. I still left dad some food when I made breakfast, though. I wasn’t *heartless*.

Amy sent me a text while I was on my run, asking to meet up at school. She said she wanted to talk, and wouldn’t try to kiss me this time. I ignored the flutter in my chest when I thought this didn’t prevent *me* from kissing *her*, tamping the feelings down. Amy didn’t like me that way, and could do *way* better than my emotional mess of a self, anyway.

I still wasn’t *thrilled* by the thought of rushing to meet her, though. In my grasping for something to do before I headed in for my shower, I remembered the deal I’d made with Sue and her gang. Might as well get a head start on that.

“Hello, Taylor.” Sue said after she picked up. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, Sue.” I said, stretching as I cooled down from my run with a walk around the school. That it’d keep the conversation more private was nice, too. “I was just thinking, I said I’d…” How to phrase this? Should I even bother trying to obfuscate being a cape over a cell phone? “…do a bit of work, and I was wondering about that. Maybe around the tenement, or some other building, sometime?”

Sue hummed. “Arthur was talking about sniffing up the blueprints for the building and poking around a bit… could step that up. Maybe next week?”

I hadn't made any plans for next week yet, so... "Yeah, that sounds good. Let me know when he's done, and we'll set a time." I was actually a little sad at how short the conversation was. I hadn't even made it behind the school yet, which meant I'd probably just head into the gym and take the tunnel to the locker rooms from there, instead of looping around to the main entrance of the school and taking the long way like I'd planned.

"While I have you," She said just before I could start the 'goodbye' dance. "We've found a place for that meeting you wanted to have." It took me a second to figure out she meant the independent capes I'd asked her to look for. When I gave an affirmative noise, she continued. "Does Sunday evening work for you?"

"Yeah, sure." I said immediately. "So, does that mean...?"

"We haven't found anyone yet, no." I hummed disappointedly. "A few have online accounts that are easy enough to contact, but Jake's the one trying to wrangle those, and I haven't talked to him today." I guess that made sense. Sue was pretty savvy for someone who looked at least sixty, but didn't seem like the internet type. It hadn't occurred to me to just... *find them on PHO or email* them. "We can talk about that more when we start on that work we talked about."

"Sounds good." We said our goodbyes, and I hung up, pulling the water from the morning's mist and light rain off my phone before I stashed it in my pocket.
I wound up heading through the gym after all, taking the quick trip to the locker rooms for my morning shower, then I headed up to the upstairs classroom where we'd been having our clandestine meetings.

She was there, deep in thought. The bags under her eyes weren't gone, but they were looking better. She probably slept for the first time in days last night. She perked up when I came in and shut the door. "Hey, Taylor." She muttered.

"Hey. You... wanted to talk again?" I asked, girding myself for whatever it might be this time.

"I just..." She stopped, hiding her anxiety behind a clearing throat. "I was just wondering if..."

Oh no, was this a confession? Did she actually like me or something? There was no way she didn't have a whole host of prettier, less damaged options if she wanted them. I was gearing up to tell her I wasn't good enough, when her words caught me short.

"I want to join your team."

Wait, what? "But... what about New Wave?"

She scoffed, her emotions turning dark. "What about New Wave?" She spat, and I started sputtering, trying to articulate anything through my startled confusion. She grew a bit pensive when she saw my reaction. "The only reason I've stayed with them as long as I have is because Vicky's there, and I had nowhere else to go. Your team's a good 'somewhere else' and Vicky..." Her heart picked up as she glanced to the side, feeling conflicted and agitated. "I'm not sure how I feel about Vicky right now."

"Amy," I said, reaching out, before I paused and let my hand drop. "It's a big decision. Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I don't think I would've stayed anyway, after I turned 18. Vicky's..." She shook her head. "Dean has been talking about moving, for college and... other reasons." She felt conflicted, but I couldn't begrudge her other people's secrets. "It's what a lot of their fights have been about, recently. I think... he's starting to win her over on moving in with him, when he leaves." She felt... outright distraught over that, barely holding herself together well enough to mostly hide it.

"You could always go with her." I tried, which drew a sad bark of laughter from her.

"No way Carol's going to let their precious PR pinata get away, she doesn't even trust me when I'm living under her thumb, out on my own? Never." She shook her head again. "And I'd just wind up moving in with Vicky, and..." She felt disgusted at the thought. She really didn't like thinking about Vicky and Dean...

I swiftly crossed the room when she started to sniffle. "Hey," I said, catching her in a half-hug. "It's okay. You can join my team. The more the merrier." It was a good start, me, her, and- "You can even meet..." My mouth got away from me before I realized it. Amy glanced at me suspiciously. I chuckled. "Well, I've already got a teammate lined up, remember?" I couldn't actually remember if I'd told Amy anything about Dinah, but she nodded after a second. I checked my phone. It was still before 8 so Dinah shouldn't be in class yet... "I'm meeting her on Saturday." I held it up. "Do you want me to call and see if she's okay with me bringing you, too?"

Amy looked confused for a second, then shrugged and nodded. I dialed the number and waited. Dinah picked up, yawning into the phone and muttering a confused, "Taylor?"

"Hi-" I choked on her name. Right, cape stuff. "Uhh... remember when you said we'd have three
"Capes on the team this week?" Amy stiffened next to me, her eyes going slightly wide.

"Yeah?" Dinah mumbled, still confused.

"Do you think it'd be okay if I brought her by Saturday, so we could all meet?"

"73%" She replied instantly. "That's... actually better than I thought?" She gasped a bit, then stuttered out an apology. "I... erm, mom can be... sorry."

"It's okay, she probably wouldn't like me bringing friends over when I'm supposed to be tutoring you, huh?" Amy looked somewhat thoughtful, as I said that.

"Who... is it?" Dinah asked, her shyness creeping back into her tone.

I glanced over to Amy with my actual eyes this time. "Do you mind if I tell her who you are?" Amy looked confused, probably at being given the choice at all, before she shrugged. "It's Amy Dallon. Panacea." I replied into the phone.

Dinah gasped and fell quiet for a few seconds, before the microphone picked up muttered numbers I couldn't quite make out. "D-... you okay?"

"Y-yeah. Don't worry about me. Er... names. You can tell her, it's fine." She managed.

"Okay, Dinah." If she was okay with it... "Are you okay, though? Do you have a problem with both of us coming by this weekend?"

"82% chance my odds are generally better if I'm known to interact with Panacea." She replied more confidently. "I-it's... okay, if it's her."

I winced a little. "Do... you want me to call your mom and ask about it?"

She paused, then snapped out a quick "No!" Before she sputtered another apology. "I... it's better if I do it."

"Okay." I said, drawing the word out unsurely. "Do you need anything, or should I let you go?"

"I'm fine!" She chirped. "Do... do you?" She was probably wondering if I had any questions for her, but I couldn't think of any that couldn't wait for Saturday.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks though. See you Saturday?" She mirrored the sentiment, and we hung up. I turned to Amy. "Soo..." I drawled, giving her an awkward smile.

Her eyebrow quirked up, unamused.

I slumped. "That was Dinah, she's... kind of the whole reason I'm forming a team." I leaned in a bit closer, so I could talk more quietly. "She's a thinker. Thinks she'll be kidnapped if she doesn't have help." I leaned in closer, so I could whisper in her ear. "Precog."

She stared blankly at me as I drew back. She was shocked, surprised... a little excited? "You have a pocket precog." She deadpanned.

"Maybe?" I winced, not really understanding the reference I felt she was making.

"I'm... not sure how to feel about that." She said, agitation rising within her. "On the one hand, that's... kind of amazing, and a little terrifying. On the other..." She started to feel... disturbed? "Are... is anything we did...?"
My eyes widened and I waved my hands negatively. "No! Nono, we're friends, you're my best friend, please..." I was tearing up, scared of losing her. She slumped and nodded, and I let myself heave a relieved breath. "Dinah only said there was a good chance we'd get another teammate this week... I had no idea it'd be you. I..." I bit my lip. "...honestly thought you'd never leave New Wave, so..."

She scoffed and shook her head, and I took the time to dry my eyes with a smile. Bit of an emotional rollercoaster this morning... We sat there comfortably for a couple minutes, before I felt the need to ask. "So, what are you going to do about leaving New Wave?"

She sighed, shaking her head. "I don't know. I'm graduating soon, even if I'm not 18 yet there's not a judge in the state that wouldn't approve my emancipation if I pressed it, being Panacea." She grimaced. "...except maybe a cape bigot."

I hummed. "So you're just going to... hide it until graduation?" That sounded like it could blow up in our faces.

Amy shrugged. "Not much else I can do. I could just quit outright, but..." Her family would throw a fit, and she'd still be living with them. I didn't blame her for not liking that option.

"We'll figure something out." I said, gathering her up into another half-hug. She flushed, her heart picking up agitatedly, and I let her go. I kept forgetting she didn't like being touched, even if her powers would let her, now. I checked the time, we were a few minutes from the bells. "I'll see you at lunch?"

She nodded, and we parted ways.

---

Lunch was fairly normal. Vicky was happy to see me again, and Kara seemed relieved I wasn't avoiding her anymore. I brought up that my grandmother was in town checking on me after the Winslow thing, and invited Amy over to hang out and maybe meet her. That got a few questions from Vicky's curious friends, which I mostly deflected. Aside from that, I just wallflowered with Amy while I ate. Tracy was still doing her thing, which made me think I should drop by again soon, and Cassie was still coming to school again, though I didn't bother seeking her out to check on her once I'd recognized her with my senses.

Eating with Vicky reminded me that I wanted to tell her I was a cape... but after the bombshell Amy dropped on me this morning? I felt a little conflicted about telling her one secret, while hiding the other, like I was just distracting her while I stole her sister away. That thought left me feeling fairly crummy for the rest of school.

I waited for Amy in front of the school, and we made our way to the buses from there. Vicky was apparently busy, and given my feelings at lunch, I didn't bother to ask what she was busy with. Amy made a crass remark about her sister only letting her go because she trusted me to keep Amy away from the hospitals. Which was... nice, I supposed.

We got to my house, and spent the time practicing martial arts in the backyard until Dad got home. When he saw Amy was here too, he offered to order some pizzas. I reminded him that Gram was coming by soonish, and though he never said it, I gathered from his reactions that a large part of why he decided on pizza was to thumb his nose at her high society sensibilities a bit. I wasn't going to say no to pizza, though, and let it slide.

Gram showed up when we were finishing up our first go at the pizzas, and I hopped up to let her in.
I had to admit, it was a little fun watching her struggle to keep the sneer at our dinner off her face for the sake of a good first impression. "Gram, this is Amy Dallon. Amy, this is my grandmother, Rosalind Lafayette."

"Rose is fine, dear." Gram said, proffering her hand.

I could see Amy hesitate, she still wasn't used to skin contact, but she did shake Gram's hand. She felt pretty awkward after that, though. "Amy's decided to join my team, when she graduates." I said, to break the ice.

Amy looked sharply to me, surprised, with a brief flash of betrayal. "Your grandmother knows you're a cape?" She asked, incredulously.

"It is difficult to render assistance with matters of which one is ignorant." Gram replied rather sternly. "That said, I have a vested interest in my granddaughter's health, safety, and continued well-being. Supporting you then, becomes supporting her. I look forward to working with you."

The old woman tilted her head in a brief nod, or an absolutely minuscule bow.

For a moment I panicked, thinking the pair were going to butt heads and hate each other, before Amy nodded.

"Fair enough. I'm guessing you're where the team's funding is going to be coming from?" Amy didn't like Gram, I could tell, but she was straightforward and rational enough that Amy could respect her. ...at least as much as an irreverent and usually belligerent teenager could, anyway.

Gram grinned rather viciously. "Oh, don't mistake me for a petty sack of ducats, miss Dallon. Tell me, have you ever considered work in pharmaceuticals?"

The shift in topic threw Amy for a moment. "That's making drugs, right?" Gram nodded, and Amy shook her head. "I can't do that. I just fix what's wrong with people." I goggled at her. The part about not making drugs was true, but... why would the second part be a lie?

By the time I thought to say something, Gram was talking again. I'd have to bring it up with Amy some other time, in private.

"You are the healer that can see a person's biology, yes?" Amy nodded. "This includes their cells? Chemicals in their blood? Complex organs like the brain?" Amy kept nodding, hesitating before that last one, glancing at me. I nodded to her, and she nodded at Gram. "Then it stands to reason you can also see how those chemicals interact with those cells and organs?"

"Yeah? What are you getting at?" Amy huffed.

Gram clicked her tongue. "Pharmaceutical companies, like your local Medhall, spend hundreds of thousands of dollars a month per drug they are researching, for years- even more than a decade- to try and prove they are relatively safe, do exactly what they think they do, and minimize chances that the drugs do something they are not aware of." Gram leaned forward, pinning a slightly wide-eyed but still confused Amy with a pointed stare. "You, miss Dallon, can simply walk into a series of drug studies, perhaps once a week for a month, and save whichever company is holding them literally millions of dollars by simply telling them what the chemicals are doing."

Amy had reared back a bit in the face of Gram's intensity, and I could feel her mind roaring with a dozen trains of thought. Her eyes twitched a little as she thought, staring more through Gram into the distance than at her, for the moment.

Gram chuckled, reaching into one of her pockets and pulling out a small metal case. Depressing
two little triggers simultaneously caused the thing to click open on a spring, and Gram took one of the small stack of business cards from it, before closing it again. She held it out, the motion close enough to Amy's line of sight to startle her back to awareness. "Call me once you've reached your majority, and I can ensure you make at least seven figures a year helping to improve the health and quality of life for people around the globe."

Amy took the card, holding it like a venomous snake. She felt conflicted, full of giddy excitement, worry, fear, and shame. Eventually she slipped the thing into a pocket. "Thank you." She muttered, still confused and processing how she felt about the offer.

I could tell Gram was rather offended by the reaction, but didn't show it too obviously. Amy certainly didn't notice, still lost in her own little world. "Hey," I said, to draw attention away, Dad and Gram focusing on me while Amy looked my way, but mostly kept having her personal crisis. "So, tell me about those businesses you mentioned around town?"

Gram's eyes flicked briefly to Amy, but she nodded and started into an explanation of what all she'd been doing. It sounded like a lot more negotiating for potential investments than actually having bought in yet, though there were a few around that she already had stakes in. About twenty minutes in, Amy's phone started to ring, and she excused herself to the living room with a huff about it being 'from Carol.'

I honestly paid more attention to Amy talking than Gram, at that point. "Yes? ...I'm at a friend's house. ...Yeah? ... Why does that matter? ... Why? ... ...fine." She huffed and hung up, making her way back into the kitchen. Gram finished what she was saying, and subtly yielded the floor to her. "I have to go home." Amy spat in frustration, then took a breath and calmed down a little. "Sorry, I'll talk to you later."

"Do you need a ride?" Dad asked, moving to get up, when Gram stopped him.

"If miss Dallon requires a ride home, I have a perfectly fine driver on call." She took out her phone and called the woman, whose name was amusingly also Carol, and told her that 'her granddaughter's friend' needed a ride home. She ended the call with a nod. "You'll find her in the driveway. Have a safe trip home."

Amy looked fairly confused, and looked to me. I shrugged, and she shook her head, slightly exasperated. I hopped up to see her out, and watched the car pull away with her in it before heading back to the kitchen. Gram went back to her previous topic for another twenty minutes or so, before I found a good place to cut in without interrupting her.

"I don't mean to be rude, but I'd... sort of like to do something more immediately productive with my time, since Amy's not here anymore."

Dad cut in before Gram could. "What did you have in mind?" I think he was seeing a way to get rid of Gram's reason for being here, namely myself, and thus neatly shoo the old woman away. I didn't understand why he felt he had to stay down here with us if he wanted to get back to his home desk for more of his own work.

"I was thinking training, but if I'm not going back to the Trainyard, I'm not entirely sure what my options are, today." 

Dad rubbed his chin, while Gram sat back slightly, letting us discuss it. "Well," Dad started, slightly unsure. "If you just want something to do with your powers, you could always clean up part of the beach. It's been a while since that's been done."
I hummed, thinking back to when I'd been there recently, and having to dodge needles and glass sometimes, in addition to the regular trash. "Yeah, that probably needs doing." I turned to Gram, who'd been watching us imperiously. "Do you mind if I go do that?"

She pursed her lips, frustrated with my antics. She didn't seem angry, though. "No, this is fine." She took a breath and simmered down a bit. "Do consider attending some of these meetings, I know most of them will happen while you are at school, but this will not be all of them."

I smiled and gave a shy chuckle. If I kept ducking out on her like this, I probably should do something to make it up to her, huh? "Sure thing, Gram."

I made my way up to my room, grabbed my cape kit and swapped it into my bag in place of my books, and came back downstairs to say goodbyes for today.

---

It didn't take long to make my way to the beach, a couple quick walks and a bus ride, after telling Gram I didn't need a ride. I didn't want her driver to connect any dots about driving me down, and then Terraform doing something on the beach, especially since I got the feeling Gram was going to try find a place on the Boardwalk to catch sight of my powers in action.

I stashed my stuff on another abandoned-looking building, after checking the roof door and finding the lock still worked. I headed down to the thin strip of sand between the buildings and the water, mostly dry from this morning's light rain by now. My senses weren't phenomenal in sand, but it was still fairly packed, so they weren't abysmal. I used them to pull harder, heavier trash out of the depths, sweeping up the surface to gather up the loose crap that hadn't blown or washed away already, and made a pile by the street nearby. I was a little surprised by how much of the sand, mostly dry or not, got kicked into the air by what I was doing. This might be a little flashier than I'd intended. With that in mind, I grabbed my cape phone and dialed the PRT.

"PRT Non-Emergency, how may I help you?" The woman who answered asked.

"Hi, this is Terraform. I was going to clean up the beach a bit, but... I think it's going to kick up more sand than I thought. I wanted to let you know, in case you started getting calls about it."

"Oh! Uh, give me a second." I heard typing and the occasional click in the background, the woman getting back to me a couple minutes later. "Okay, that should do it. Was there anything else?"

"No, thank you. I just didn't want to waste anyone's time being sent out to check on me." Goodbyes said, I stopped to think of my options.

I was closer to the north end and the Boat Graveyard than I was to the south, so I might as well head up that way and then loop back. So I headed that way in a zig-zag pattern, to make sure I caught everything with my senses as I went. Moving and unpacking the sand shortened my sensing range quite a bit, especially in the places where the beach widened out. Still, it wasn't long before I was speeding up, not caring how much dust I kicked up since I could just pull it along with me, and force it to the ground when I was done. When I felt confident I could keep up with it, I kicked up an unnatural dune, surfing along its crest while I gathered trash and pulled it along behind me.

It wasn't long before I started running into the beached wrecks that made up the Boat Graveyard, and figured that was a good enough place to stop. I didn't know how far Brockton extended past the Graveyard to the north, and didn't feel like cleaning up other cities' coast today. I piled the trash up by one of the wrecks, and pulled the sand out of the air, before pondering what to do with the garbage. It wasn't a small pile after all, and I didn't feel like dragging it across the beach to
where I’d started again, nor leaving it out for Mush to use, since this was Merchant territory again...

In the end, I called the PRT again, and asked them if they could call the relevant services. The guy on the line was confused by the request at first, but seemed happy to do so once I told him how big it was, and where they could find it.

That done, I had a mile or two of beach to cover to get back to where I’d started. So I compacted the sand under my feet into a sandstone, locked my feet down onto it with more compacted sand, and did the 'moving dune' trick again. The distance was eaten up quickly, to the point where I started decelerating before I’d even hit anything I might consider my top speed. With a much longer stretch of beach ahead of me, it took a lot longer this time before I stopped. Not least of which because the trashberg I was pulling along behind me was starting to get unmanageable by the time I passed the slums. I decided to leave it where it was, after I started to get into the nicer Portsmouth area just south and east of the slum, figuring they'd be less likely to just leave it there like they might if I'd left it in the worse part of town's section of the beach. Then I sped ahead a bit, rounding the horn to the south of the bay, and pulling the comparatively negligible amount of trash from the nicer area to the pile I'd already dumped.

All told, it'd taken me less than three hours to do. I hadn't even noticed how dark it'd gotten, as focused as I was on my earth senses. Another call to the PRT, and I found myself standing around, wondering what to do now. I needed to get back to my bag up northward, so I could use air to sprint, do more earthbending to cut the distance, or... I eyed the bay itself. Why couldn't I just use the same trick on the water?

