An AU where Taylor never triggered but decided to become "strong" in order to stop Emma and Sophia from bullying her before Christmas her freshman year of high school. She eventually escalates this idea into making a plan to clean up Brockton Bay, but there's only so much she can do without super powers. Taylor doesn't let that stop her and begins working toward her goals. And although she starts alone, she eventually finds friends and allies among the parahumans that reside in the Bay.
August 24th 2010

I peered down across the street at the run-down house from the roof of some old foreclosed restaurant.

After hours of sitting on the roof staking the place out, I can honestly say with 100% certainty that a) there are four strung out merchants making drugs in the house, b) the last of the lights have just been turned off so they should all be asleep in another 15-20 minutes and c) it is now 3:17 am. The first two points mean that I can finally get ready to sneak into the house and apprehend the merchants with minimal resistance, the third point means that waking up for school tomorrow is not going to be an enjoyable experience, but it wouldn’t be the first time so maybe tomorrow morning won’t be as bad as last time I pulled an all nighter doing something like this.

As I prepare to stand up and stretch my legs after crouching on the roof for the past few hours I hear something land on the gravel roof behind me.

“Now who could be skulking around on a school night?” asks someone behind me who sounds like a very irritating teenage girl.

I stand up to turn around and low and behold there stands Glory Girl and Laserdream about 15 feet away from me. The former crossing her arms as she smirks at me and the latter looks tense with a disapproving frown, although it looks more directed at Glory Girl than myself.

Holding up a finger I says “One, I’m not skulking. I like to think that I’m just lying in wait, since that sounds a whole lot less foreboding and villainy like skulking does and two” I hold up a second finger “There’s a saying about stones and glass houses that could definitely be applied to this situation.”

I smirk at the affronted look Glory Girl gives me, but I doubt that she notices it through the balaclava I use as a mask.

“Well I doubt you’re up to anything good this time of-“ Glory girl had taken a step toward me before Laserdream grabbed her arm to stop her.

Laserdream loudly whispers “Vicky I’m pretty sure that’s Camo Girl” in response to Glory Girls confused look at being stopped from putting the hurt on who she assumes is a bad guy. Which I’m not.

I glare into the night when the Protectorate’s name for me is brought up. I’m not bitter at all that even though I dislike the name I still haven’t been able to come up with anything better after all these months of being a vigilante. Nope, not bitter at all.

It probably doesn’t help that my costume consists of black cargo pants, a black balaclava and an old camo army jacket I got from a thrift store. I didn’t really have any other distinguishing features for my costume or a flashy ‘power” for that matter.

But I think Laserdream believes my glare to be directed at them and not at the metaphorical nightmare that is maintaining PR as a cape without an official PHO account, so she hastily says “We didn’t mean to interrupt you, it’s just that Glory Girl’s been a bundle of nerves since the school year started and wanted to get some air instead of being cooped up in her house.”

Glory Girl sends Laserdream a small look of betrayal before turning back to me with an appraising
Glory Girl sends Laserdream a small look of betrayal before turning back to me with an appraising look and saying, “So you’re the Thinker that’s been going around banging on every Merchant’s door for the past few months?”

Well I can’t let that juicy bit of info go “Aw, is Alexandria junior having a hard time at school? Or has Gallant put his foot in his mouth again? Taking another break?” I don’t know why I said that to the girl who can literally put the fear of God in someone with a measured glare, but I usually keep my survival instincts on hold until I’m fighting criminals so…meh.

Almost immediately I feel a rush of awe and fear coming off Glory Girl. I only afford myself one backwards step before she turns her aura off as a warning “Vicky!” gets half shouted by Laserdream.

Glory Girl takes a deep breath before glaring at me and saying “That’s pretty rich coming from someone with ‘Militia Junior’ as an alternate name on PHO” she finished with a smug grin that set my teeth on edge because of another annoying teenager it reminds me of.

Alright, so I kind of walked right into that one. That’s my bad for trying to get into a mudslinging match with Glory Girl without preparation. I should probably get back to what I was doing before-

Shit!

I turn back around to face the old house I was just skulking, I mean watching!! for hours on end to make sure Glory Girl’s little aura surge hadn’t gone and woken up the Merchants I’d been spying on.