I sidled up to the waves, pulling a chunk of the water out and freezing it into a meter long several-inch-thick slab of ice on the sand. I got up on it unsteadily, then pulled the waves further in to float it. I nearly toppled over when the thing started to move, it was a lot less stable than my sandstone slab, and I had to freeze my feet to the ice to help my balance. It was unnerving to go without my earth senses at first, but I could see relatively well by the light of the shoreline and the Protectorate rig. A couple minutes of getting my bearings floating out past where the waves started curling and crashing, and I felt fairly confident in my balance.

So I pulled up a swell of water under myself, and pushed it to crash northward. it was a little tricky at first keeping myself at the right part of the wave for optimal travel, but it started getting fun after that. I sped about on the waves for a while, deciding to cut playtime short when I started getting too close to the Rig. I skirted around it and made my way to shore about where I thought I'd started on the beach, pulling the water and sand out of my hoodie, pants, and fake shoes. I could get the rest when I got home.

I was in a pretty good mood when I got home and sat down to study with some leftover pizza.

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I snapped to awareness, startled by the suddenness of it. I took a moment to stare up at what I realized after a moment was a cloudless blue sky. I could feel around myself a little, like earth, but much worse. I shifted, and realized I was laying in sand. I wasn't sure what was going on, since I could normally sense much better through sand than this. All I could tell was that the couple feet under and all around me were also sand.

I sat up, and looked around. I was on a beach, with trees and shrubs to one side, and open water on the other. The last thing I remembered was falling asleep, so either I was dreaming, or I'd been kidnapped. Oddly, the thought of having been kidnapped didn't fill me with the anxious dread I was expecting. I was mildly alarmed, but my emotions felt dull. Muted. From my scant memories of lucid dreaming in the past, that wasn't too uncommon. Glancing around I spotted more
incongruities in the world. The water had no waves despite being large enough I couldn't see another shore, which led me to notice there was no wind. I hadn't heard a single animal since waking up, and there was no movement in the plants. The sand was a perfect angled sheet without dunes or footsteps, the indentation where I'd been laying the only perturbation. There was no sun or moon in the sky, despite being bright daytime, and closer inspection of the foliage gave way to a repeating pattern to the trees and bushes.

Well, if this was a dream, I might as well enjoy it. I got to my feet and hopped into the air, surprised when I landed normally instead of floating into the air. "What the hell?" I muttered, bringing my hands to my lips and ear as I noticed the odd tinny quality of my voice. I made some random vocalizations to familiarize myself with the difference to it, chaining through a long continuous noise flowing between vowel sounds. "Okay. That's weird, but okay."

I could still sense, if poorly, so I checked my other powers. I spewed out some fire, then turned a stream onto the sand beside me, fusing it into glass. A gust of wind scattered more of the stuff, and a gesture froze a large swath of the water. Bending still worked, so what the hell was going on? I took a moment to rub at my eyes in frustration, and when I looked again everything I'd done was gone. No ice, no glass, no windswept divot in the sand. "Okay, that's actually really creepy." I said, looking around, slowly spinning to try and keep abreast of my surroundings. "Would be reeeeaally nice to get some hint about what's going on."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted something, speeding my spin to bring it into view. Four pillars stood in the previously empty sand. "Okay. Not getting it, if that's a hint." They weren't made of the same material, the left two looked like different kinds of stone, while the right were metals. As I got a little closer I could see the far right one looked to be steel, and the one next to it looked like poorly cast iron, full of pocks and bubbles. Spots of the other two were shiny like they also had metals in them, the second moreso than the first in the row. The far left looked almost like random rock, which would make the next one... unprocessed ore or something? I palmed my face, rubbing it a bit before I slumped a little, glaring up at the sky. "I don't understand!"

When I lowered my gaze, I jumped backward in alarm. Three of the pillars had vanished, leaving only the rocklike leftmost one. "Okay." I forced myself to calm down. "If I'm dreaming, this is probably more dream training..." So what did it want?

It wanted me to do something with the pillar, but it couldn't be as obvious as earthbending it... I slowly stepped up and laid my hand on the stone. Yep. Just rock. Not as cold as I was expecting, but with everything muted as it was, my sense of temperature being off didn't seem so strange. I closed my eyes and felt the stone. It was a square pillar a couple feet wide, three meters tall and just as deep in the ground. All I felt around it was more sand, and the structure of the rock itself was fairly normal, an igneous composite with crystalline structures in it that were a little harder to sense, probably metal veins.

When I opened my eyes, I wasn't surprised to see the other pillars had reappeared. Standing in their row, about two meters apart. "I guess I go down the line, then." I grumbled, trudging over to the second one. Like I'd thought, it was made almost entirely of the crystalline metallic structures.

The wrought iron pillar was the surprising one, after a few seconds of inspecting it with my senses, I thought I could feel bits of crystal in it. I tapped it with my other hand to propagate more vibrations through it, and sure enough tiny flecks of earth appeared in my senses throughout it. I grunted in surprise, and made my way to the last one. Even tapping, slapping, and hitting the thing-thanks to dream logic, even punching it wasn't painful- I couldn't sense anything in it.

"Okay, now what." I said, and waited. I deliberately closed my eyes for a second and reopened
them, but nothing had changed. I stomped away until the pillars were outside my limited sensing
range, and repeated myself. "I said, now what?" Eyes closed, eyes open. No change.

"I don't understand. You're my powers, right?" No answer. "I don't get it. I'm sorry, but I don't.
You're going to have to explain it to me." I waited, my hackles raising as I kept closing my eyes
and watching nothing happen. "I don't get it!" I yelled, pulling the stony pillars from the ground
and smashing them against the metallic ones. A blink later they were back to their undamaged
states, smugly waiting for me to get whatever I was supposed to understand. I growled and fisted
my hands in my hair.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME!?" I roared at the sky.
And the sky roared back.

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THU FEB 24

I snapped awake, nearly leaping from my bed as I heaved in great gulps of air. I could still hear the
roar, and my rapidly waking brain finally recognized them as air sirens.

Endbringer sirens.
Interlude 2 (Vista/New Wave/Tin Man)

Chapter Summary

Vista's a taaad more OOC than originally intended, but I had fun writing her this way. 
XD

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

SAT FEB 19

Vista flopped herself down onto the couch after stretching space so she could do so from the door. She let out a frustrated groan and pawed her visor away from her face. Kid Win had already run off to tinker, which was fine with her. She didn't want to deal with other people right now. She'd been in a bad mood since she'd seen that message on PHO, with nothing to do but wait out the patrol and stew on it.

How dare that fucking cunt call her a prepubescent whore!? Called her small. Called her weak. So many insults in one little sentence.

And PR would crucify her if she responded in kind! She was allowed to be playful, make jokes, but never outright insult anyone. That'd just get her punished, and they knew the best punishments for her were just... sending her home.

She shuddered. The less time she had to spend around either of her parents, the better.

Sophia'd won this round, and the bitch knew it.

Missy threw her visor against the wall. It let out a satisfying crac-crunch as it rebounded off, then clattered to the floor. She didn't need to look to guess the tinker-polymer visor itself was probably fine. She might've cracked the plastic circlet rig it slotted into, but those were designed to be replaceable while she was still growing, anyway.

She sighed and rubbed her face, groaning into her hands. She had no intention of going home this weekend, especially with her mood this bad. She'd wind up snapping, which would lead to another argument, which the other parent would inevitably find out about and goad them about... she didn't even care to remember if it was her mother or father she was supposed to be staying with, right now.

She glanced over at their entertainment center, her half-lidded stare completely unimpressed. She didn't care about TV, didn't like video games the same way the boys did, wasn't interested in any of the movies they kept stocked here, and the training videos could go fuck themselves.

With a sigh, she dug out her phone. Might as well check PHO again, before figuring out what to do. She could always go out on an unsanctioned patrol, the gang borders were a mess right now, little fights everywhere, while the kiddies like her got stuck patrolling the safer areas. She should be out there in the fights, making the streets safe. Not cowering like a whiny little girl.

She took a deep breath and let it go. She was still pissed at Sophia. That's all this was. She didn't
have to prove to herself that she wasn't a little girl, everyone who mattered already knew she wasn't. Missy steadfastly ignored how short that list actually was, as she navigated to the site and groaned.

The first notification when she refreshed PHO was from her keyword searches, telling her she'd been mentioned in Terraform's thread again. Knowing that, she deliberately skipped over it when she got to it. She skimmed the couple new pages on the Vista thread, checked the Gallant and Glory Girl threads for mentions of Dean and what he might be up to- it wasn't stalking if she didn't keyword search him, she repeated to herself- and ran down the list of ENE cape threads to distract herself from today, and the thread she was ignoring.

Eventually though, she ran out of things to dally on. With a put-upon sigh, she navigated her way back to Terraform's thread.

► **SpecificProtagonist** (Cape Groupie) (Threadbanned)
Replied on February 19, 2011:

Crashb0t Hey, everyone has their ways to handle stress. Some people smoke, or drink, or play video games, whatever.

I write TerraXVista lewds I'm never going to be allowed to post anywhere. That's how I'm dealing with the difficult time I've had for the past couple weeks.

What I'm trying to say is, gimme the deets!

What even the fuck? She was thirteen. There was no room for ambiguity in that, she knew her official page was even erred slightly younger than her real age on purpose. Way too young for that. She imagined the pervert in her head; a fat neckbearded nerd living in his mom’s basement, spending all his time looking up porn and typing up sick kink shit like putting little girls in his ‘adult fiction’.

Missy threw her phone to the far end of the couch, where it bounced off the arm and came to rest between the back and her foot. She shrank space to pick up the remote without having to move, clicking the TV on. Then she warped space so she could kick open the fridge, before letting that snap back into place, reaching her arm out to grab a can of soda, then pinching the fingers of her other hand, shrinking the empty space of the open door to nothing and letting the magnetic strips snap it closed. She cracked the can one-handed, a trick her dad taught her because he thought it'd make him look cooler to her. Instead it just reminded Missy what a stupid frat idiot he'd been when he knocked up her mother. Her other hand was busy flipping the TV to the Nature channel, pretty much the only station they got that was worth anything, and only because they had kittens sometimes.

She slurped at her can and stewed for a bit, zoning out to the documentary she'd already seen, about the biotinkered snakes some idiot released in Australia to try and fix their toad problem. The only thing the first watch had done was lead to her deciding to never, ever visit that crazy place.

Long story short- it did not work. Way fewer dingos around to eat babies now, at least.

It only took half an hour before she was bored enough to try anything else to alleviate it. Whenever her mind wandered though, it always strayed back to that post. Slapping her hand down on the phone by her foot without bending herself in any way, she picked it up and growled as she flipped through PHO again. If her mind wouldn’t let her escape the topic, she'd dig deeper and find a reason to stop caring about it.

She brought up SpecificProtagonist's profile, and scoffed. 15? Female? There was no way that
wasn't a lie. In Missy's experience, girls didn't care about sexing littler girls, it was all the old perverts who were after kids. She even had a link to another site where her 'content' was supposed to be. She'd seen that scam plenty of times, no thanks.

She went back to zoning out in front of the TV for a while. Dennis came in at that point, suiting up for the patrol he had with Dean today, and decided to check on her.

"Hey, Missy. How are you holding up?" He asked, setting down his helmet and plopping into a seat.

She shrugged. "I'm fine. Dean not coming in?"

Dennis hesitated, but shook his head. "Picking up the suit from Armsy. He's meeting me out front." She groaned quietly and went back to the TV. She’d forgotten it was due for maintenance. "Hey, you sure you're okay? I saw what was going on in-"

Oh god no. "I'm fine." The last thing Missy wanted was to be babied.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay!” He got up and grabbed his helmet with an unsure smile and a chuckle. ‘I’m going."

She didn’t bother watching as he left. She appreciated that the boys were taking things more seriously now, but hated that it took Triumph getting kicked up to the Protectorate over the holidays to do it. She liked Rory, but he’d been 18 for something like half a year before they finally booted him off the team. She was sure there was some nepotism there, him being the Mayor’s son, putting pressure to keep him in the Wards, and thus a command role, for as long as possible.

His long term as leader had left the other boys complacent, though. Aegis was floundering a bit, trying to figure out how to be their boss instead of their friend. Dennis and Dean were finally starting to realize their turns were coming up soon, since Carlos didn’t want to stay in charge. Hell, he didn’t even want to stay in the Bay! Traitor already had a transfer lined up for when he graduated.

Missy’s problem with all of this was that these changes just saw them trying to baby her more, to show how adult and responsible they were. No one cared that she was the most experienced and best trained of the Wards. They just saw a child that needed watching.

She groaned, not wanting to drive herself into another rage arguing with herself over why she should be Wards Leader, already.

Now she wasn’t just bored, she was pissed. When her thoughts turned back to that stupid lying pervert, she growled and clicked through their profile. They had some fake blurb, and a few comments and conversations there. And that link. She glared at it for a few moments, before deciding it was probably real. It looked like a real URL, sounded vaguely familiar, so some of her classmates were probably users there, and holding her finger down on the link until options popped up let her confirm the link actually went to the place it said it did. Dennis loved messing with people by posting up a URL and changing the actual hyperlink destination to something completely different, usually memes or old songs. Sometimes both.

The desire to leave scathing reviews on the pervert’s smut quickly grew overpowering. She switched her phone to data-only, to dodge the stupid kiddie filters on the WiFi, and clicked the link. Getting a phone without filters like that was as simple as complaining to her father about the phone her mother had gotten her being in any way inadequate. It wasn’t like they were going to
scream at each other any more over it, but she hadn’t heard it brought up yet. Missy’s phone loaded the site just fine, and she made an account, obviously lying about her age when that option popped up. The first thing she did when it let her through to the ‘SpecificProtagonist’ profile on this other site was spin off another page in her browser to run a search for ‘Vista’. To the site’s credit, she didn’t find much, and it seemed she was only mentioned in those, not starring. A quick skim through the board’s terms and rules confirmed a not unreasonable ‘No persons under 16’ rule for the porn. Something about age of consent where the forum was based from.

She closed that tab and went back to examining the profile and stories list. The first thing she noticed was an overwhelming propensity for gay boy pairings. All of the ENE boys were on here—even though Chris really shouldn’t, since he was 15—some of them multiple times. SP seemed to really like pairing Dean with Rory or Dennis. There were more, including the adult heroes, and even some girl pairings. She scoffed at one with a summary about Battery seducing Shadow Stalker into the Wards. Missy knew Battery was only a couple years out of the Wards herself, but knowing them? The whole idea was ridiculous.

She scrolled back up, looking for one that was especially heinous, and couldn't possibly be any good. Her eyes alighted on a Glory Girl / Panacea story, which fit the bill. She was self-aware enough to admit a good chunk of why she picked it was the little thrill that the pairing meant Dean would be single, there. She settled in, fully expecting to see some nasty lesbian incest scene before she could even scroll down.

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Three hours later, Missy closed the story, feeling conflicted. She had only found one sex scene near the end, which was tagged so it could easily be skipped over. The entire thing was... actually really sweet. It took her a second to get over the fact that the characters acted nothing like Vicky and Amy, but once Missy’d convinced herself these were just girls who happened to have the same names and family situation? Surprisingly compelling. Amy slowly seducing Vicky, then the pair having a whirlwind Romeo-and-Juliet affair, before running off together.

Why was this even on this site? Sure, it had that one scene, but that could be cut out. It couldn't be the incest angle, everyone who bothered to look it up knew Amy was adopted. It was even right there in the story!

She'd barely even acknowledged Dennis and Dean getting back from their patrol, heading to her room to avoid the inevitable video game noises more than anything else. So now she was laying on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to categorize all the feelings she was having. One thing she was sure of, SpecificProtagonist probably wasn't a guy. She didn't think a boy could capture a girl's internal thoughts that well. If that was true, maybe she was 15? It still didn't make it okay that they were writing little girls into their adult fiction, but... on the other hand, didn't that just mean they thought she was adult enough for it?

Missy blushed a little. It was nice thinking she'd found someone else that thought she could be in adult situations... with adult responsibilities, able to decide things for herself instead of being told she was too small, all her talent and experience left squandered.

She grabbed her phone and switched accounts. She didn't use this one much, but the option was always nice.

MissedByAMile (10:48PM): Hey, are you *really* writing that Vista stuff?

She stared at the screen for a bit, still not sure she should be messaging a stranger on the internet, but... the validation if she was right? She huffed, blacking her screen and slapping it down on the
bed, covering her eyes with her other hand. She didn't need anyone's approval. She was just fine how she was.

...it'd be nice, though.

Her phone beeped at her, and she checked it.

SpecificProtagonist (10:50PM): Are you *really* asking about that?
SpecificProtagonist (10:50PM): Wait, I know.
SpecificProtagonist (10:50PM): You're a *cop* aren't you?
SpecificProtagonist (10:51PM): I know my rights! Text *I* put on *MY* hard drive is *MY* business! You can't harass me over that!

Missy scowled, torn between wondering what the hell this crazy was talking about, and wondering if that was actually anything like a valid concern, for a porn writer. It only took her a little bit to think of a halfway decent reason to be asking about this stuff, before she replied.

MissedByAMile (10:52PM): She's my age, and I like imagining I'm her.
SpecificProtagonist (10:50PM): Wait, really?
MissedByAMile (10:52PM): *Yes*, really.

She heaved out a sigh, wondering if any of this stupid validation was even worth it... It took a bit for SP to get back to her, and Missy imagined she was doing a bit of digging, like she'd done earlier on the older girl's profiles and such.

SpecificProtagonist (10:53PM): Okay, let's say I believe you. What do you want?
MissedByAMile (10:53PM): I dunno, I thought it might be cool to read some of those.
MissedByAMile (10:53PM): Or swap ideas, if you didn't want to share.
SpecificProtagonist (10:54PM): ...
SpecificProtagonist (10:54PM): You *do* know I only write gay shit, right?

Missy groaned at their obstinence, and figured a bit of embellishment couldn't hurt.

MissedByAMile (10:54PM): Yeah, I know. I've read a few of your stories already.
SpecificProtagonist (10:55PM): Hmm... Alright.
SpecificProtagonist (10:55PM): What kind of story were you thinking of writing?
MissedByAMile (10:55PM): Maybe something Vista/Gallant?
SpecificProtagonist (10:55PM): ...go on.

Missy grinned, and started trying to throw together bits of fantasies she'd had in the months since her crush started to bloom, seeing what fit together into a halfway cohesive plot.

This was going to be fun.

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**WED FEB 23**

Sarah was clicking away at her computer, managing the team's patrol and PR schedules for the next few weeks, when the phone rang. She made sure to save her work, before checking it. The number wasn't one she recognized, but it was a call to her New Wave business line. That wasn't so odd, she just hoped it wasn't another rabid fan or anti-cape bigot who'd managed to find their actual number instead of the glorified voicemail box they put on all their cards. "Hello? Sarah Pelham, Lady Photon."
"Hello." The voice on the other line was sharp and female, as well as old if her guess was right. "My name is Rosalind Lafayette. I am interested in making a sizable donation towards your team's foundation," The non-profit they used for costumes, insurance, and any costs from PR events. "and when I expressed an interest in speaking with you before finalizing the transfer, I was provided this number."

Ahh, one of *those* calls. Sometimes people wanted things from the team, be it personal meetings or autographs, or the less acceptable mercenary requests. Some of the hinted requests of the *girls* on the team still made her shudder to think about. Some of the idiots with too much money out there are just *unacceptable* with how they wanted to use it. Although to be fair, some of these calls are genuinely someone that just wanted to chat first, and she hoped that's what this was. She scribbled the woman's name down on the pad by the phone, before she could forget. People tended to make all their smaller donations at the PR events, not bothering to go through the trouble with the non-profit and the banks unless they were at least fifty dollars, usually a hundred or more. Sometimes they'd get the odd thousand dollar donation, some of their largest being five to ten. They'd gotten a twenty-thousand donation once, after taking down Marquis, which had been a major windfall given their private struggles at the time. "Thank you for your consideration, that's very kind of you. What were you wanting to discuss?" She didn't use words like 'what can I do for you?' in these instances, anymore. It *never* ended well.

"My granddaughter was hospitalized recently, and while she's now recovered, she is far too stubborn to take the reasonable option and leave the city for greener pastures... no offense."

"None taken." Sarah replied almost immediately. She knew firsthand how bad the Bay could get. She was relieved the call wasn't complaining about Amy not healing someone... that *also* happened far too often, in her opinion. The girl was a trooper, but not a *machine*. She needed downtime like anyone else.

"The *next* most reasonable course of action then becomes attempting to render the *city* safer for her. To that end, I've set aside some funds for the local police, emergency services, and independent heroes. I would consider endorsing the PRT and Protectorate, but there are some... unfortunate circumstances staying my hand."

Sarah knew a leading statement, and that was about as blunt as they came. "What sort of circumstances?" She asked, not seeing the harm in pandering, especially if *not* asking the question might cost them.

"When Taylor was hospitalized, the PRT almost immediately took control of the criminal investigations surrounding the incident and, to the best of my own investigations, have done nothing with them." There was a tightness to the other woman's voice, carefully controlled rage threatening to snap. "Even nearly two months later, I still find more signs of those initial few days of police action than any PRT efforts."

Shit, this conversation was a minefield. She couldn't side too heavily against the PRT, or risk some backlash as the leader of a *PRT-Affiliated* team. She could understand the woman’s frustration though, and as much as she hated it, a not-insignificant part of her couldn't stand the thought of letting the donations slip away from them. "I'm sorry, that sounds terrible. Have you tried contacting them?" She asked, neutrally.

"Oh, they're on the list." The old woman chuckled. "Don't you worry about that. Now, what has your group been up to these past few weeks? I've heard you try to strike a balance between heroics and normal life."

A much safer question, but still felt a little like prying. Still... "We've been taking some time off
and patrolling more. There's an Endbringer attack due soon, and we want to make sure we're ready to help out." Not to the fight itself. She wouldn't mind going, but if she went, Neil would follow, not to mention her children. Crystal was old enough Sarah couldn't stop her if she wanted to, now. She shook her head, not wanting to dwell on even considering losing any of them.

"Ah, yes." The words were hissed with a venom that surprised Sarah. "I don't begrudge anyone wanting those monsters dead. My husband and son were in New York." Sarah inwardly cursed, and couldn't help imagining an ominous click underfoot. "Entirely different buildings, but... I like to imagine they were together, in the end."

Sarah resolved to hug Eric whether he liked it or not, the next time she had the chance. "I'm sorry for your loss."

She had the feeling Rosalind was shrugging. "It's been fifteen years, and at least I still have my granddaughter."

Right. The granddaughter. The entire reason for the conversation. "And... her name is?"

"Taylor Hebert." That name sounded familiar, but the only thing that came to mind was the man who ran that dock union... They'd never interacted, but she thought it might be a 'D' name? "Don't worry if you can't put a face to her name, she's endeavored to not be newsworthy, and I can't help but think it's at least partly my fault." She must have waited too long to comment, and gave a polite chuckle.

"It's good that she's out of the hospital. How is she?" Be polite, keep her engaged.

"She's doing much better after her transfer to Arcadia. She's happier, and making friends. I'd prefer if if she were doing so in a safer city, but at this point she doesn't want to be moved again." Sarah wondered if she'd met any of their children at school, and decided she'd ask Eric if he'd heard anything about her. Probably after the hug.

"I understand the worry, ma'am. If it weren't for my circumstances, I might have considered moving." It did no one any good not to admit the Bay had its problems. Better to own it and spread some breadcrumbs to follow.

"Your team, yes." Sarah inwardly cheered at having steered the conversation away from the minefield. "Most of what I've found looking into your group, has been about the Dallon girls. Could you tell me a bit more about the rest of you?"

Right... "My own children have been focusing on their studies when not patrolling, Eric goes to Arcadia and tends to patrol around the school and home, since he's a rather slow flier." Public knowledge. "Crystal likewise watches out for the campus area, when she's not in classes there." Don't need to mention that she's living in an easily targeted dorm room instead of home... "Carol does a lot of very important work that does sadly pull her away from patrols fairly often, but makes time to patrol and liaise with the PRT. Neil and I have a nice balance to our cape and civilian lives, I think." When they can find civilian work, anyway... "And Mark is-"...barely functional..."-on call, whenever we need him."

"Hmm..." Sarah could feel the weight of decades of intense scrutiny in that hum, and couldn't help the slight sweat that broke out. "...I believe I will be happy to support your team and its mission, Mrs. Pelham."

"That's wonderful!" She said excitedly, scribbling down a couple more notes before she forgot.
The old woman hummed pleasantly. "If you don't mind, I have several other calls to make, before I visit my granddaughter today. Have a pleasant afternoon."

"You as well, and thank you again!" Sarah said, waiting for the line to click dead before she hung up.

Well, that went well enough, and the team had another windfall to look forward to. That always brightened moods around. She clicked back to her work, fiddling with schedules and making a quick call about a venue to host something in a couple weeks, hopefully after the Endbringer tension was done for a few months. Then she clicked over to their online banking pages, curious about their newest donation, only to choke on her own spit.

That couldn't be right.

She called Margie, the non-profit specialist they usually worked with for New Wave's non-profit foundation, only to be told that yes, the numbers were real. Yes, she'd checked with Madam Lafayette's accountant, it was intentional. Sarah idly thanked her, and the headset slipped from her loose fingers. She very nearly fainted, staring at her screen.

Sarah blinked, forcing herself to take a breath, rapidly and somewhat violently writing the number down on the sheet she'd been scribbling notes on, underlining it twice, and tore it off the pad. "Neil!?" She called, diving to the floor to retrieve her fallen phone.

The big man thundered up the stairs, meeting her at the door as she floated into the hallway. His concerned gaze instantly assessed his wife, and seeing no immediate problems, grew confused. "You alright?"

She swallowed to try and wet her dry throat. "Yeah, I'm... calling Carol over." His head tilted slightly, and she pushed the paper into his chest. "We got a donation."

He grabbed the sheet, and she heard him mutter "...that's a lot of zeroes," as she floated down the stairs.

She dialed her sister's number, and floated to the kitchen table, seating herself rather heavily in her chair.

"Sarah? Is everything okay?" Carol asked, duly confused since Sarah rarely called during regular 'work' hours, even if they were all taking time off.

"I don't know. Probably. I just... need to talk. Can you come over?" She tried to keep her voice even, and wasn't sure she succeeded.

Manpower came down the stairs a minute later, rather woodenly seating himself at the table, and setting the sheet of notes down in front of him. It only took Carol about five minutes to pull into their driveway, they didn't live that far away after all. Surprisingly, when she let herself in, Mark followed in behind her. He must be having a good day.

"Sarah? What's wrong?" Carol asked, eyes darting about for anything out of place. Sarah motioned to the table, and her sister stopped short, warily. "What's going on?"

"Please sit down." When her sister didn't budge, she sighed. "We got a donation."

"That's... nice. But not strange. What's wrong?"

"I think you should be sitting." Sarah said, somberly.
Carol was about to protest again, when Mark came up behind her with a gentle push forward. She huffed, and stalked to the seat nearest her sister, and Mark took the next one. "What is all this about?"

"We got a donation." Sarah said again, and when Carol was about to chime in that she'd already said that, she continued. "One hundred. Thousand. Dollars."

Mark goggled at her, turning to Neil, who nodded.

Carol grit her teeth, staring at her sister, giving her a moment to spring it as some uncharacteristic joke. "That is... a suspiciously large amount of money." That was the sort of money one might drop on a multinational aid foundation, not a pair of nuclear families who fought crime in their spare time.

Sarah nodded. "That's why I called you over." She motioned to Neil, who handed the note off to Mark. "I have no idea what to do about it."

Carol took a glance at Sarah's chickenscratch, and couldn't help the ominous feeling she recognized those names. She took a deep breath and turned back to her sister. "Please, summarize."

She took a deep breath. "I got a call earlier, from a Rosalind Lafayette. She said she was donating to places around the city, to make it safer for her granddaughter Taylor. From the sound of it, she was planning on handing out money to everyone but the PRT and Protectorate. Something about dropping the ball on the case that had her hospitalized."

Mark winced, Neil groaned and palmed his face, and Carol took a deep breath and slipped further into 'lawyer mode'. "I wasn't aware the PRT were involved."

Sarah gave her sister a wary look. "But you were aware of the case?"

Carol nodded. "I looked into it, after Amy brought... Taylor... home with her."

Sarah blinked. "Wait, brought her home? So she's friends with this Taylor, or...?"

Her sister sneered slightly. "As far as I know, yes. Friends."

Sarah carefully ignored Carol's reaction. "So, it's possible Rosalind knew Taylor was friends with at least one of our children, and was... saying thank you for taking care of her?"

Carol scoffed. "I highly doubt it."

Sarah threw her hands up in frustration. "Well the only other option I can see is her trying to turn us against the PRT somehow!"

"Sarah." Neil boomed calmly. "Carol, both of you calm down." He watched his wife start taking deeper breaths, then met Carol's flinty gaze. It took a moment, but she glanced away first. "I don't think a little bad blood is going to do much. Piggot already hates us on principle, and the rest of her staff are professional enough to at least act like little things like this didn't happen."

"I liked her." Mark said, breaking into the mood and causing the others to glance at him curiously. "Taylor, I mean. Nice girl. Bit awkward. I think she grounds Amy a bit..." He visibly chewed on his words for a moment, before he nodded. "I think they're good for each other."

This left the others thinking somberly for a few moments, before Sarah sighed. "Carol, you obviously know more about the situation than the rest of us. What'd you find about Taylor's case?"
Her sister didn't bother denying that she did know quite a lot about it, despite not having direct legal access to all of the pertinent data. "I couldn't get access to her medical records, and didn't know the status of the investigation." She shook her head. "Nor who had the investigation. What I was able to gather was that Taylor Hebert was locked in her locker for several hours before breaking herself out, and whatever she'd been locked in with, it was bad enough that no one would touch her. The faculty present called EMTs to take her to the hospital, not because she was that badly injured, but because they wouldn't have to pick her up to take her to the nurse."

Mark sighed, closing his eyes. Neil tensed angrily, and Sarah covered her mouth with a hand, muttering "Oh my god..."

"She spent almost two weeks in the hospital, and remarked once that she'd been comatose for at least half that time."

"And no one got fired over that?" Sarah huffed angrily. "I know I would've heard about this if they were!"

Carol shook her head. "Several of the faculty were given citations, and mandated sensitivity training and emergency medical training. The school has such a high turnover for faculty that apparently they can't afford to fire anyone outright over this one incident."

"That's bullshit!" Sarah spat, and Carol glanced away and gave a very small nod of agreement.

"I think we can all understand why the woman is so angry, now." Neil said evenly. "I don't like that she dragged us into it, but... she did give us more than I make in a year."

Sarah could easily admit, that did make it pretty hard to stay mad at the woman. It still didn't feel quite real, yet. Their team was just... fine, financially. This one donation would cover their regular spending for the rest of the year, and it wasn't like the regular smaller donations were going to stop entirely. They were a public practice, anyone could look at their ledgers if they asked the right people the right questions, but how many actually did that? It might make the people that would second-guess donating to them, but the rest?

They shifted gears after that, touching on Endbringer plans, and upcoming PR events once that was past. No use wasting the fact that all the adults but Crystal were here, especially when she was such an infrequent participant in those plans, with her college work piling up.

It was about an hour later that Carol and Mark left, with a promise to keep an eye out for anything on the Hebert front.

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**WED FEB 23**

I groaned as I saw the number. “It’s from Carol…” I got up with a huff, nodding towards their living room, and wandered off to take the call. "Yes?"

"Where are you?" Carol snapped.

"I'm at a friend's house." I stated calmly.

She paused, and I caught the slight trepidation in her voice when she continued. "...is it Taylor?"

"Why does that matter?" I had to remember not to snap, Carol always had to escalate if she thought someone was confronting her.
She huffed out a small sigh, but didn’t seem to be gearing up to yell, this time. "I'll let you know when you get here. You're coming home, now."

I had to resist the urge to pull the phone away to glare at it. "Why?"

She hissed in a sharper breath, and I knew I’d fucked up. Her next words were flat, pointed, and clearly enunciated. Lawyer mode. "Something has come up, Sarah called me over to discuss it, and now I need to speak with you about it. Come. Home."

No winning here. "...fine." The call ended, and I took a slow, deep breath. Whatever she wanted, I was not looking forward to this...

I went back in, and told them I had to leave. Then Taylor’s grandmother offered up her driver, catching me off guard to the point I didn’t speak up before she’d made the call. I glanced uneasily at Taylor, who shrugged. I sighed and shook my head, wondering how the hell she decided what to be completely unflappable about. I started for the door, and she hopped up to see me out. I couldn’t tell if she was being courteous, or if this was another of her ‘dumb puppy’ moments that made it so hard to dislike her.

Case in point, the awkward wave she gave when I got into the car. She was never trying to be cute, but she managed it anyway. I gave a little wave back, hiding my wince at how painfully adorkable she was being.

After we’d pulled out, the driver caught my eye in the rearview. “So... you’re Panacea, right?”

I bit down the groan. "Yeah?" I gave her my most deadpan nonplussed stare.

"Oh, just... uhh." She blushed a little, chuckling to ease her nerves. "Just wanted to make sure I was taking you to the right place."

She hadn’t asked where my house was. That... was the most awkward type of fan. Just nice enough that public figure decorum demanded being nice back, but creepy enough you were never sure what they wanted, what they already knew, or what they were going to do with anything new they learned interacting with you. I’d hesitate to say ‘the kind you have to be nice to, but can’t quite feel safe around’ because it was pretty hard to beat my power for feeling safe from the usual creepy fan threats, but I knew that’s how it’d be for a normal celebrity.

I ignored her, digging out my phone and sending Vicky a text, asking if she was still busy. When I didn’t get an immediate reply, I sighed. She was probably still riding Dean in whatever 'sufficiently romantic' dark corner of they Bay they'd wound up in. I leaned into the door, looking out the window and trying to ignore the dark, jealous, betrayed disgust trying to bubble its way out of my stomach. Vicky didn't belong to me, I'd just have to be fine with that.

My phone finally dinged about halfway home. Just a quick 'sup?' from Vicky. I felt the giddy joy at interacting with her rise up, and peter out. Now wasn’t the time for that.

'Nd hlp, if ur free' I sent. She sent a couple of question marks back. 'Carol clld, hav t hd hom. prbs pissed. Run int?'

The wait was longer this time, and I imagined she was discussing it with Dean. 'Gmme 20?' she sent back, as we started pulling down my street.

'Ur the best.' I sent with a smile. I could handle Carol for twenty minutes.

We pulled up to the curb, and the driver called out to me. "So, uhh..." She pulled out a paper pad,
and a pen. "Would you mind? My little cousin's been on a New Wave kick, recently..."

I sighed. Usually I wouldn't bother, only playing this nice with the fans when someone else was around, but then I thought of Carol waiting in the house, and eyed her car warily. With a choked down groan, I took the pad, killing a couple minutes asking who I should make it out to, what I should say for them, and making... small talk about what her cousin was like. I hated every second of it, but it was better than giving her another few minutes to ramp up before Vicky got back.

Eventually the conversation got awkward though, and I had to let her go. I watched her pull out, and heaved a small sigh. "Into the fire, I guess." I turned and made my way up the driveway, taking the steps as slowly as possible without looking like I was intentionally stalling.

Carol had set up in the living room, with a clear view of the door, like I knew she would. Her sharp gaze tore over me for a moment, her fingers never pausing as she typed something up on her laptop. "Sit." She commanded, and I ambled over.

Whatever it was, she finished typing and closed the screen just before I sat down. After a few seconds of silence, I figured this was one of those days she wanted me to be engaging. "So, what did you call me home to talk about?"

Carol clucked her tongue, still assessing me. "New Wave received a rather substantial donation today, from one Rosalind Lafayette."

I glanced down, trying to remember if she'd mentioned that. "Isn't that a good thing?" I asked, meeting her eyes again.

Her lips pursed unpleasantly. "It was to the sum of one hundred thousand dollars."

My eyes widened at the unexpectedly high number. I knew she'd talked about money in amounts that sounded pretty ridiculous, but I didn't think she'd have that much to just throw around. "That's some pile o' dosh." I muttered. Her eyes narrowed, entirely unamused. "I still don't get it though, that's good, right?"

Carol's pursed lips softened, but her eyes narrowed slightly. "Nominally, yes. However, I've checked with contacts in other organizations, and it seems the police and fire departments each received around thirty thousand, while hospitals and clinics have gotten twenty or less, depending on their size." She leaned forward, her gaze somewhat predatory. "Note that among them, I did not mention the PRT, nor Protectorate. It appears that we have received their shares, and I do not like the message that is sending to anyone who checks." She leaned back. "And believe me, they will."

I knew she was waiting for me to speak, expecting me to fess up, like she always did. I had no idea why she even tried anymore. It hadn't worked since before I was ten, and she'd always punish me for it when I did. "I have no idea why." I said honestly.

Her eyes flashed, and she bit her tongue. I could tell she wanted to tell me that was bullshit, and that I should just tell her whatever it was she wanted me to say that would justify her paranoia. "You have no idea?" Dripped out venomously, instead.

"None." I stated firmly. Meeting her eyes meant challenging her. Looking away meant admitting guilt. Like everything about Carol, a no-win situation. I chose to try and stare her down.

She bristled exactly as I knew she would. "I don't believe you."

You never do. "I do not know why she'd have a problem with the PRT. I could guess, but that'd probably be wrong." And she hated guessing, anyway. "You're going to have to ask something else,
if you want more than that."

She tensed, her teeth gritting, but she swallowed that down before responding. "You are aware that she's Taylor's grandmother, yes?"

I hated the accusation towards Taylor she was leveling with her tone, but I couldn't address that without this devolving into a shouting match. "Yes. She dropped by a little while ago, to talk to Taylor. We were introduced, then you called, and I left. She had her driver give me a ride home." A factual statement of events, leaving out the important parts.

"And you don't know why she might have an issue with the PRT?"

I quirked an eyebrow. "Should I?" I had no idea what she was trying to prove, and was getting tired of giving the same damned answer. "She doesn't tell me everything. I'm sure you don't tell Aunt Sarah everything." I caught the minute flinch, and knew I'd scored a point. Hypocritical bitch. "If you know something about Taylor that I don't, I trust her to have a good reason she hasn't told me, yet." Put up, or shut up, Carol.

"Apparently," She started, choosing her words carefully. "The investigation into what hospitalized Taylor was taken under the PRT's jurisdiction, and I assume-" Oh just call it a guess, you hypocrite! "-that their findings were inconclusive enough to displease her."

I leaned back, thinking on it. "That makes sense." I met her eyes again. "I still didn't know about that until you told me, though."

She hummed, still apparently unconvinced. "I still don't like that she's trying to play us against the PRT, Amy."

I raised my arms in an overenthusiastic shrug. "I don't see how it's our problem. If you really don't like it, just... I dunno, give them their shares, or something! Or you could just keep it, and not care, since it's not like the public is going to find out and make a huge stink about it. The PRT's got federal money backing it, they shouldn't need big donations like we do."

"She has no right to involve us in her squabbles!" Carol snapped.

"I don't think she cares." I spat back. "What would you do if the PRT just up and dropped what happened to Eric, huh? Or what happened to Crystal?"

Her eyes alighted with a mad rage at my mention of their trigger events, and she nearly leapt to her feet. "You do not get to take that tone with me, young woman!" She shouted.

And like she'd been waiting for it, and for all I knew, she had, Vicky chose that moment to charge in through the front door, trailing a cacophony of cheerful ruckus in her wake. She looked slightly more ruffled than the windswept look alone could properly account for, but I doubt Carol noticed. "Hey mom! Ames, what's going on?" She chirped happily, trying to diffuse the situation.

I couldn't help one last jab. "Oh, Taylor's grandma gave New Wave a bunch of money."

"Really?" She asked, her eyes lighting up.

Carol glared down at me in betrayal, warming the cold cackles of my heart. Go ahead, spit all over your little angel's good mood. I fucking dare you.

She gave up, turning away with a huff and turning her attention to her real daughter. I smiled at her back. Just five more months, you bitch, and I'm free of you forever. The thought filled me with
more joy than I thought entirely reasonable, but it wasn't like I'd turn down a good mood.

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**WED FEB 23**

Reuben heaved a weary sigh, leaning his weight on his good leg, and the wall of the alley he'd trudged down into. It wasn't much, but it was private enough for a couple minute's rest. The Merchants were finally starting to settle down, today's patrol was downright uneventful compared to even yesterday. He'd heard Skidmark had been put down, nearly killed. Squealer didn't care about anything, and Mush was too passive to start fights without his violent boss goading him into it. It looked like the city was going to calm down just in time for the next big 'truce'.

He snorted to himself. Truce. What a crock of shit. The gangs never stopped, even if they played at keeping quiet for a few days, drugs kept flowing, girls kept disappearing, families and businesses still had to pay their 'dues'. Truce only kept the violence bottled up until someone popped the bubble again, then they'd make up for lost time. He shook his head, groaning as his weight settled back on his bad leg.

A metal paw reached down to rub at the pocked and scarred steel plating covering the limb. He knew it couldn't really press through the armor over the healing bullet wound, but the motions still helped a little. He knelt slightly, so he could put more weight on his hands to scrape along the plates. It'd been almost two months since he'd been shot. Not even the worst wound he'd ever had, but it still laid him out. They tossed him in a clinic, told him to focus on getting better. Not two days later he gets word he's fired.

'Honorable Discharge' his ass. The damn skinheads were looking for any excuse to have him pressed off the force, and they finally managed to make something stick. Getting too old, too slow to catch up to changing procedures, mentally unfit for grief or overwork... they even tried to use his daughter against him. Single parent shouldn't be running around getting shot at, they said.

And then this happened. Through shot, grazing the bone, tearing the muscle. They told him he was lucky, that it missed the artery and he'd mostly recover, eventually. All he heard was 'low priority'. In a good city, with a good force, with actual money, he could afford to sit around and wait to heal, or wait until he could get healed. In Brockton? They cut him off, dropped like bad meat. Gave him enough money to survive for a couple months for his years of service, and left him out to rot. His savings would give them another month or so, but he was already digging into it to get by. Looking for work, looking for parts, looking for anything.

Too much longer and he'd have to resort to the money he'd been stealing from the Merchants. He wasn't the smartest man out there, but even he knew you didn't fuck with the IRS. They'd see him magic up money, and come knocking. Then they'd have to run.

That, or get shipped off to join the heroes.

The crackle of broken glass crunching under thick boots had him look up from his power-gauntleted hands, to the entrance of the alley, where he saw a figure. He reached down to his side for his weapon for tonight - a rebar pole that still had a bit of concrete on one end. That was one lesson he hadn't had to learn in this hero gig. Never bother with guns, too noisy and lethal. Never bring your own weapons when you could just find one and toss it. Less blood to clean, or track home. Fewer tools he had to buy or replace.

He reared up, bulky suit standing just shy of two meters tall. He was big and he was slow, but God help you if you found yourself under the hammer he raised menacingly.
"Whoa, whoa!" The man said, holding up his hands. The lamps to either side of his faceplate lined up on him, and Reuben saw he was a lanky white blonde, which set him not liking the fool on principle. "Not here to fight."

"How did you find me?" He rumbled deeply. The speakers on his rig weren't the best, but you could understand the words coming out the other end, and that was enough.

The man grinned and shrugged. "It wasn't too hard. You've been busting up Merchants for the past few weeks, figured you'd be around." He nodded down to the scratched up leg plating. "You're not exactly the quietest guy."

He lowered the hammer, giving the illusion he was standing down. An upswing that'd barely kick at all with meat arms could still knock the fight out of any normal in his suit. "What do you want?"

"Just a chat." The man said, and Reuben's metal fist creaking the rebar in its grasp let the man know just how bullshit that sounded. "Alright, not... Okay. Just thought a guy like you might be getting tired of running solo."

"Pretty sure I'm a little too black for your club." The speakers did a halfway decent job masking his voice, but it couldn't hide that the words started deep. The Merchants had already picked up on his skin color, he didn't think he was giving up much shoving it in this asshole's face.

"Alright." The man said, his grin starting to strain a bit. He slowly reached up to his neck, digging a bit for a cord necklace under his shirt. "Think you might want to reconsider calling me a Nazi to my face." Dangling on the end of the cord, hanging in the beam of light, was a well worn but obviously old and cared for Star of David.

It was possible this guy was playing it up, taking some old Jew's necklace to get people like him to let their guards down. Reuben shifted, his stance less hostile, the hammer dropping a bit to rest on the ground. Something in his gut told him the man wasn't lying. The set of his jaw and the steel in his eyes, Reuben saw real hate there.

"Sorry." He rumbled.

Blondie put his necklace away. "All good. Not like I don't milk looking Aryan for everything it's worth around here." He stepped further into the alley, slowly at first, but picking up momentum when Reuben stepped to the side to make room. "So, I gotta ask. You've been running around hitting the gangs, mostly Merchants, but they could just be in your way." The man took a deeper breath. "Rogue, hero... or villain?"

Reuben had to admit, he'd put some thought into this question. He didn't care as long as they got by, but his thoughts always turned to his little Abigail, and what he'd leave behind for her. "...not that last one."

The man stared up into the faceplate for a few seconds before he nodded. "Name's Gerard." The man raised a hand as if to shake, but took a good look at the mitt of his gauntlets and held it up for a fistbump instead. Reuben humored him, letting him bop his fist on a raised gauntlet. "Engleman, though it's 'Gerry Stuart' if anyone looking too white asks."

He nodded, as much as his rig allowed for it. "So?" He prompted.

Gerard nodded back. "There's a new hero running around. Wants to gather up some independents and form up a team." Huh. Surprised they thought that'd work, but he couldn't fault their initiative. "Meeting's Sunday after next, Captain's Hill, 8PM. There's a little gazebo on the far side, that's the
meeting point." He rummaged in his jacket as he kept talking. "It's fine if you don't wanna' show, no hard feelings." He finally pulled out a folded up slip of paper and held it up. "I, uhh... I've got the number for the burner phone we're coordinating this stuff through here, but... I don't know if you've got pockets on that thing?"

Reuben sighed and knelt down, taking a closer look at the sheet as it was unfolded. It didn't look like it'd been tampered with or coated in anything, and indeed just had a phone number string written on it. He cracked the back plating open, letting it clang against the internal mechanism he'd need to crank to open it further. Gerard refolded the note and tossed it through the gap before backing away, letting him winch the seal shut again. It made it harder to get in and out of, but that was kind of the point. Much harder to crack open if someone wanted to get at him, and very little way to accidentally hurt himself in the hatch and its mechanisms. It's not like getting out fast would save him from much right now, crippled as he was.

"So yeah, should always be someone at that number if you call it. Plan right now is to meet up at the gazebo and head into the woods nearby for a little privacy. If you've got any questions, or want to make the meeting and can't, just call and we'll figure something out."

"Who's this hero doing the recruiting?" He rumbled as he stood again.

Gerard grinned. "Her name's Terraform. Might want to keep an eye out for her." The man shook his head wistfully. "She's... sure something. Idealist type, with a hell of a chip on her shoulder."

A woman? Or a girl. Either way, he didn't think he could afford to turn a blind eye to the offer at hand. "I'll think about it. The team thing."

"All I can ask." Gerard said, backing away with a shrug before turning with a wave. He stopped at the entrance to the alleyway and turned back. "And hey, Regardless? Good luck out there, Tin Man." He gave a jaunty salute, and headed off down the street.

Reuben sighed. That goddamn nickname was never going away, was it? Oh well, not like he'd come up with anything better to call himself.

He decided he was done for tonight, and made his way back to his van. He'd gotten it on the cheap, probably the stereotyping involved, and stripped it out to kit it as a transport for his rig. The only things he really had were his fitness to keep up with the beat cop life he'd fallen into for the past decade, as well as mechanic training he'd gotten growing up, and a little bit of engineering from school. More than enough for what he needed. Tinkertech was ridiculous, but good old fashioned know-how and ingenuity got you pretty far when you needed them to.

The back hatch of the long white panel van opened up when he tripped the signal for it to from inside his suit. He clambered in, grabbing handholds he'd welded in and pull-crawling his way inside. It was a tight fit, and he only made it fit by pulling up the rig's legs at the knee before he hit the button to shut the door. It was a bit of an awkward dance, getting in and shutting up the van to make an ambush harder while he cracked and cranked the hatch open, then opening the door to straighten his legs so he could crawl out of the suit before folding it all up again with a remote from the driver's seat.

It was silly, but it got the job done.

He thought on the offer, while he was driving back to the house he was still paying off. Plans made for a couple who both worked rarely panned out well when one of them passed early. A team could help with supplies, keeping up the stock for all this tinker gear without having to rummage around or steal from the gangs. A team could maybe help with money, set him up with a cover job to
explain the gang money, since he still couldn't find anywhere hiring for the shit he was trained in. A team could help with safety...

His mind turned to Abigail. The last light of his life. That poor, sweet child who thought her daddy was a hero.

Yeah. Maybe a team could help with that.

Chapter End Notes

Reuben is a product of considering Brockton as a dynamic system, and thinking about what would actually happen after the Slaughterhouse rolled through town. The cops would be hit hard, most of them getting killed off in the crossfire and winding up with them handing out badges to anyone fit enough without a criminal record. He's one of the last to get culled out of the job, despite technically not qualifying for it.

EDIT: Aaand fixing a wrong word ate the formatting on the little PHO bit again. I am choosing not to care. I'll fix it at some point.
Chapter 2.1 (Canberra, Part 1: Hurry Up and Wait)

Chapter Summary

Start of Arc 2: Momentum  
First half of the original "Canberra" update, Update 24.

Also, costume reminder:  
Taylor's costume was voted to be very much like Kuvira's. You can google her easily enough to get an idea of it, just remove the metal parts Taylor hasn't added in yet.

THU FEB 24

The klaxons blared as I stared out into my dark bedroom. My first thought, as anyone’s, was hoping it wasn’t here. My second was feeling terrible for wishing them on someone else. My rational mind tamped that down, and left me with a firm resolve. Even if it was here, I wasn’t weak anymore. I wasn’t helpless. I could fight.

I was already getting dressed when I recognized that the pattern of the sirens was for somewhere else. I kept throwing things on, and tore open my door. Dad was there, standing in his. He was leaning on the frame, still bleary-eyed even as wide as they were, and hadn’t bothered changing out of his flannel pants or putting on a shirt.

“Taylor?” He muttered, confused. Then his heart stopped, his veins constricted in terror, and the organ flared back to rapid life. “No. Taylor, no.”

“I have to help, dad.” I said, barely audible over the noise.

He stumbled out of his doorway and made to wrap his arms around me, keep me here physically if he had to, but I held him off. With my strength, it was so easy I couldn’t even justify calling it grappling. “Taylor, no.” He moaned, his voice cracking.

“Dad, I’m not fighting!” I yelled, cutting him off. “I’m not stupid, I’m not suicidal. I’m not going to fight them.” I could see my words were finally getting through and sinking in, leaving him still worked up, primed to fight, but confused. “But they break cities, dad. I can move mountains and see people under rubble. If I don’t go, I’m always going to wonder how many people died because I wasn’t there to save them.”

“You’re not fighting?” He muttered, tasting the words. His hands dropped and I let them go. He was staring at me, looking for any hint of falsehood in my words. “You’ll be safe?”

“Yes, dad.” I implored him to understand. The sirens finally stopped, leaving the world sounding hollow and quiet.

“Promise me.” The words spilled out rapid and weak. “Swear it, swear you’re coming back, Little Owl.” This time when he tried to hug me, I let him. He kept muttering the words into my hair as I held him tightly. Neither of us were very religious, but the Endbringers had a way of changing minds about that. Any little comfort was welcome, and the words sounded like little prayers for my safety.
“I promise, dad. Just search and rescue. Fixing enough that they can handle the rest. I promise.”

He pulled away, staring into my eyes again, and nodded. “I’m coming with you.” It was nice that he wasn’t simpering anymore, but this really wasn’t the thing to regrow your spine about...

“Dad, I can run to the PRT building, dodging the traffic and being safer for it, in three minutes. One of those is because I’ll probably get lost with how dark it is.” My joke didn’t do much to lighten the mood, but it wasn’t completely ineffective.

"But..." Dad started, cut off by the house phone going off. We both glanced at the handset on his desk, in his room. Probably Gram calling to tell me not to go, too. I could tell Dad was considering picking up, seeing if both of them could talk me down, but a small, dark current of indignation held him back. He didn’t want to agree with Gram on anything, but he would if it was for me.

I pounced while he was still hesitating. "Dad, New Wave helps out at these things, but they always wait until the... fight... is over." I didn't like calling it that, but all the other words for what happened at Endbringer fights weren't going to do me any favors convincing him. "I'll call Amy and meet up with them. I'll be fine, dad. I promise."

He stared at me, as the phone kept ringing. I saw the tension slowly leave him, could tell when he folded. He raised his arms slightly, and I came in for a hug. "Go do your hero thing." He muttered into my hair.

I nodded, and finished getting ready while he wandered over to the phone. I wanted to be gone before he got the chance to change his mind, so I quickly grabbed my masks and shoes, running down the stairs and out the door, barely pausing to lock it behind me. After that I started walking, fishing out my phone. It was a little after 1AM I noticed, as I navigated through to send Amy a text. 'I'm going with you. Meet when/where?' That sent, I dialed a number, listening to it ring as I watched for a good spot to mask up.

I felt a little bad about lying to dad about what I was doing, since I wasn’t going straight to the PRT. If I was going to do this, it was going to be my big debut as a nationwide- or worldwide, depending on where the attack was- hero. I needed to make a good first impression. That meant I needed my costume. I was maybe halfway to Parian's shop when she answered, having found a decent spot to fumble my masks on with one-and-a-half hands given my phone, and then starting to run after that. I slowed down so the wind wouldn't ruin the call.

"Yes?" She grumbled, probably not at all happy that I'd been on something like the third call to her phone when she picked up.

"It's Terraform. I'm sorry to call so early, but I need my costume. Is it ready?" I tried to keep the huffing out of my voice, having run without airbending help so I could still hear if she picked up.

"What? No!" She spat. "I'm not going to let you run off and kill yourself-"

Oh goddammit, it was just the argument with dad all over again. I cut her off. "I'm not going to the fight, I'm doing search and rescue afterward. I want to look good doing it, and figured the costume would be more knife and whatever-else resistant than my hoodie." There was silence on the other line, so I wasn't sure if she was chewing on it, or disregarding me. "If you really want me to not make it to the fight, you should probably try to stall me by helping me get my costume ready. Please?" Still silence. "I'll owe you one?"

She grumbled out a long sigh after that. "Fine. I have one that's almost done..."
"Great!" I chirped happily. "I'm almost at your shop. Meet me there in a couple minutes?"

She stuttered out an affirmation, and I shut off the call. It was probably rude of me to assume she lived in the third floor loft over her shop, but what else would she do with the living space? It's not like anyone would go after her there, knowing the rest of the capes would instantly come crashing down on someone breaking the rules that openly.

Without having to worry about my phone, I ate the distance to her shop in a little over a minute, only going just slow enough to be sure I could keep my bearings in the dark. Sure enough, I could sense her already present, still fitting herself into her cape getup as I approached. I decided to let her have the time, and checked my phone for messages from Amy.

The first was what I'd expected, her going off on a 'don't fight Endbringers you stupid bitch' rant, followed a little later by the actually helpful information that they weren't expecting a teleport for at least another hour. A bit confused, I asked her why it would take that long. Her response about a minute later being 'Lots of teams, only so many teleporters, only a couple capes in Brockton that'd go to a Ziz fight, so we're bottom of the priority list.' which... I guess made sense. Armstrong was the big name of the Brockton Protectorate, but he was a Tinker. Even I knew you didn't throw Tinkers at the Simurgh. Going down the list, the only flier was Dauntless, so everyone else would only be useful for emergency response and S&R, assuming they'd let themselves get anywhere near the Simurgh in the first place.

I sighed at that maudlin thought, hoping the city was getting enough support to still be there when we showed up, and sent Amy another text. This one asking her to keep me updated if anything changed. Figuring I'd given her the few minutes I'd promised, I knocked on the door to Parian's shop, and waited for her to let me in.

I was standing with my back to the door, keeping an 'eye' on the street, so I didn't appear to see her checking through the glass and huffing in irritation at me. I mean, I was keeping her up, when I'm sure she would've gone right back to bed after the sirens, had I not called. I did kind of deserve a grumping at.

The door clicked unlocked and opened, and I turned to see her holding her hand out to the partially-lit store. "Well, come on, then." She spoke shortly, and I complied.

She locked the door behind me, and turned back my way. "Thank you for helping me." I said, before she could snap at me. "I'm sorry for keeping you up, but this is important to me."

I could tell she was glaring, behind her mask, but the tumult of her mood had petered off with my apology. "One's image is rather important, yes." She kept up her glare for a moment, before she sighed. I'd just stood there looking appropriately contrite, deliberately ignoring the dark brown hair I could see poking out from under her wig, and other little things resulting from her rush to 'cape up'. "Come on."

She led me upstairs, to her work room, and had me sit while she pulled a trio of mannequins out of storage. My costumes looked... really good, actually. They had a neat military professional look to them, despite the pattern and colors not really fitting any particular national identity I could think of, which would be nice to avoid stepping on any toes. Parian glanced at the tags on them as they floated themselves up for ease of access, then took a few careful looks at the different suits, sliding two of them back to sit along the wall. "This is the closest to done. I was going to finish them over the weekend, including the boots and gloves, which I haven't started on yet." Large needles and thick thread started floating around her, as she started finishing the hem of the skirt, pins I hadn't noticed floating out of the costume as she got to them. "If you're set on going, you'll have to do without them."
"That's fine." I said, glancing down at the costume's bare trousers. I could deal with using my regular fake shoes this time. They were nearly due for replacing, anyway- Dad was right when he said they wouldn't last as long as normal shoes. "Do you have any paint? I could just color what I'm wearing..."

She glanced over, and shook her head. "Nothing that'd work right for that, no." She kept working after that, and I decided to cool my heels trying to meditate. "I'm surprised you're not chomping at the bit, from your call." She remarked a few minutes later.

I checked my phone, it wasn't quite 1:30 yet, and no updates from Amy. "I checked after I called, and someone said the teleporters wouldn't be by for an hour or so. I'd like to get there ASAP, sure, but I've got a little time." I said with a shrug.

Parian hummed, not seeming to slow or speed her work any. "I'll be done in... fifteen minutes, or so." She said, continuing to finish the hems. A couple minutes later, she moved on to finishing the stitching in the pants, and a few minutes after that, checked the zipper under the 'tabard' looking part of the coat, and started sewing some white clip-buttons into the hem, to help hide it. Then she double-checked they worked properly, tested several of the other seams along the coat, and stood back to her full height. "Done."

"Great!" I said, hopping up. "Do you mind helping me get it on?" I was already pulling my hoodie up as I asked that, not really caring that it dragged my slightly sweaty shirt up along with it, giving the woman an eyeful of my abs and sports bra. Her heartbeat and tension cues sparked upward, probably just my ceramic mask coming off in the bundle. I reached in and grabbed the thing, affixing it back over my domino mask and pulling my shirt back down. "Sorry about that." I said, causing her eyes to snap back up to mine. I started fiddling with my pants, only to stop and tilt my head at her. "Do those work as pants, or just over-coverings?"

She bit her lip behind her mask, glancing down at my legs, over to the mannequin, and back again. "They're... pants, yes."

I nodded, and continued shucking mine. Then I grabbed my wallet and phones to move over, kicking the hoodie and pants into a little pile by the chair I'd been sitting in. "Uhhm...?" I halfheartedly prompted, causing her to jump slightly and look up from my legs with her nerves thumping in her chest. She must not've done the shower room thing in school, I guessed.

"Right!" She said, focusing on the costume, undoing its buttons and zippers. It really was just a thick coat and pants, it seemed. I slipped into the pants first, so Parian would stop having to feel awkward. They were a little loose, but not enough that I'd need a belt. I stowed my phones and wallet, and let her feed my arms into the sleeves of the levitating coat. I fluffed my hair out from under it, and turned to look in the mirror. Something seemed... off. I looked good, and I could tell I'd look even better if I had an actual figure to fill the costume out a little, but something didn't quite click.

I grabbed at the wavy ruffles extending from my head. "My hair." The statement was low, and mildly horrified. I started pulling at it, trying to smooth it out and failing. I started trying to weave it into a braid, but I was out of practice, always leaving it down like mom's usually was since her death, and usually just having Emma braid it, before that. "It's too distinct." I half-moaned. I didn't want wearing mom's hair out to be a problem, but it was just like the glasses thing! I gave up on the braid, trying to pull it all into a bun like Gram's. She had less hair to bun up than I did, but managed to make it look pretty good with the hair that'd passed matrilineally to me. "How do buns work?" I huffed, a slight edge of hysteria starting to creep into my voice. "I'm going to be late if I take too much longer with this!"
"Here." Parian said, and I was slightly startled to realize I'd been tunnel-visioning to the point of treating her like just another mannequin in the room. One hand rested gently on my shoulder, and the other shooed my hands away from my hair, before settling on my crown. She slowly moved it down through my hair, a gentle caress that left tingles in its wake. As her fingers glided through my locks, they slowly untangled and straightened, and I realized she was using her power on it. The telekinesis pulled my hair- had it pulling itself- into order, at her will. By the time the gentle stroke of her fingertips reached my mid-back, I could already tell my hair was straighter than it'd ever been, since that's where it usually ended, with its usual curls. The tingling touch extended into the curve of my lower back, the hand lingering slightly as it fell lower. She drew it away, back to where I could see it in the mirror, and slowly curled it into a fist. I watched her wrist twirl and fingers clench, my hair cinching itself into a tight ball at the base of my skull. She inspected the work from a couple angles, then glanced over her kit of tools. A couple were floating where I could see them in the mirror, but more were outside my sight. It was slightly unnerving knowing there were things floating where I couldn't see or sense them, but the moment didn't last long before she pulled a pair of thin steel rods to herself. "There."

I reached up to lightly touch the needles, and my ball of hair. I was surprised at how far it'd compacted itself down. "Wow. Uhm, thanks?" I turned back to her, and her eyes drifted back up to my mask from admiring her handiwork. "Can I go back to bed, now?" She asked in a drowsy monotone.

"Oh! Yeah, sorry." I glanced around for anything I might be forgetting, and spied my shed clothing. "Do you mind if I pick those up with the rest of the costume stuff?"

She shrugged and muttered, "Sure." I could tell she was tired, but it became especially apparent with how far she was slipping out of character.

I hopped down the stairs, rather eager to get moving, as well as let her have her night back. "Thanks again." I said as she came to unlock the door.

"Please don't make a habit of it." She drolled, motioning to the empty street.

I gingerly stepped past her, giving a small wave and repeating, "I mean it, thank you so much." She hesitated, biting her lips again, feeling conflicted and wary. "Hey, about the hair thing..." I hummed affirmatively. "...don't tell anyone about that?"

I chuckled softly. "I... don't know too much about what all goes into the Endbringer truce, but I'm pretty sure secrets are in there somewhere." I shrugged. "I wouldn't say anything anyway, but... I figured you'd trust that more."

She nodded, feeling a little more relieved at my words. Then she lifted her hand in an aborted wave of her own, and slid the door shut. I heard the lock click, and felt her heave out a sigh. She glanced around the door to check on me through the windows. I nodded and turned, realizing how awkward I must look just standing around. I started walking, then hopped to a jog, working my way up to a wind-boosted sprint towards the PRT building. The whole way I watched Parian trudge her way first to the lights to switch them back off, then upstairs to her bed, barely divesting herself of her mask, wig, and ruffles, before she collapsed back into bed.

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There were a pair of PRT troopers manning the door when I skidded to a halt on the sidewalk
outside the PRT building. "Hey, am I late? Did I get here in time?"

The agents looked to each other, then one of them motioned inside, which I took to mean that I'd made it. I hopped up the stairs and strolled into the main lobby, only to stop dead, staring at the gathered capes. New Wave and a boy in armor to one side, most of them drinking coffee to wake up, the boy I recognized as Shielder instead sipping at one of those godawful energy drinks Greg swore by. That was fine.

It was the swarm of Nazis on the other side of the room that had me pause.

It looked like they had nearly their entire roster here. The only ones I recognized to be missing were Purity, Crusader, and that one gasmasked 'blitzkrieg' or whatever. I knew I should know them all by sight, this far into my career... but it just never came up. I decided I should change that, the next chance I got.

I knew Kaiser. Everyone knew him. He was flanked by the Twins, with the rest of his capes to the side of them closer to me, and on the other stood Miss Militia a good few paces off. It felt slightly ironic that the hero standing closest to them was the only one here I knew to be non-white. If I had to guess from how tense she felt, she was keeping an eye on them. Opposite her were Hookwolf's bunch, him, Cricket, and Stormtiger. A little closer to me and slightly apart from the rest of the Empire stood Victor and Othala, very close to one another. Separated a ways off, but nearer to them than anyone else, Rune sat bundled in one of the lobby's chairs.

Their reactions varied quite a bit, most of the Empire capes started eyeing me, sizing up the new competition in their own ways. The big exceptions being Hookwolf and Othala, who didn't seem to care about me, and Rune, who felt nervous and conflicted all of a sudden. Maybe it had to do with our last fight? Miss Militia felt guardedly optimistic when she glanced my way, and the half of New Wave I hadn't yet met felt similar. Mark wasn't here, but the rest of the Dallons were. Carol seemed to recognize me, if the indignant frustration bubbling up under her natural wary mistrust was anything to go by. Vicky and the boy in red and gold armor were more curious than anything.

Amy, of course, recognized me instantly. She felt weary, tired. She didn't want to be here, but knew it was the right thing to do. She also didn't want me here, from the brief spike of worry and fear when she caught sight of me, alongside the mild surprise at my costume. I'd described it, but as the saying went, a few words rarely compared favorably to seeing something for yourself. This all simmered down into the frustrated apathy of those awoken far too early, tinged with small flares of jealousy. That confused me for a bit, until I remembered how much she didn't like her own costume, which she hadn't had much say in the design for.

I steadfastly ignored the whispered conversations from the Nazi half of the room, making a beeline for Amy. About a third of the way there, she caught my eye and subtly shook her head. I hesitated. Right, Taylor knew Amy. Showing up to a fight with Panacea in tow was one thing, there might be a good reason for that to happen which didn't involve us knowing each other. Jumping straight to chatting like we knew each other would shoot any attempt at obfuscating my identity in the foot. I kept the same course, but my target shifted slightly.

"Hey, you're Kid Win, right?" I knew Gallant had a knight theme, which this boy certainly didn't, narrowing things down handily.

"Uh, I-yeah." He stammered shyly. If I had to guess, he was used to having the rest of the Wards around to draw attention away.

"So... where is everyone?" I hedged, adamantly ignoring Vicky pulling Amy slightly away to begin a whispered interrogation about me. The rest of New Wave kept an eye on me, but I didn't think
their own low conversations were about me. "I wasn't expecting Wards, but I thought there'd be more Protectorate heroes." He glanced around nervously, though his helmet should have hidden most of it. "I'd ask Miss Militia, but she looks... busy." I said softly, giving him another few seconds to gather himself.

The heroine in question had moved slightly, to keep myself and the villains in sight. Behind her, I could see monitors on the walls. Where usually they'd be playing various ads, safety videos, and clips of the local heroes; instead most of them had a large countdown running, with about thirty-six minutes remaining. The monitor next to it had much smaller font, but I could make out 'BROCKTON BAY: 413' and under it a counter that was slowly ticking up. It'd held at '198' since I'd gotten here, but jumped up to '204' as I watched. Amy was right, we were abysmally low priority, it seemed.

"Uh, yeah." He finally muttered again. "Most of them are staying back. Miss Militia has experience coordinating things, Velocity can easily make it right before the timer's up, and Armsmaster..." I could tell he fidgeted slightly, despite it being mostly hidden by his rigid armor. "He's the sort of Tinker who can make every minute count..." Unlike me, I could tell he was thinking. I didn't know if it was naturally low self-esteem, or comparisons to Armsmaster that I hadn't realized before now that he'd face almost constantly, but he really didn't have a very high opinion of himself. I had no idea what I could do about it, though. The kindest thing would probably be to ignore it, for now.

"What about the other Wards? If you're here, are they coming, too?" By now Amy had huffed and started stonewalling Vicky, instead of trying to deflect, obfuscate, or lie about any connection we might have, based on both being at that fight last week. I could feel Vicky's aura flaring over the room now and then, but forced myself to ignore it. She was pouting now, looking around for something else to focus on, her eyes always straying back to myself and Kid Win, curiosity that I was.

He shook his head. "Clock, Aegis, and Gallant don't do Endbringer stuff. It's a little weird Shadow Stalker isn't here, though. She usually..." He trailed off, uncomfortably.

"...likes rubbing in how much better at Search and Rescue she is?" Vicky cut in, smiling impishly. He grumbled, but didn't outright deny it. Shadow Stalker sounded... unpleasant.

"What about Vista?" I asked.

Kid winced, glancing to Vicky, who had a classic 'Oh, please don't tell, my version is much more detailed and embarassing~' twinkle in her eyes as she smiled at us. He sighed and relented. "Vista isn't allowed to go." Vicky's grin widening slightly had him bite back a groan and continue. "The last time there was a Simurgh fight, Vista went for search and rescue. It was before I'd finished joining the Wards, and she doesn't like talking about it, but she was hurt. Stabbed by a Ziz-bomb." I hadn't heard about that, but a glance over to Vicky and Amy showed they weren't surprised. Depending on how bad it was, Amy might have been asked to heal it, so that made sense. "Since then, they put new regulations in place. No Wards under 15 at away fights, even with parental permission." He paused to shake his head. "She's... still really mad about being at the center of that. I would be, too. "We've tried arguing that it was a Ziz plot, with kids triggering younger on average every year, to keep young Wards that could make a serious difference out of the fights, but all that did was land her in M/S for a week."

I didn't need the winces around to tell that sounded unpleasant, and I didn't even know what it meant. "M. S.?"

He cringed. "Master/Stranger protocols. For telling if someone's had their mind altered, or might not be who they say they are. I'm... not sure how much else I'm allowed to tell you about it." Yeah,
that didn't sound remotely pleasant.

"So, uh," I said a bit louder, changing the subject. "What should I expect when we get there?"

The two of them floundered a little, though I wasn't sure why. I knew these fights were bad, but then they'd just say it was bad, wouldn't they?

"Oh-ho? Newbie wants advice now, does she?" The deep voice crowed from behind me. I watched the figure amble over from the middle of the pack with my senses, not really wanting to turn and interact with them, even as I cringed. Maybe I'd been a little too loud?

"Go away, Hookwolf." Vicky growled, glaring over my shoulder. I could feel her aura pick up, trying to run him off, but I pushed the feelings down. I really didn't feel like 'awe' right now. The rest of the room was tensely watching, and I could feel Rune jump to her feet and trail after him. She ended up a little behind him, a couple meters off to the side, near the exit. She felt worried, concerned, irritated, and a little angry, though I couldn't tell who each of those were aimed at.

The man slapped a hand over his thin-shirted chest, miming a shot to the heart. "Oh no, and here I was, just bein' neighborly." I could tell he was feeling the irrational fear response from Vicky's aura, but wasn't letting it stop him. I tried to remember if they'd fought before, or if he was just used to ignoring fear as a nearly-indestructible frontline fighter. It had to be something like that, with the way Rune was nearly cowering under the same effect. "Girlie wants advice on dealing with an Endbringer's mess, then I figured as one of the few people in the room with experience fighting the things, I might have a touch of seniority on the topic." He grinned widely under his full-face mask.

That's what this was. Strutting, making himself feel bigger, poking barbs at the heroes while they couldn't shoot him for it. It reminded me of Emma and all her top bitch socialite bullshit. I'd hated him on principle as a murderous Nazi before, but this was just making me dislike him on a personal level, on top of that. "But not the Simurgh fights?" I asked, finally turning to face him and trying to affect as much of an 'unimpressed' look as I could, as well-covered as I was.

My barb struck a nerve, but he didn't show it outwardly, refusing to let himself lose face. Instead he shrugged widely. "The fuck am I supposed to do to some flighty bitch up in the air? I know I'm a ground-pounder." Can't concede, can't let himself lose, not in his nature to let things slide, but can't revenge the slight violently like he wants to, with the truce on. "Besides, you've seen the line for the smurf fights." He pointed with a thumb back towards the monitors, now morosely displaying a static '212' with about half an hour to go. "Anyway, important thing is, if you're not a Mover, they'll have you digging civvies out of the rubble." He said, dismissively. Then he grinned, a savage, wicked thing behind his mask. "But if you are a Mover, you'll be on cordon duty with me and your fliers." He twitched his chin up at New Wave. "There'll be two rings of flares around the city, where they're gonna be putting up the walls. Anyone from inside passes the first, you shoo them back inside." He shook his head sadly, despite his smile. "But if they get past the second one..." He reached his right hand up slightly, his middle finger shredding as the flayed filaments distorted and distended, forming into thin chains and braided cords of barbed and bladed metal. The thin whip slowly slithered its way through the air across his chest, until it reached his neck. He flicked its tip across his throat in a quick and brutal gesture, before the digit reformed and he continued the motion into a shrug.

I grit my teeth furiously, my hands clenching as I fought down the urge to punch him in his smug shit-eating grin. He wasn't here to help the city. He wasn't here to save anyone. He was here to kill people and get away with it. I wasn't the only one bristling, either. Most of New Wave had tensed, and Amy was actively holding Vicky back with a hand on her sister's chest.
"Hookwolf, please, you're not helping." Rune cut in, causing the man to glare in her direction. Then he noticed the eerie silence from the rest of his cadre as they watched, his eyes panning over them until they reached Kaiser himself, whose head shifted in a tiny negative shake.

He scoffed, but prowled away towards Stormtiger and Cricket, muttering "Shut up, brat." to Rune as he went.

The tension died down a bit as he left, New Wave letting the imminent violence drain out of them, while Kid Win uncoiled a bit from his subtle cowering in the face of goddamned Hookwolf, which was pretty understandable all things considered.

“Don’t talk to anyone.” I’d assumed Rune would follow Hookwolf back to their side of the room, but instead she glanced their way and slowly approached us. “When we get there, don’t talk to anyone.” She stopped a couple feet shy, when it looked like Vicky was tensing up to punch her Junior Nazi face in. “They’re not people anymore, not really.” Vicky snapped at her, and Rune flinched, taking a step back and cowering away.

Despite my mask, I halfheartedly glared at my friend, still held back slightly by her sister. “Vicky, aura.” I muttered sharply. “There’s still a truce on, snap a cap on it.”

Vicky gave me a confused look, but she did settle down a bit. She huffed and floated away slightly, her sister holding her place between all of us. I could tell Amy was frustrated, at least partly with me, but I didn’t have the time to unpack that right now. I turned back to Rune and curtly motioned for her to get on with it.

She was still wary and worried, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was me she was worried for, though I had no idea why. The fact that she felt like she was telling the truth helped a little, but considering dehumanizing others was part of the Empire’s rhetoric, not as much as it usually would. “I know that sounds bad, and I know most of the people in the city are just normal people stuck there with the bombs, but it’s the one you stop and talk to, the one you let yourself think is still a person, and isn’t, that hurts you.” She shook her head sadly, and I could feel how ashamed she felt, admitting it. “Not even physically, either. They’ll say something, do something, and it might not matter now, but someday down the line, it’ll come up, or you’ll remember… and then you’ll hesitate, or overreact, or whatever, and something terrible will happen because you talked to a bomb.” Her words had grown more heated as she spoke, peaking near the end loud enough that it was possible the rest of the room might have overheard it. She seemed to realize this, and shrunk self-consciously in on herself. She shook her head, continuing at her original quiet volume, a surprising amount of worry and compassion to her emotions and tone. “Please, just… don’t talk to anyone. It’s better that way.” Her piece said, she made her way back to her prior seat, skirting around the rest of her gang, and steadfastly ignoring their calculating eyes.

“Well,” Amy muttered after Rune passed out of earshot. “…she’s not entirely wrong.”

“Ames!” Vicky whined, disappointed.

She shrugged. “Carol said the same thing before we left the house, and Aunt Sarah said it again before we came here. Are you going to say they’re wrong, too?”

Victoria was fidgeting, uncomfortable. Kid Win and most of New Wave were also feeling varying levels of conflicted over the conversation they were overhearing. “You don’t have to agree with her, though.” She grumbled halfheartedly.

Amy shrugged again. “I don’t really like it, either, but someone had to tell Terra.”
“Thanks, Panacea.” I said, fumbling slightly over her cape name. She grunted and wandered a little closer to her family, letting the room settle down into a rather awkward silence for about a minute.

Miss Militia put a hand to her ear after that, drawing eyes, including mine, across the room. The words and numbers on the monitors behind her were blinking. She nodded, then turned fully towards the crowd. “The fight’s over! Everyone get ready to head out.” Her voice projected over the room fairly well without yelling. Our place in the queue was knocked down a few places, and the estimated time to departure settled down at about six minutes.

The numbers didn’t quite make sense until I noticed the ‘current’ queue number jumping far more rapidly now. “Does that really make such a huge difference?” I wondered out loud.

Kid Win answered. “A lot of the transport capes won’t go near an active Endbringer fight, let alone a Simurgh fight, add in that about half the mass-teleporters we have access to are Tinkers who use their tech to do it…?” He trailed off, sadly.

“…and Tinkers are bad for Simurgh fights.” I finished, morosely. I suppose if anything explained cutting our queue time by twenty-something minutes, getting more than half their teleporters actually participating would do it.

The room settled into a tense silence while we waited out the clock. About three minutes to leaving, the elevator dinged and swished open, dispensing Armsmaster into the room. He strode in, in all his blue-chrome glory, trailed by a small floating trolley laden with plastic crates. His eyes scanned the room, fixating on me as he pulled up next to Miss Militia. “New cape?”

“Terraform, sir.” I responded, having to pitch my voice louder to project across the room. I had to wonder if the Protectorate had training for doing that so easily, or if it was something that came with an age I hadn’t hit, yet.

He hummed and nodded. “Good to have you with us.” He then immediately turned to start a hushed conversation with Miss Militia that I couldn’t overhear. I pushed down the flash of giddiness that flared up at his words, now wasn’t the time for fangirling. He grabbed one of the smaller crates off the top of the trolley, popped it open with one hand and drew a thick plastic band out of it. Then he set it down and sent it skidding to the middle of the room with his foot. "Com bands." He announced, before making his way over to me. Several of the Nazis started audibly grumbling over the disrespect they were being shown, but it was hard to feel bad for them. Victor, Stormtiger, Cricket, and one of the twins went to the box to grab enough for the rest of them, as the Tinker got to us. "Comms check?” He asked, looking to New Wave.

"Already done." Brandish answered, getting a nod in return.

"I assume you don't have your own radio?” He asked me, and I shook my head. He nodded, holding the band out to me. It looked a lot like a bulky plastic version of a sweatband, with a basic screen taking up most of its face, and two large-ish buttons taking up the rest. "Hold the top button to talk, press the bottom one to ping your position, hold both for emergency override. Do not abuse that privilege." I nodded, and was briefly distracted by Velocity streaking through the room from the front entrance, ending next to Miss Militia. "Press the top button, and follow the startup prompts.” He said, drawing my full attention again. "Good luck." Social niceties complete, he gave a curt nod and turned to gather up the box of armbands on his way back to the other Protectorate heroes.

It took me a second to figure out the release latch, then clip the band over my wrist. I hit the button and 'State Name' popped up on the screen. I held it up to my mask and stated "Terraform." By the time I drew it away, the prompt had changed to 'TERRAFORM, Confirm?' with a ‘Yes' next to the top button, and a 'No' by the bottom one. I hit yes, and the band started to slowly flash 'STANDBY'
at me. It was finally starting to really sink in that *this was happening*. I was going to another country to help with emergency disaster relief. I was going to be saving lives. People were going to be *counting on me*.

I drew in a deep breath and slipped into the first stages of meditation, clearing the clutter from my mind and focusing on what was important. This was happening, and I was ready for it. That's all that mattered.
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We waited in tense silence as the clock ticked down, starting to flash red at the thirty-second mark, which I guessed meant we should expect our ride any second now. At precisely twelve seconds from zero, my senses detected a new person in the room. I turned to look at him, not sure what to expect, but what looked startlingly like a blue-suited bellhop, or old-timey elevator operator, certainly wasn’t it. He was heaving very slightly, stress responses high, but hiding it well enough. He raised his hand to tap his blue beret-looking hat with a jaunty salute, his smile not quite reaching the eyes under his large identity-concealing goggles. It felt like he was taking a second to breathe before jumping back into the thick of things, and I couldn’t really begrudge that at all. The rest of his outfit actually reminded me more of my own, than any others that came to mind. A large blue padded coat, with a lightning motif along the seam, where I had my tabard-looking part. The rest of the costume was subdued by comparison, really just matching the colors, adding shin and elbow guards, along with gloves.

“Everyone ready to go?” He called, catching the attention of everyone who hadn’t already noticed him. “Gather ‘round, tight-ish.”

There were a few muttered thanks from the New Wave adults and Protectorate capes, Armsmaster’s the loudest of them. “Thank you for prioritizing us, Strider.”

I’d actually heard about this guy. He was supposed to be one of the best teleporters in the world, though I thought he was independent? “No trouble at all.” He replied, motioning us all closer. He didn’t seem entirely honest about it, and I had to wonder if there were favors being traded under the table to get the best ride picking us up. When we’d all bunched into a circle about three meters across, I had a sudden flash of vertigo, and we were outside. The sun beat down oppressively from above, while distant yelling and sirens flooded our hearing. “Good luck.” Strider said, then he was gone.

When my eyes finished adjusting a second later, I glanced around to verify what my senses were already telling me. We stood near the edge of a large lake cutting the city in two, a couple blocks away from a heavily damaged bridge that used to span a narrower section of it. From what I could sense, this spot was chosen more for being central to the damage, rather than as a particularly open landing zone. Velocity was already gone, and Miss Militia had started off towards a makeshift command node. Armsmaster hadn’t moved yet, but he was already talking on his helmet radio.

An armored trooper holding a tablet computer tromped up from where he’d been waiting nearby. From the looks of similar setups nearby, there were a bunch of 'landing zones' for the incoming parahumans, each with at least one of these greeter troops. "Brockton Bay?” It wasn't really a question. Despite the inflection, his eyes scanned over the crowd and his tablet without any sign of surprise or confusion I could detect. "Movers and fliers know what you're doing?” When he got nothing but affirmative gestures and noises, he turned to Armsmaster. "Comms set up?” The Tinker paused his conversation just long enough to give the man a thumbs-up and a nod. "Good," The trooper turned back to the rest of us. "Get to it, then."

Hookwolf grinned and his body shredded, flaying itself and hardening, adding mass and whirling into a writhing, roiling ball of sharp and deadly, rolling away for about half a second before his preferred lupine form leapt from the mass, sprinting away. I could sense there was very little solid to him, despite being made of metal. It was all ropes and chains and cords of metal, coiling and
gripping on each other, pulsing in time in a twisted facsimile of musculature, holding its shape with
the few larger solid blades within the mass acting like splintered, disconnected bones.

I barely noticed Kid Win and most of New Wave taking to the air, I was so close to being sick all
of a sudden.

"Triage camp is by Capital Hill," The agent continued, mercifully drawing my attention away. I
saw him pointing towards the largest pillar of smoke coming from this side of the lake, in the
middle of a circular structure formed from the roads around it, like the center of a simple
dreamcatcher. I could feel the remains of a much more densely packed version on the other side of
the lake, with far more damage than this one had suffered. "If you hit the crater, take a left."

"Come on, Ames," Vicky said, quickly bundling the healer in her arms. As she sped into the air, I
catched her saying "Glory Girl and Panacea..." into her radio before distance and the Trooper
talking again overpowered the sound.

"They got hit hard." The man sad with a sad shake of his head. "That's one of the high damage
areas, we had command and triage near the parliament building to try and consolidate defenses, but
it didn't work, and then we couldn't move the injured." He pointed across the lake, towards the
other circle of streets. "Ziz parked over city hall and smashed up a lot of the nearby buildings,
that's where most of the damage in city limits is. Bitch also smashed the reservoir dam nearby," He
pointed off mostly perpendicular to the first two areas, where I could feel the shallow river valley
on the edge of the city, and the remains of the dam that was still slowly crumbling and eroding as
water flowed over the top of what was left of it. "which caused a lot of damage downstream, tying
up some of the country's emergency services to handle that. If you head off chasing that, we won't
follow." He pointed back across the city again, completing the little cross of damage dealt.
"Finished off by smashing the relay from the rest of the city's water suppliers, and the bridges to
cross the lake with. Those are lower priority, but if you can tinker up a water purifier, that'd be
fantastic." The man turned away then, tapping away at the tablet, clearly not expecting anyone to
actually help with that. Manpower and Brandish broke off at that point, following after Vicky and
Amy.

"I can do water!" I yelled, flinching at my own overeager volume. The man turned back, and I
raised a stream of water out of the lake. It was murky from the collapsed bridges and who knew
what else, but I split the water as I pulled it towards us, one streamer becoming murkier, and the
other nearly clear. "I'm pretty sure I can make drinking water."

Everyone nearby, especially the capes, were paying attention to me, now. "One moment."
Armsmaster said, and I wasn't sure if he was talking to me, or whoever he'd been on the line with.
He depressed a section of his armor near his lower back, and drew a small cylindrical tool from the
section that opened up. He walked up, shoving his entire hand, gizmo and all, into the clearer glob
of water. A few seconds later, he pulled it out, glancing at it before looking at some readout or
other I couldn't see on his visor display. "It's not pure, but it should be potable." I tried not to wince
at the man basically saying 'It'll do.' "I'll get some teams working on building and refurbishing
water tanks." He turned fully to me, then. "Terraform, I'll want you back here in a couple hours, to
start filling tanks." It took me a moment to realize he wanted a response, and I gave a jerky nod. He
turned to go back to what he'd been doing, before he hesitated. "This is a very good thing, you can
do." With a nod, he went back to his conversation, pulling his hover trolley along behind him as he
made his way over to the tents Miss Militia had left for. I ignored that Brandish had stopped to
watch, too. She gave me an odd conflicted look before following a slightly impatient Manpower to
where the country's capital building used to be.

Nothing left to do with it, I directed the water back into the lake, both streams flowing into it
without splashing. With the display of my abilities over, the rest of the Empire capes drew away slightly. Kaiser raised his hands, and a single massive blade began to creep up from the road next to them. It was weird feeling the thing sprout and widen, then extend, the metal seeming to appear and mold itself from nothing. It only took about six seconds for the thin three-by-four meter metal obelisk to finish forming, slowly digging itself deeper into the road for stability as it went, subsuming the material into more of the same metal.

Then Rune stepped up to it, and ran her finger over a small section of it in a quick but intricate pattern. The blade lifted itself out of the road, leaving a thin but somewhat deep divot, and tilted onto its side. Their capes started filing on, Rune getting on last. Our eyes met as I watched, and she gave me an apologetic grimace before the blade lifted off the ground and cut them from my senses.

As they floated away across the lake, I felt confused. I tried to puzzle out why she'd feel like that, but the effort just made me feel frustrated. The confusion shifted to indignance, fury bubbling to the fore of my mind. I wasn't some weak nobody to be pitied. I was here to save people, and I was going to be amazing at it. I'd wipe that look right off her damned face!

I took a running leap off the edge of the lakefront, the water rising to meet me, freezing to my feet and forming into an ice board. I landed rather softly in the water, coasting forward as I spun slightly, coiling the water underneath me into an artificial current that had me shooting across to the other side. The water at the other side formed into a shallow ramp that had me flying over the quay and between the first buildings on the other side. Just water damage here, nothing structural, I didn't have to worry about stopping. The ice turned to water and I let it drop to the road first, before my feet hit the surface and I transitioned into a roll, conserving most of my momentum and popping up already sprinting.

At first I aimed myself at the closest destroyed building, where I could sense six body-shapes, two of which still had signs of life. The emergency responders were all clustered around the center of the damage, where there were more buildings down, more people to help... and more able-bodied people to help them help survivors. As much as it pained me to admit it, the more time I personally spent picking people out and dragging them to medical aid, the less I was spending doing what I'd be best for- moving large amounts of rubble.

I dashed past with a wind-assisted sprint, quickly coming to the point where taller damaged buildings were spilling their rubble into the road and making travel more difficult. There were people here helping, but not as many as further on, and fewer capes. Most of them were coming from the north, or going around the lake to come at the problem from the sides, rather than taking the straight path through like I had. I knocked a bit of rubble out of the road to start clearing things, but another couple blocks and there was nowhere for it to go, and I stopped bothering. I was still running, now vaulting up to more stable outcroppings, kicking off and leaping between them on my way past. I skidded to a halt on the other side, where the crews from the north were trickling in. Most of them, and the majority of the capes nearby, were diving into the middle of it, where the worst of the damage and the most downed buildings were. I didn't want to disrupt that yet, not without showing that I could actually help. So I turned to the sides, the outlying damage, tapering off like spokes from where beams or other attacks had been redirected, or buildings thrown by the endbringer. The center of the damage was worse, having debris rained on them from her protective cloak of airborne buildings, or being crushed under the chaotic swirl of material she'd pull up to protect herself or harry the capes with.

That was fine, it meant buildings where people were crawling around or through debris, instead of on top of it. "Careful! Moving rocks!" I called, pulling several chunks people were having to squeeze around away, opening doorways or clearing hallways. After the first couple piles of rubble I shifted to the street, I started finding buildings where moving the rubble might destabilize the
rest. I thrust pillars of stone or concrete, whatever was under the buildings, up to hold the structure while I pulled away detached walls, or nearly complete floors with no more walls to support them. Having shown off what I could do, and not seeing much else I could help with on this street, I headed for the bulk of the damage.

The buildings here were a lot taller than I was used to, with the loamy coastal soil of Brockton Bay. Back home 'Tall' buildings were four of five stories, only buildings near the Towers ever breaking ten, hence the name. Medhall stood at a comparatively gigantic 20 stories, well past the limit of what was safe for most of the city's soil. It was surprising to me how much rubble seven, ten, fifteen storey buildings left behind, if you built rows of them, and then knocked them all down. It spread into the streets, consumed alleyways, and left a sea of rubble for blocks in a rough circle.

There were people tackling the rubble from the sides, but that'd take weeks or months to clear it, which the survivors didn't have. So most of the responders, a lot of them looking like desperate or determined civilians, were climbing on top of the rubble to dig down into it. There were Brutes doing the work of five or ten men apiece, Movers diving in and dragging the injured out. I spied a Blaster, destroying larger chunks of rubble when a crew wearing hardhats and safety vests told them it was safe. There were even a couple Shakers, telekitetics or geokinetics like me, levitating larger pieces away. Those I grabbed out of the air to their surprise, pulling them over to a shallow pile on a sidewalk.

"Everyone move!" I shouted, catching their attention, but not provoking the response I was after. I took a wide stance, flashing my hands out palm-first, then repeating the motion and clenching my hands into fists. The rubble under their feet for nearly an entire block shifted upward slightly, just enough to get their attention, or make people stumble a little at worst. I held it there, preventing anything from slipping deeper. "Everybody off! I'm moving it all!"

That got people moving. There were some calls of confusion, some people yelling at me, asking me what I thought I was doing, but no one got very close, and the people on the rubble never stopped moving. I cut off the angrier ones by raising my right hand, still clenched, and drawing dozens, then hundreds, of chunks of brick, concrete, and plaster into the air from places the diggers had vacated.

"I need a dumping zone!" I flicked my head back, to indicate behind me. Everyone on solid ground, the ones who weren't staring dumbfounded at the levitating stone anyway, started shooing people. It was chaos for a couple seconds, before they fell into agreement and cleared one side of the street for me. It wasn't a lot of space, and it was going to run out quick. "Can we get some trucks or something?" I asked.

"Already on it." One of the hardhats called back. He wasn't the only one on the radio, I saw a few capes speaking into wristbands, and members of other crews on handsets. I didn't hear anything from my armband, but I heard some tinny noises from other ones. I guess they filtered who got what messages somehow, and to be fair, I didn't need to know everything that was going on in the whole city.

By the time I'd deposited the first load of rubble, the climbers had mostly cleared a couple building-sized swaths of area, so I used both hands and lifted. Solid-looking masses of loose bits came up, small non-stone bits of stuff that hadn't been particularly attached to the building materials dropping out of it, the largest bits being office chairs that were light enough I let them fall, and a desk I managed to catch with another chunk of brickwork before it landed. There weren't many people left alive under so much rubble, but uncovering them was my priority. "Get them out and move!" I shouted, a slight pant of effort cutting into my voice. "I'm holding the stone rubble
steady, don't worry about it shifting!" I took a moment to breathe and focus. "There's more people
down there!"

The hardest part was dealing with how many things I was controlling at once. The things I was
lifting and moving, and all the bits of rubble I was holding still enough to be safe, it was a lot.
Compared to that, the density and weight of the materials weren't much of a factor. The chunks I
was lifting were rarely more than a ton each. The effort needed was slowly easing as I got used to
it, but it was still the most tiring thing I'd done since getting my powers.

Eventually we settled into a bit of a tempo, fewer and fewer normal people rushing in when I
cleared rubble. They left it to the Movers, and those Brutes whose strength came with additional
speed or agility. If it took them longer than a few seconds to find someone in the open, I'd taken to
holding bits of brick or plaster in the air right above them like a marker. Things slowed down when
it started getting dark, but they passed out flashlights and set up larger floodlights where we were
working. Sadly there weren't enough large trucks in the city to make a difference with the rubble
hauling. I was moving enough to fill dozens of pickup trucks in minutes, the coordination needed
to make those logistically feasible just didn't exist right now. Faster to just move the rubble a bit
farther down the road, at least until we'd cleared enough space to start filling it back up. It got to
the point where we were clearing a whole building's worth of rubble in a few minutes, and there'd
only been a few blocks where buildings had actually been destroyed, rather than damaged.

Never let it be said that the endbringers weren't destructive, but of the three, the Simurgh usually
left the fewest destroyed buildings behind. Who cares about destroying homes or businesses when
she destroyed your minds? She was the Hopekiller, after all.

I'd known they were there, but the first visible sign of the Empire capes were the Valkyrie twins.
They were at full size, something like ten to twelve meters tall. It was hard to tell with one of them
leaning over, and the other crawling, using their height to reach over and into the rubble like living
cranes. Rune was levitating large chunks of rubble away, but mostly using that original blade
they'd flown in on like a giant backhoe. All three of them kept checking with Cricket, I guessed
something about her powers let her detect people like I could. Kaiser was mostly just standing
around being visible, occasionally using thick 'blades' that were too wide to properly cut anything
to lift and shift larger pieces of rubble. I didn't see any of the others, but I had to assume Othala had
gone to heal, and Victor might be with her.

They all stopped to back away and watch as me and my crew rolled through, doing more work in
minutes than they'd managed in the couple hours since we'd gotten here. They were all wary,
which made me feel good. There were other emotions, but the outlier was Rune. After she'd felt
wary and confused while she watched me work, she started to feel... pride? And... hope? I had no
idea what to make of it, and put it out of my mind, concentrating on my work.

It only took another half an hour or so to finish sifting through the destroyed buildings, about
twenty minutes after my armband let out an 'it is now 5AM EST' courtesy notification. Everyone
was happy at our progress, but the celebration was short lived and I'd shied away from it anyway.
There were still damaged buildings elsewhere, and while most of the city still had power, there
were sections that needed repairs to bring the lights back on. Almost as soon as we were done, I'd
started making my way back to where we'd been dropped off. When I got to the lake I hopped in,
making another ice board and surfing across, though much slower than the first time.

I pressed the top button on my armband. "This is Terraform. Armsgmaster said he wanted me for
something?"

A couple seconds later, the armband dinged. "Please proceed to the marker on the map,
Terraform." The pleasant female voice requested. I looked at the little screen, where there was a map grid, and a little arrow pointing to a point not currently on the mostly-blank grid. I turned the thing, and the arrow moved after it took a moment to update itself. I suppose I was in the middle of a lake, there wouldn't be much in the way of additional landmarks...

"That is kinda' neat, though." I muttered, and sped up in the direction indicated.

As I got closer to the waypoint, I began to notice that not all of the lights I saw were from the streetlights or the floodlamps. Tiny, abnormally bright lights dotted the shore as well, resolving themselves into welding torches as I neared the lakefront. I hopped off my iceboard and took in the scene. There were tanks large and small everywhere on the quay, a good chunk of them that weren't made to hold water at all. Some of those were in the process of being scrubbed out with all manner of tools and rinsed with lakewater, whatever they had to do to remove whatever had been in there previously. The welding torches I'd seen were busy working away at making new 'tanks', boxy things that didn't look fit to store water at all, from the outside, at least. From the snapshots I was getting of the process, it looked like they were welding together plates of thin sheet metal, reinforcing the edges, and then adding in another layer of metal, before... filling the gap with containment foam? I didn't know how sturdy the stuff was when it'd set, but these were big boxes, a couple meters to a side. That was a lot of water, when full. Maybe I'd been underestimating the stuff?

"Hey, uh..." I was about to ask after Armsmaster, but it dawned on me that all of these people were gathered up here waiting on me, working and building and cleaning, all on my word I could do something and Armsmaster's that I wasn't wrong. That, and I could feel him kneeling inside one of the partially constructed boxtanks. My throat constricted, mouth suddenly dry, and I forced myself to swallow to try and regain my ability to speak. It suddenly felt very warm in my coat. I didn't know he'd be working on this personally! "Armsmaster?" Try as I might, I failed to keep a slight stutter out of the name.

He popped up, catching sight of me and nodding. "Terraform, good." He knelt back down to finish what he was doing, and I plodded around to stand nearby. Five seconds later he was done, standing up and calling someone over, handing the improbably small welding torch off to a man in a stripped-down trooper outfit, without the helmet, armor, or weapons. Then he turned back to me. "We'll have you start over here." He pointed and turned, assuming I'd follow.

Naturally, I did. He led me to one end, and told me to fill up the first of the big tanks. I lifted a thick stream of water into the air and had it spiral into a screw shape, then started forcing all the not-water out of the stream, to splash back into the lake. The remaining clean water flowed into the tank, and I guessed we were getting a few gallons of water every second. "I... wasn't expecting you to handle this yourself." I said, trying to strike up conversation when I had the flow steady. It was just a matter of continuing the motions and maintaining it, now. "Is this really going to help that much?"

He frowned, and I felt a flare of indignation. "Yes, it is." He shook his head and sighed, his emotions evening out again. "The city is without water, and may be for some time." He waved his hand at the tank. "Every hundred gallons is another family that will feel less like rioting in a week. It means we can more easily prioritize shipping in food and medicine. Fixing the water supply is our highest priority, after the basic fencing, even higher than the permanent walls." I'd been trying to ignore that part. Everyone here, at least everyone who lived here, was going to be trapped. Walled in, and left here. I still wasn't sure how I felt about that. "...high priority doesn't mean quick or easy solutions, though."

"Right. Yeah." I muttered, not really sure what to say. I felt like, for all I'd done, it hadn't been
enough. But I was tired, and wasn't sure what else I could do. I was only one person, I couldn't fix everything. This would have to be enough. "Hey... thanks. For setting this up."

He was quiet, lost in thought for a few seconds, before he nodded. "It's fine." He paused again. "I've been working under the assumption that you'd want to head home, either for school or to sleep. There will be transport back to Brockton, in about an hour. Education is important, and not being missing after an attack helps preserve civilian identities. I won't stop you if you want to stay, though. I'm going to keep working here until you're done, then I'll be joining the engineers, fixing or bypassing the water relay station."

No pressure, huh? I shook my head, switching the stream from one tank to the next. I could already tell I was going to be filling these up faster than they could make them. Eventually there'd be a bottleneck. I could give it an hour, and see how I felt. Between the lack of sleep and all the effort from earlier, I was ready for a break... and I wasn't sure I'd want to come back. "I think... I'd like to go home then, yes."

I expected him to feel disappointed, but he just nodded. "I'll let them know." He turned, but hesitated, pausing to watch me. I was still swirling my arms, twisting slightly and swaying on my knees, to keep the water flowing efficiently. "That's going to get monotonous. I'll see if someone can find you a radio." He nodded to himself and headed back to the welding teams. Rather than dwelling on it, I decided to see if I could increase the flow a bit.

A few minutes later, when I was nearly done with the third tank, one of the agents running gofer tasks set one of those large portable radios down nearby, tuned to some rock station or another. I wasn't sure how I felt about the special treatment, but it helped to think it was probably boosting morale for the rest of the crews, too.

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In the end, I wound up filling all the tanks in less than an hour. The rest of the time was spent washing out refurbished tanks and filling them with water, and waiting for the crews to finish up the last makeshift tanks they were working on, and filling those, too.

It felt really sketchy, flushing out those sewage pump trucks for drinking water... but those things had thousand gallon tanks attached to easily mobile trucks. Emergencies will, as emergencies do, I supposed.

When we were done, one of the guys who'd been in the welding crews did some math in his head, and guessed we'd stored up something like thirty thousand gallons of water. Apparently those big boxy tanks were about a thousand each, and they'd made twenty-two of them. Three trucks with thousand-gallon tanks, a couple more with half that, and a smattering of barrels and other tanks made up the difference.

The radio had only helped so much, after an hour. I hadn't actually had a rest since I'd gotten here, though the effort involved in the waterbending was much less than the earthbending before it. It wasn't nothing. I was tired, hungry, irritable... at least I wasn't bored anymore. Armsmaster had left before I was finished filling up the tanks, but I'd have more chances to thank him again around Brockton. As it was, I was down to filling little tanks and huge jugs when the notice that the teleport to Brockton Bay was coming up came over my armband. The crews and I danced around thanking each other for a minute or so before I left to follow the little arrow on the armband.

I wasn't in a hurry, and was thus unsurprised when I was the last to show up. Kid Win and Shielder looked and felt like shit. They definitely needed a break, and I wouldn't be surprised if they flat-out skipped school today. Rune wasn't faring much better, but perked up when she saw me. I still had...
no idea how to feel about that, but luckily she was standing off to the side away from the heroes again, so I could keep my distance. Amy was tired, but otherwise seemed fine, while Vicky was putting up a brave face, even though today was weighing her down much like the others.

The thought of standing around in silence was entirely unappealing, however. "Hey, how is everyone?"

Amy shrugged, and the boys groaned. Rune felt like she wanted to speak up, but hesitated. "Oh, I'm fine." Vicky lied, chuckling and forcing a smile. "How are you? We heard you've been busy!"

Oh geez, they heard about all that? I mean, I knew getting my name out there was a good thing, but I didn't want to be involved in the inevitable gossip! "Er, yeah. Kinda?" I demurred.

"Own it, new girl! You did good." She failed to bite back a yawn, but her mood was infectious, picking up everyone's spirit slightly. "Just wish we didn't have to go to school..."

"They don't let you have the day off?" I asked. Everyone's armbands chirped simultaneously, informing us it was 7AM back home, but we mostly ignored it.

"Parents gonna' parents."

I turned to Amy, who looked about ready to fall over. "Are you going to be okay?"

She huffed, irritably. "I don't want the day off. It's bad enough I'm going to be sleeping through my hospital hours, I don't want to skip school, too." She rubbed her face and shook her head, muttering about coffee. "Going to see if I can head in to the hospital before school,..."

I wasn't sure that was healthy, but I wasn't going to tell her not to help people if it made her feel better. Had to see if she'd take this weekend off from healing, though. After another minute or so waiting, we heard a loud, weirdly resonant whine, before an obvious tinker appeared a few meters away.

He fiddled with the bulky device he was holding, then checked a tablet computer that'd been hanging from a line attached to his suit. "11PM to... Brockton Bay?" He called out, glancing around.

He fiddled with the bulky device he was holding, then checked a tablet computer that'd been hanging from a line attached to his suit. "11PM to... Brockton Bay?" He called out, glancing around.

I waved him over, and he cheered. There were two steriotypes for Tinkers. The Armsmasters; athletic, action-oriented combat Tinkers in their sleek armor, with their powerful weapons... the other one fit this guy perfectly. He was a dumpy looking fellow, thick limbs and heavy gut covered in a safety-orange jumpsuit half-covered in sown-in gadgets, tech boxes, and control boards, and festooned with lanyards dangling various tools so they'd always be at hand. It made him look dorky and harmless.

Which I guess was kind of the point.

We could see him grin, as he waved and waddled over. His overbuilt sci-fi goggles only covered his eyes and most of his nose, along with the tops of his cheeks. "Hey, there! I'm Sonic. This everyone?" He glanced around as we nodded and hummed affirmatives, checking his tablet again. "Alright, then. We'll be making a few jumps to get where you're going. Let me know if you need a sec, my tech makes some people queasy after a jump or two."

He checked the tablet again, grabbing the device he'd been holding when he appeared and fiddling with it. He started muttering coordinates, checking back and forth, which wasn't entirely reassuring, but I hadn't thought he was lying about anything he'd said. "Gather up." He said, and when we were all almost touching, even Rune, he prodded the device. It hummed, picking up in
pitch and volume until it was nearly a painful shriek in our ears. The world went fuzzy, disassembling around us as my sense of balance cut out. Then everything snapped back to normal, and we were standing in a well-lit empty room.

I stumbled away, leaning over and trying to catch my breath. I'd never been motion sick before, but I imagine this is what it must be like. My senses spread out, and I could tell we were in a city, in a fairly well staffed and maintained building... a PRT building? My senses spread further, and I got the feeling we were on a huge island. I clenched my eyes shut while the others hovered nearby, asking if I was okay. It looked like... New Zealand?

I shook my head and straightened up. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

Sonic shook his head, and I could feel him rolling his eyes at my bravado. "Okay." He fiddled with his teleporter again, taking another twenty seconds or so before he called us around again.

It still hit me hard, but I handled it better this time. We'd landed in Hawaii, this time. Half a minute later we'd jumped again, to somewhere in California. I bit down the bile threatening to escape. One last jump and we found ourselves back in the lobby of Brockton's PRT building. I clamped my hand over my mouth, staggering back and leaning over. Amy rushed to my side, slipping her hand onto the back of my neck, and I felt my stomach settle itself.

"Thanks." I choked out.

"I warned ya'." Sonic chuckled, and I shot him a glare. "I'm gonna leave, before she gets mad at me." He was still chuckling, even as he stepped away and fiddled with his machine. The hum built to the shriek again, and he was gone.

Kid Win hobbled off further into the PRT building, while Shielder found a chair to slump into. Vicky was fussing over Amy nearby, while I just stood there catching my breath. The lobby was empty, and I had to wonder if that was because it was early, or if they kept it closed to the public on days like today. Rune hadn't moved much since we arrived, and seemed to be working herself up. She stepped closer, and I turned to face her. She looked young. Younger than the rest of us, all smooth cheeks and pouty lips, with her mask covering the rest. A few tufts of hair had worked their way free, dangling around her neck from within her hood. I was surprised they weren't blonde, instead a mix of eye-catching Empire red and an otherwise rather charming violet. "Uh, hey." She said, trying to sound stronger than she felt. "I, uh." Her eyes caught Amy silently glaring, and Vicky looking about ready to snap at her. She sighed. "Never mind." She turned and walked away, shaking her head and huffing out another sigh. By the time she'd made it out the door, she'd worked herself back up to feeling tired, but determined.

"Sorry," I muttered. "I don't know what's up with her."

"Probably looking to recruit you." Vicky said in a dark tone, prompting me to turn and face them instead of watching the door. "You need to be careful about that."

I glanced at Amy and chuckled. "I don't think I need to worry so much, I'm tougher than I look, and I'm making my own team." I turned back to Vicky and smiled, hoping it came through in my voice. "I'll be fine."

"So," Amy broke in, changing the subject. "anyone want me to flush their toxins, so you're less tired?"

"GOD, YES." Shielder roared from the other end of the room. I wasn't aware it was possible to zombie-shuffle through the air until I saw him floating over to his cousins. Vicky giggled and Amy
let out a long-suffering sigh, so I guessed this was pretty typical for him. Amy laid hands on, and he perked up. "Thanks, Amy. You're the best." He floated away humming that coffee jingle, and Amy groaned loudly. Vicky just giggled harder.

"I'm doing you last." She told her sister, causing the blonde to pout. She turned to me and I shook her hand, feeling a lot of the weariness bleed away. It wasn't all gone, but it felt more like I hadn't slept well, rather than spent four hours hard at work after a third my usual night's sleep.

"Thank you." I said, waiting as Amy poked her sister in the nose and 'piggy-faced' her, while Vicky whined and had to put up with it to get her healing. When they were done, Amy grinning smugly while Vicky pouted harder, I asked, "Are you going to be okay?"

Amy shrugged. "I've had worse. Just need to fix my coffee-blood levels, and I'll be fine."

I wasn't so sure, she felt weary, like she wasn't quite sure, but I had hope she'd pull through the day. I chuckled at her joke, at any rate. I nodded to the door, and we started walking, Vicky floating behind us until we got closer, when she sped up to get the door for us. It felt nice, walking down the steps in that comfortable silence. Amy smiled as she trailed behind us, glancing between us. Vicky was in pretty good spirits too, turning and kneeling, offering her arms. "M'laaady." She hummed.

Amy climbed in, chuckling as Vicky lifted off. She raised her fist into the air and cheered "For Coffee!" before the two started accelerating off, laughing.

I smirked, shaking my head. Yeah, we really needed that, after Canberra. I started jogging for home, picking up speed until I was sprinting. I didn't have any clothes on under my costume, so I didn't bother stopping to change. Instead I looped around and waited until no one was looking, before sneaking into the back yard. I made my way inside and found dad nursing coffee, waiting up. He startled at first, until I took my mask off. Then we hugged, he told me I looked good, and he wandered upstairs to pass out.

It wasn't too strange to call in to work on Endbringer days. Some places even expected it, and he could always make the work up on the weekend. I wasn't too worried.

I popped some leftovers in the microwave and went upstairs to change into some running clothes. I might as well keep up my jogging, right? I prepped my backpack with a change of clothes for school, then headed down to eat my food. I was still tired, but caffeine fixes that well enough. Thinking back to earlier, I chuckled and nodded to myself. Amy would probably appreciate more coffee, regardless of how much she'd already gotten.

That decided, I grabbed up my stuff and stretched before headed out. Instead of school, I made a detour, heading for a coffee place near Arcadia. When I got there, I slowed down, taking in the slow morning bustle with my senses. People were flocking to the shops and not bothering to stay, having places to be. There was a girl leaning against her car in front of the shop, a pretty blonde, probably waiting on her boyfriend. I eyed her up and down as I got closer. A very pretty blonde, who definitely had a boyfriend. I caught her bright bottle-green eyes as mine drifted back up, and she smiled at me. I blushed at having been caught looking, and glanced away. When I was about to pass her to get into the shop, she stopped me.

"Hey," She called, pushing off her car and stalking up to me. "I'm Lisa." She lied, smiling brightly.
Interlude 3 (Lisa)

Chapter Summary

Lisa!

I should preface this by saying I tweaked Lisa's power. It's mostly identical to canon, with one major change. Try to figure out what! I'll reveal it in the footnote.

...formatting ate all the indents for Lisa's power insights. I'm going to just try and ignore that for now.
Starting to really hate HTML formatting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

THU FEB 24

Lisa hated her boss.

This wasn’t a particularly uncommon trait, especially considering her status as a pretty white teenaged girl from a fairly wealthy family, stuck in her very first job which she didn’t want, having been forced on her by someone with authority over her life because they thought they knew better.

She snorted to herself. Yeah, there were ways to spin anything, if you knew how.

So here she was, staking out the PRT building almost six hours after she’d gotten here in the middle of the night, because the boss that’d recruited her at gunpoint called her up after she’d been woken up by the fucking Endbringer sirens, and told her to.

At least the coffee around here was pretty good, and she was relatively fresh power-wise. It’d been a slow day yesterday, and she’d kept a tight lid on it ever since the new girl had shown up. Fancy new most-of-a-costume straight from Parian, and all. Ostensibly Lisa was there to watch for the Empire's capes, and throw her Thinker power at them until she figured out the last couple identities she hadn’t found, yet.

She had no intention of doing that, now.

Parahuman. Has no powers.

She’d nearly given herself a headache trying to figure that one out. It wasn’t until she’d clamped down on her power that she realized it was the problem. Somehow the new girl, Terraform, had some sort of partial anti-Thinker power. Lisa could still read the girl just fine, but trying to get anything on her powers got that weird, impossible answer.

Of course she had powers. Lisa’d seen her file, had watched the girl come dashing in on an insane supernatural tailwind. The girl had powers.

But if her power didn’t work right for some reason, how would Coil’s power react to her? The thought made her grin every time it came to mind. She’d have to find some way to pit the two
against each other. Arrange it so the new girl came out on top.

She was sipping her latte espresso when the door to the PRT building opened.

Parahuman. Rune. Cassandra Herren. Touch-based Telekinesis. Control diminishes with increased number of objects. Weight limit per object, not total controlled mass.

Lisa rolled her eyes. The Herren trio hadn't taken ten minutes to figure out, and Coil had already known their names when she'd given her first report on their capes. It'd been part of a test, to prove whether she'd really give him a cape's real name.


Oh-ho, now that was interesting. She briefly considered trying to recruit the girl, before second-guessing the thought. Even renouncing her Nazi gang, she’s still a bigot. She’d never take orders from Brian after finding out he’s black.

Determined. Wants to leave the Empire. Thinks she has a way to leave the Empire.

Ahh, oh well. Lisa clamped down on her power again as she watched Rune make her way down the street. Either it had something to do with Terraform or her team, or it probably involved leaving the city. She didn’t need to waste her power on that.

The important thing was that Rune being here meant the kiddy ride to get back before school was here, which meant she should be here. About a minute later, Shielder came out and flew away. She almost let her power slip, until she'd noticed he was alone. Nothing useful to learn, there.

Then the door opened again.

Bingo.


Lisa ripped her power’s focus away. She didn’t need to hyperanalyze Glory Girl, she needed information on Terraform. Lucky her, that’s who came through the door next.

having friends. Not used to socializing. Not used to enjoying company. Has trust issues. Recent trauma involving trust issues. Recent trauma involving other people. Recent trauma regarding social isolation. Recent trauma is trigger event. Trigger event involved former friends. Trigger event involved former trusted friends.

Hmm... the only big trigger-like event she'd heard about recently was-


Gotcha.

Just to round out the set, Lisa turned her power on Panacea.


Her eyes widened. That… was way too much information. Potentially dangerous information. Then Panacea turned her eyes from her sister, onto Terraform.


Lisa hadn’t been expecting *suddenly lesbians* today, but it’s not the weirdest thing she’d seen this week. She watched Glory girl turn and kneel, Panacea climbing into her arms.

*Is exhausted. Is sexually attracted to her sister. Likes being held by her sister. Inhibitions lowered by exhaustion. Is fantasizing about her sister. Wants to kiss her sister. Wants to have sex with her sister.*

She rolled her eyes and waited for them to lift off.

*Is going to get coffee. Is going to get coffee somewhere else. Is going to get coffee at a place Glory Girl likes. A fancy coffee shop 1.3 Kilometers south on the Boardwalk, Glory Girl’s favorite coffee shop.*

No danger being discovered by them for sitting in front of *this* coffee shop, then. Good. She turned her attention back to Terraform.


And with that, she knew roughly where Taylor lived, and which coffee shop she’d have to go out of her way the least to stop at on the way to school. She watched the girl speed out of sight, finished her drink, and got into her car. She’d have to hurry if she wanted to find a good parking spot before Taylor got there. Trying to talk to her in the coffee shop was a non-starter. The morning after the Endbringer alarms went off? *Literally everyone* was going to need coffee today. Best to
pounce outside, and hope she could convince Taylor to talk to her somewhere more private. Knowing how fast Taylor could be, she almost started to worry that she'd picked wrong, when the girl came jogging around the corner.


Bummer for her, she was going to be late even if Lisa didn't try to talk to her. She waited for her to get closer, and that was when Lisa caught Taylor's eye.


This girl was a *fucking mess.* Lisa smiled at her anyway, looking away so she wouldn't scare the girl off. She waited until Taylor got closer, for her to start turning into the shop. Then she called out. "Hey!" Taylor turned, and Lisa sashayed up to her. Being pretty had its perks, and she was hoping Taylor's attraction would more than balance out the other stuff. "I'm Lisa." She introduced herself, giving her widest and brightest smile.

**Thinks you're lying. Confident you're lying. Knows Lisa isn't your name.**

Fuck.

**Doesn't like you. Doesn't trust you. Thinks you're lying. Hates liars. Has trust issues.**

Double fuck. Taylor either had some sort of Thinker power of her own, or she was way too paranoid to work with. She was hoping for that first one, but needed to nip this mistrust in the bud now. "Okay, you got me. My name's actually Sarah." She was a little worried, trying to sound contrite, and giving a wry smirk instead of her grin.

**Thinks you're lying. Confused. Doesn't know why you're lying. Doesn't know Sarah is your real name. Wary of you.**

Wait, what? Lisa shook herself slightly, throwing off the shock. She needed to roll with the punches, this was weird, but she could handle it. "Alright, alright." She held her hands up to give herself another second. "The name on my actual birth certificate is Sarah. Does that make your lie detector happy, yet?"

Lisa didn't even need her power to know she'd just fucked up. The snarl on Taylor's face said it all.
Doesn't like you knowing about that. Doesn't want anyone to know about that. Doesn't have powers. Doesn't like you. Doesn't trust you. Knows you're a parahuman. Knows you know she's a parahuman. Doesn't like you knowing that she's a parahuman. Thinks you're threatening her. Thinks you're outing her. Thinks you're breaking the Rules. Looking for a private place. Wants to take you to a private place. Wants to threaten you.

Taylor had glanced about very briefly, before grabbing Lisa's hand and dragging her into the nearest alley. There were a couple passersby who caught sight of them, and surreptitiously checked to see if the two girls were running off to do something naughty together. These people lost their interest when they found Lisa bodily hoisted by her coat and pinned to the wall by an angry amazon of a girl.


Lisa winced as that contradiction kept snapping back and forth in her head. Her power was really not happy with it. She tried to pull it away from the physical confrontation, and all thoughts of powers, regardless of whether Taylor had any.

Doesn't trust you. Doesn't like you knowing her secrets. Has trust issues. Is angry with you. You remind her of someone. Doesn't like that you remind her of someone. Does not like the person you remind her of. Doesn't like you. Has had secrets used against her before. You remind her of someone who has used secrets against her before. You remind her of someone she hates. You remind her of someone who betrayed her. You remind her of her former best friend. You remind her of her former lover.

Oh god, she was going to die. Her gun was in her purse, which was in her car. "Truce! Truce!" She snapped out, desperately.

Is calming down. Is forcing herself to calm down. Is forcing herself to think rationally. Does not want to break the truce. Thinks you are threatening her civilian identity. Thinks you are breaking the truce. Does not consider you a physical threat. Knows you are afraid. Knows you know she's stronger than you. Wary of you. Pities you.

Lisa slid down the wall as Taylor set her back on her shaky legs. "Explain." Taylor growled. Lisa nodded, taking the time to breathe deeply and let her power work.


"I need help." She really hoped this wasn't going to come back to bite her.

"Seems like a stupid way to ask for help." Taylor groused, letting go of Lisa's jacket and dropping her hands to her side. She didn't move away, though.

That was an incredibly unhelpful rabbit hole her power was running down. "Did you know I would be here?" Taylor asked. "Are you stalking me or something?" Lisa refocused her power, giving herself a moment by slowly smoothing out her jacket. Taylor’s eyes followed her hands.

Wants to help you. Looking for an excuse to help you. Doesn’t consider you a threat. Knows you don’t have any weapons. Knows people who don’t need weapons. Knows members of New Wave. Remembering Blasters from New Wave. Knows you don’t have weapons. Watching your hands anyway. Likes your curves. Is sexually attracted to you. Enjoys having an excuse to look at your body. Rationalizing her reason for looking at your body. Wants an excuse to touch you.

Another dud. "I need help." She kept it vague while she wrangled her power again. "I'm a Thinker."


Looking for a reason to help you. Wants to help you. Is a hero. Wants to be heroic. Has a team. Has a hero team. Is recruiting for her hero team. Is attracted to you. Wants a reason to stay near you. Wants to recruit you. Isn't trying to recruit you. Wants you to be independent. Doesn't expect you to be independent. Thinks you might be a villain. Doesn't want to recruit villains. Wants you to not be a villain. Wants you to be a hero. Willing to recruit heroes. Wants to help you. Doesn’t trust you.

She could work with this. "And, Thinkers are a hot commodity. Villains will do anything to recruit a Thinker, even put a gun to their head and say 'you're working for me now, or else'." As long as she stuck to the truth, she should be fine. Usually she embellished, threw in half-truths and assumptions, but without her power to tell her how Terraform’s powers worked, she had to assume that was a bad move. Thinkers were so annoying. "Like my boss did, to me."


The tension kept bleeding away from Taylor as she listened. "And what do you expect me to do about that?" She thought for a moment. "You're not Empire, you're not Asian, you're not a Merchant... I don't know who your boss is. If I haven't heard of him, why should I have to deal with him?"

Doesn’t like the gangs. Knows the Empire would flaunt you if you were a member. Hasn't heard of a female Thinker in the Empire. Knows you're not a member of the Empire. Knows you're not a member of the gangs. Doesn’t want to go out of her way to fight the gangs. Doesn't like violence. Likes dominance. Control freak. Likes showing dominance without violence. Likes showing dominance with minimal violence. Likes being in charge. Likes being in control. Likes showing that she's strong. Wants to show she's strong. Wants to help you. Wants to catch your boss to prove she's strong.

Checkmate. "His name is Coil. He's a Thinker, a mastermind Bond-villain type. Controls things from the shadows, hiring mercenaries and arming them with tinkertech, hiring villains as patsies he can pretend aren't connected to him, and 'hiring' people like me, who don't have a choice, or don't have a good option." There. Everything true, and hopefully none of it was too repulsive to Terraform’s overinflated sense of heroism.

Doesn’t believe you. Doesn’t think you're lying. Isn't sure she believes you. Thinks you think you're not lying. Hasn’t heard of Coil. Doesn’t think someone like Coil is realistic.
Taylor's lips pursed as she thought. "And what happens to you if you don't have a boss anymore?"

Lisa smirked and shrugged. "I get to start making my own choices again. I was a relatively harmless pickpocket when he grabbed me, not a lawful person, but not a villain, either." Be honest. Give Taylor something to chew on as her 'bad side' so she thinks that's as bad as Lisa could get on her own. Telling others your flaws engenders trust. It was just basic psychology. "I doubt I'd go back to that, but I'd prefer to be a rogue or something." Can't lie and say she'd stop being a villain. She'd switch sides if the situation called for it, but didn't actually believe it was possible anymore, and she didn't know if Taylor's powers would pick up on that. "I could be convinced to go hero, in the right situation." Technically true. The best kind of true. Her grin faded. Now to ease into the real problem. "I don't think my team could make the switch, though."

"Your team?" Taylor prompted, warily.

Hasn't heard of your team. Doesn't think you have a team. Doesn't think you're lying. Confused. Doesn't know why she hasn't heard of your team. Doesn't want to believe she could have missed a villain team.

"We're pretty small-time." Lisa conceded. "Just thefts, some corporate espionage, a few runs against some gang holdings... we don't really want to be villains." Lisa didn't add that, as a whole, the Undersiders probably wanted to be heroes less than they wanted to be villains.

Doesn't believe you. Doesn't think you're lying. Knows you know not to lie. Knows you're smart enough to trick her. Doesn't trust you. Doesn't like you.

Taylor shook her head. "I'm gonna need more than that. Why can't you go to the PRT, or New Wave? Why me?" She leaned in, glaring harder. "And what about your team? You'd just run if you thought you could get away, or if you didn't care about them. What happens to them when their boss is gone?"

Angry. Tired. Rambling because she's tired. Knows she isn't thinking clearly. Doesn't like that she isn't thinking clearly. Knows you know she's tired. Knows you planned this meeting. Thinks you've been stalking her. Thinks you've been planning this meeting for days. Thinks you might have been planning this meeting for weeks. Knows she's tired. Knows she's not thinking clearly. Thinks you knew she'd be tired. Thinks you intended to confront her when she wasn't thinking clearly. Doesn't know how your powers work. Assuming worst-case scenario. Assuming she has no secrets from you. Assuming you are manipulating her. Feels violated. Hates not having control of her secrets. Hates being manipulated. Dislikes your power. Dislikes Thinker powers. Doesn't trust you. Doesn't know your team. Dislikes not knowing your team. Dislikes not knowing your teammates. Doesn't like villains. Doesn't trust villains. Dislikes that you might betray your team. Has history with betrayal. Dislikes traitors. Doesn't want to enable villains. Doesn't want to be tricked into enabling villains.

Lisa hadn't anticipated being overestimated to be such a minefield in this conversation. Taylor had taken her spur-of-the-moment gambit and assumed it was the work of a master manipulator with weeks of planning and preparation. She swallowed thickly, and even though she knew it would have made the situation so much worse to have, she still dearly missed her gun. Best to just go down the list, for now. "He has moles in the PRT, I wouldn't be safe there. New Wave either wouldn't help a villain, or would make me out myself joining up." She really hoped she didn't have to go into detail why that would be bad, given her parents. "The team would either fall apart... or keep doing its thing with fewer resources and less funding, making them easier for heroes to catch." She shrugged. "We're called the Undersiders. I can't tell you any more without breaking the Unwritten Rules. You know what those are, right?" Lisa hoped Taylor would take the hint and
drop it.

Not surprised. Expected those answers. Has experience with espionage. Knew the PRT could be compromised. Didn't know the PRT was already compromised. Now has confirmation the PRT is compromised. Has spoken to New Wave. Doesn't want to be outed. Forming her own team as an alternative to New Wave. Forming her own team as an alternative to the Protectorate.

"The rules are bullshit." Taylor drolled with a shrug.


"Usually, whenever someone tells me about the Rules," Taylor continued. "they follow it up with all the reasons they think the Rules don't work. Lung doesn't care. He's too strong for anyone to hold him to the Rules, and he knows it." Taylor fidgeted slightly, before she took a step back and started pacing a couple feet in front of Lisa, making short meter-long circuits to stay close and keep her hemmed in. "The Empire pretend to care about the rules, but we have no guarantees they actually do, and I know they've got people sick enough to try if they thought they could get away with it. I'm not convinced the thing with New Wave wasn't just them fumbling the hit. The Merchants? No one cares about the Merchants. They could be doing anything, and who would even know?" Taylor stopped dead in front of Lisa, her hand snapping up to point in the girl's face. She was already nearly leaning on the wall, which led to her skull bouncing lightly but painfully off the hard stone, blonde hairs catching on the old, aesthetically rugged brickwork. "The worst part about the Rules is it's not an even split who has what say in them." Her hand dropped, and Taylor gripped at her face, smooshing the flesh of her cheeks and screaming internally for a bit, a quiet whining groan escaping her nose. "If the PRT want you gone and can find a good reason for it, they can just have a Kill Order signed, and declare the Rules don't apply to you anymore. If they can't do that, they can just choose not to save you when you're fighting someone like Lung or Hookwolf, or not investigate someone breaking the rules against you in particular." She let her arms drop after that, taking several deep breaths and trying to calm down.

Doesn't believe the Rules work. Wants the Rules to work. Is distressed the Rules don't work. Knows you broke the Rules. Assumes you also believe the Rules don't work. Wants the Rules to work. Wants to be safe in her civilian life. Wants her father to be safe. Wants a way to hide from cape celebrity. Wants her identity to remain a secret. Knows you know her secrets. Wants to know your secrets. Calming down. Meditating. Intentionally altering her emotional state. High degree of mental control or Thinker power. Likes control. Needs control. Trains control. Has no powers. High degree of trained mental and physical control.

Taylor turned to Lisa again, glaring tiredly into her eyes. "And then there's you."


Shit, shit, shit. She just had to jump the shark, didn't she? It was more and more clear to Lisa that getting Terraform to help against Coil would just be trading one boss for another. Coil and
Terraform were more alike than they seemed at first, both control freaks who wanted to make the city better, but it was a matter of scale and priorities. Coil wanted to own the city, and then make it better, because it would be his possession he was improving. Why settle for a beat-up pre-Leviathan Subaru you needed to jerry-rig parts for, when you could show off your rebuilt Ferrari instead? Terraform was similar, from the opposite direction. She was a creature of compulsions and obsessions, rather than ambitions. She needed to help people. Needed to save people. Needed control over her personal life, and the things closer to her. It was the saving of people that brought them closer to her, which compelled her to have some level of control over them.

At least Terraform was more likely to care about her wellbeing, making her easily the better choice.

Taylor stepped back into Lisa's personal space, pressing one hand to the wall over her shoulder, while the other hand was flat, fingers curled back at the second knuckles, which were pressed to the middle of her chest. This pressed Lisa more fully against the wall, the hard joints pressing slightly painfully into her sternum. "Now, Sarah, who are you?" Taylor asked, leaning forward and looming over the slightly shorter girl.


Oh god, this couldn't be happening...


...she let out a small sigh of relief, and waited for her power to keep digging.


Lisa wanted to buck at the dominance plays, especially after that false rape flag tripped her fight-or-flight responses, redoubling her internal stress. She tamped down the frustration, the indignation at being forced to give up her own secrets, instead of spewing someone else's. Getting angry would just make Taylor violent. Trying to lie would just get her knocked out and dumped on the PRT. She couldn't help the glare she leveled at Taylor, but the taller girl wasn't moved. They kept glaring at each other for nearly a minute, Taylor patiently waiting her out from her position of power. Lisa flinched as the first twinges of a Thinker headache started to creep through her skull.

"My name is... I've been going by Lisa Wilbourn." When Taylor nodded, she continued. "I was born Sarah Livsey." Taylor tilted her head in a 'go on' motion, causing Lisa to scowl, but comply. "I ran away from home after my parents started using me for my power. I don't want to go home. That's why I can't go to New Wave, they'd want me to go public, and my parents would find me. The PRT would be almost as bad if they forced me into the Wards. Their handlers don't care about happy families, just covering their own asses and stomping out custody battles. I'd give even odds
they'd send me home anyway and ignore that my parents used my powers illegally before, if it meant they'd keep quiet from now on, as long as my parents signed me into the Wards." Taylor was frowning now, but looking a lot less likely to one-inch-punch her hand the rest of the way into Lisa's chest hard enough to make her pass out. "I started roaming around, picking pockets, using my power to pick targets. Getting by okay. Then Coil's goons grabbed me, and it was join up or die. He keeps my apartment bugged, keeps our base bugged, he knows when I try to leave. Keeps trying to bug my car, but that's a lot harder. He doesn't know I'm here. Doesn't know I'm talking to you." She kept a grip on her power, only letting through a trickle of information instead of the flood that'd rapidly incapacitate her anyway if she kept it up.

"Why me?" Taylor asked.

Lisa scoffed and shook her head. "Because your power keeps telling my power that you don't have powers." She snapped. The poleaxed look on Taylor's face was glorious. "I have no fucking clue how that works, but if it works on me, it might work on him, and that gives you an edge."

Taylor pushed off the wall, stepping away. Lisa rubbed her aching chest, sure there was going to be a bruise there tomorrow. "How long have you been planning this?" She asked incredulously.

"Since this morning." Lisa shrugged. "Boss wanted me to watch the Empire roll up, try to get information on them." Taylor's stare sharpened, quickly realizing the implications. "Yeah, he's kind of a dick. Like you, he hates not having dirt on people." It wasn't as low as her usual blows, but Taylor still snarled at the insult. "Anyway, I was told to wait for them to leave, too. Then you showed up. My power went screwy, and I knew I had to talk to you. So I waited, watched you leave, figured out where you'd be, and here we are." Lisa threw her arms up in a grand gesture, instantly regretting the way it pulled at her new aches. Taylor stared at her hand as she rubbed her chest again.

Wants to help you. Can help you. Doesn't trust you. Hesitating. Doesn't want you to know something. Doesn't trust you to know something.

She stopped her rubbing, staring blankly at Taylor. The girl snarled again, having realized she'd figured out another secret. Terraform was a healer? That... was an absurd amount of versatility in her powers. Lisa held up her hands to ward the girl off. "Won't tell, not telling." Taylor huffed, but accepted it. She muttered something about 'fucking thinkers' that had Lisa grinning. "But yeah, I figured you'd be my best shot at catching him off guard. My own heroic savior." She grinned, knowing Taylor thought her smile was pretty.

Thinks you're pretty. Knows you're manipulating her. Doesn't like that you're manipulating her. Thinks your dimples are cute. Thinks your freckles are cute. Assumes that you're distracting her. Trying to remember what you're distracting her from.

"What about your team? The Undersiders?" Taylor crossed her arms, scowling at her. "What are their stories?"

Isn't going to stop digging. Thinks you want her to stop digging. Thinks you're hiding something. Doesn't care she's breaking the Rules. Rationalizing that you broke the rules first. Doesn't intend to reveal the information. Doesn't intend to reveal the information unless you betray her. Wants to make an informed decision. Wants the Rules to work. Doesn't think the Rules work. Is willing to play by the Rules. Is willing to play by the Rules when she has all of the information. Willing to pay lip service to the Rules. Willing to keep secrets. Willing to keep secrets that don't harm her. Wants to know your secrets. Wants to know your team's secrets. Wants to make an informed decision. Doesn't want to be manipulated. Doesn't want to enable villains.
Lisa cursed silently to herself. How to play this? How to make this work? "Do I-?" Taylor nodded, cutting off her question. Yes, she had to. "...no real names?" She asked. It was a simple compromise, and after a good fifteen seconds of thought, Taylor nodded. "The Undersiders are mostly in it for the money, if you could pay them enough, give them what they're after, they'll stop being villains." That's what Taylor was really after, she knew.

She sighed, and Taylor let her have the time to think. Half a minute later, she started again. "Grue's in charge. He doesn't know who the boss really is- none of them do- but Coil's been hiring him for years through various proxies. When-" She checked again, and sure enough, Taylor still wanted her to spill everything shy of names. "When Coil got the idea for the Undersiders, and offered him a steady job, he took it. He needs it. Needs money and a good work history, so he can take custody of his sister. Her dad doesn't want her, and her mom's a druggy who keeps shaking up with abusive boyfriends."

"Why didn't he just join the Protectorate, or one of the gangs? Or-" Taylor stopped herself, and Lisa could tell she'd wanted to ask 'Or just get a job if he needed one' but stopped herself. Most of her father's work was trying and failing to find work, after all.

"Too young, not white or Asian, Merchants are a shit option, and the version that was around when he started was even worse." Skidmark was an asshole, but the Merchants had calmed down since he'd taken over, mostly because he'd still been consolidating his power base within the gang for the past year or so.

Taylor took in her words and thought, before rolling her eyes. "The Wards, then. I know you said they're terrible with parents, letting past crimes slide, but I refuse to believe they'd leave a child with a druggie parent, or an actively abusive home." Taylor had no idea how corrupt the system was, but she'd convinced herself it couldn't be that bad, and wasn't going to budge.

Now Lisa just had to make it sound good, or at least not bad, without actually lying about it. "He doesn't want to move her to a home that's less shitty, he wants a good home for her." She silently begged Taylor to just drop it.

"How old are they, and how long has he been at this?" Taylor asked, coldly.

Lisa winced. "He's seventeen, she's thirteen. He's been trying to get custody since before he had powers, about three years now."

Taylor frowned, thinking it over. "Would her father have abused her?" Lisa hesitated, but shook her head. "So what you're saying is, he let his sister say in an abusive home, because he didn't want to sign on with the Wards for a few years, because he thought he could do better, and still hasn't managed it." Lisa winced a little harder at each of her points. "How long until he actually gets custody?"

She sighed. "Coil's helping with the paperwork, but isn't actually going to push it through unless he needs something from Grue. She's the carrot and the stick, with him."

Taylor shook her head, unimpressed. "Hell of a team, so far."

Lisa sighed, and carried on. "Bitch is better and worse." Taylor was about to get indignant about the name, before she held up her hands. "She calls herself Bitch. The PRT calls her Hellhound, but she hates that name. Her name is Rachel, she doesn't really have a secret identity. She's wanted for murder, but it wasn't her fault." She pieced together how best to frame the story until Taylor started getting impatient. "She makes dogs grow, bigger, stronger... she needs to train them, though. Her first dog killed her foster mother, when she triggered. The PRT still says she can flat out control
them, though, which makes it murder. She's been on the run ever since." She shook her head, throwing her hands up helplessly. "The big problem with her is the way she thinks. I'm not sure if she was autistic before she triggered or if her powers fucked up her head, but she thinks like a really smart dog that can talk. She values dogs more than people, saving dogs, caring for them, training them, but doesn't care if she has to hurt humans to do it. Coil gives her the money to take care of them, and being a villain means she can attack whoever she wants to save dogs from fighting rings, or abusive homes, or whatever." She crossed her arms, flicking a flat hand toward Taylor. "If you can manage that, get her the money for her dogs, fix her legal trouble, give her too many dogs that need her to go running off saving more, she will not give one single fuck who you are or what you do. She'll be happy with that."

She rather deliberately failed to mention Rachel's penchant for aggressive dominance plays. Terraform could take it, and the bitch deserved to have her shit rattled a little. "That it?" Taylor asked after shaking her head and trying to process Bitch being Bitch.

Lisa shook hers, too. "There's also Regent. He's... okay." Lisa waggled her hand in a so-so gesture. "He's a bit of a sociopath, but he's a hedonist. Pay him not to cause trouble and he won't, unless someone outbids you." Taylor raised her eyebrow and gave her an incredulous stare before motioning her to continue. "He's a runaway, like me. Except his dad is worse. Much worse. please don't make me talk about it." Taylor thought long and hard about it, but eventually relented. "Like I said, we don't really care about being villains but..." She shrugged. "You're gonna have your hands full if you want to go full hero complex trying to save them."

Wants to save them. Needs to try.

Lisa clamped down on her power again, closing her eyes and letting Taylor think. "It's all a fucking mess." She muttered. Lisa opened her eyes to find Taylor shaking her head and rubbing her eyes.

"You could always choose not to save them." Lisa said softly, knowing that would drive Taylor decide to do exactly the opposite. From the glare she got, the other girl knew it too.


"Fuck you." Taylor growled. They both knew she'd already won.

Lisa barely choked down the snarky retort that would just make the situation worse. "I'm sorry." She lied. "I really do need help, though. I'll make it up to you. To start with, you still want that coffee, right?" Taylor grimaced, checking her phone and realizing just how late she was. "Hey, it's okay. You can just say you slept in. Lots of late kids at schools today." Lisa moved, sidling past and motioning Taylor to follow, and she reluctantly complied.

They made their way into the coffee shop, and Taylor briefly boggled at the lines, before accepting it. "I knew it was crowded, but..."

"Seeing it yourself, yeah." Lisa nodded. "Go sit, I'll grab drinks. I know what you like." Taylor gave her an odd glance before letting herself be shooed off into a seat. It was just a matter of glancing back at her to see where her eyes were landing on the menu boards to have a good idea what to get. When she finally made it to the front, she ordered her usual along with a few varieties of caffeinated chocolate. Taylor didn't want to talk, so she just stood off to the side and waited.

When the queue caught up and their drinks were done about ten minutes later, she consolidated the trays properly and brought the order over. Her own drink in hand, she set the full drink tray at the table. Taylor gave her a confused look. "Enough for the walk, and the shower, and your friend, if
she still wants one..." Lisa trailed off, grinning.

Taylor was still glaring slightly, but it wasn't as bad now that she had chocolate, and time to cool off. "Thanks, I guess."

Lisa shrugged, humming out a whiny non-committal sound. "Wasn't hard to figure out my usual Mean Girls shtick was the worst possible thing for keeping my face not-broken."

Taylor grumbled, taking a sip of her chocolate and sounding incredibly disappointed. Lisa was having trouble caring. If she wanted her to be honest, she could suck it up and be happy Lisa was even still playing along. Taylor did something to her drink, then really started into it despite how hot it should still be. Probably temperature stuff, she could turn water to ice, if her file was right.

Seeing the other girl was going to leave her out to dry if she didn't start things off, Lisa kept talking. "Do you have a number you want me to get ahold of you on?"

She hummed, thought for a bit, then gave her cape phone's number once she'd remembered what it was. Lisa could've gotten the number herself, guessing it with her power after a while if it wasn't on file somewhere, but this saved her a little effort. Taylor was zoning out pretty hard, and the trickle of information from her power told her the girl was coming down off the fight high their initial confrontation had caused. Even that was causing painful twangs behind her eyes, now.

"Hey, I'm gonna run. Boss probably isn't expecting me in today," Lisa winked when Taylor gave her a confused glance. Big crowd in a public place, no cape talk. "and my head's starting to kill me. I'll call you sometime?" The stare briefly hardened back into a glare, before she gave up on it and nodded with a sigh. "Great! Talk to you then!" Lisa chirped happily, standing back to her full height since she hadn't bothered to sit. "Remember to head to class soon if you're doing the school thing, today." She didn't actually care, but that seemed like a good, friendly note to end on.

After that Lisa headed out to her car, hopping in and pawing for her purse. She sat it in her lap and slipped a hand in, leaning her forehead heavily on the steering wheel while she gave herself a few seconds of enjoying the comforting weight of her pistol. That had been way too close to a fight she couldn't win for her liking, and she shuddered slightly as her power poked her with just how close she'd come to a PRT cell.

The feeling of nails slowly pushing themselves out of her temples wasn't helping, either.

"Not even nine and my power's already shot for today." She groaned. At this rate she'd be lucky to last the rest of the day without ending up bedridden. She hated having to sit around bored in the dark just trying to keep her headaches from getting worse, but it felt like one of those days. She idly debated just taking some sleeping pills, or one of the stronger painkillers, but dismissed it. She wasn't risking an addiction over this.

Coil kept their medicine cabinet ludicrously well stocked, to Alec's glee, for exactly that reason. Easier to control his pet Thinker if he could trick her into hooking herself on something. Her hand drifted through her bag to grab her aspirin instead, and she popped a couple. Then she stretched and started the car, heading for her apartment. Comfy bed and thick blackout curtains were exactly what she needed right now. The boss was probably going to throw a fit and threaten her for leaving her assignment, but they both knew today was about posturing anyway. She'd have the rest of the Empire's names soon enough, he just wanted to order her around and prove he was still the boss.

With any luck, though? That was changing soon.
I've based a significant amount of how shards work and interact on Mauling Snarks and Taylor Varga. That is to say, they behave a bit like networked computers. Most of the time they send communications to a hub, which relays it to the recipient, or another hub that gets it closer to said recipient. Shards *can* communicate with other shards via Host proximity, this is how QA was talking to Shaper without using the network. Anyway, given the canon name GU called Lisa's shard (Negotiator), how being a 'pericog' makes very little sense, and given I was building a semi-new way the shards were working, I decided to just make Lisa's power one of those network hubs. It has its own processors for data analysis, but its PRIMARY power is the ability to query any *other* thinker power with simple questions whenever it wants. It can also just *ask* most shards what powers their host has, and feed that info to Lisa. Cauldron shards are finicky, and certain natural triggers have reasons not to answer, but most of the time, it works. Just not with QA and Terra. ;D

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