Luckily the house was still dark, but I thought I should get moving before Glory Girl brings down a building just for the hell of it and actually wakes them up.

“So, what were you doing before we just kind of dropped in on you?” asks Laserdream after she joins me at the side of the roof.

“Staking out a possible Merchant meth lab and waiting for them to fall asleep” I reply without taking my eyes of the house, still looking for any movement.

“Oh sweet! Need any help busting in and taking names?” said Glory Girl as she starts swinging her arms around to help her warm up for a fight.

“Nope” I say hastily waving my arms in a clear indication of ‘NO’ “These are just a few normal druggies strung out on their own product, I will let you know in the future if I need help tearing down a few walls Miss Collateral Damage, but otherwise please stand at least fifty feet away from any building that I’m in.”

“Are we gonna keep playing the name game and insulting each other? Because I can already think of a few names I’ve seen-“

“Enough Glory Girl” Laserdream cuts her off with a hiss and an elbow to the ribs, or what would have been if not for Glory Girl’s forcefield “Camo Girl’s been at this long enough to know if she needs help with this kind of thing.” Then, looking at me she adds “but we will keep watch just in case anything does happen. Is that fine with you?”

I shrug “Sure, but only if it’s just you coming to help. The house already looks like it wants to collapse, I don’t need Glory Girl accelerating the process.”

I check my pockets for my zip ties and make sure my fingerless gloves are properly strapped on before quickly making my way down the fire escape cutting any chance that Glory Girl has to look and saying, “So you’re the Thinker that’s been going around banging on every Merchant’s door for the past few months?”
This drug bust was definitely on the easy side when compared to some of the other Merchant houses I’ve busted in the past few months.

By the end of it there are four knocked out and tied up Merchants on the front lawn of the house and a small duffel bag full of illicitly gained cash. It certainly does pay to be a vigilante.

After quick call to the police about a break in at the old house, I start the long walk back to my own house.

The walk would probably be pretty relaxing if it wasn’t for the humidity. Laying around in the relatively temperate August night might have been fine but binding and carrying four grown men will really build up a sweat. Granted they were skinny druggies, but hey, it doesn’t take much to work up a sweat when your wearing a tank top, bulletproof vest (loot from a previous Merchant safe house) and relatively thick jacket.

“That was a lot more underwhelming than I expected” came from right behind me.

I am only a tiny bit ashamed to say that I might have jumped about a foot off the ground in surprise of that proclamation, I didn’t even hear anybody walk up behind me. I turned around to see Glory Girl and Laserdream floating above the sidewalk I was walking down with a smirk and smothered grin on each respective face. Because of course I didn’t hear footsteps when they were flying.

Powers are bullshit.

“Sorry for not crushing more skulls in my systematic attack on the Merchant’s foul existence. I will take your disappointment into consideration next time I break into a meth lab” I say trying to wish away that knee-jerk reaction from their memories, but Glory Girl is having none of it.

“Then I guess I’ll apologize for apparently scaring you half to death, a little jumpy, aren’t we?”

“Come on girls, you two can stop snarking at each other now”

“But snarking is my favorite form of communication with teenagers with overinflated egos” I whine “but fine, I need to keep moving before the cops show up anyway” I say turning around and continuing down the sidewalk as I talk. Laserdream asks a question after it becomes apparent that I have nothing else to say.

“Shouldn’t you wait to give them a statement?”

“Naw, I reported a breaking and entering. The police will show up, see the unconscious Merchants and will check inside the house to see if the ‘criminal’ is still in the house. They’ll see the drugs and then arrest the Merchants”

“I feel like that’s not exactly legal” Glory Girl throws in.

“This is Brockton Bay, as long as the police have an excuse and haven’t been bribed to look the other way, they can pretty much do what they want with a situation like this” I say, knowing full well that the Merchants don’t bribe any dirty cops and therefore should probably be sent to penitentiary. But I don’t really follow what happens to them after I’m done with them. This is mainly just practice anyway.
Glory Girl and Laserdream float beside me as I keep walking away from the busted Merchant meth lab and we walk in blessed silence for less than half a block before Glory shatters it with a complaint.

“Maaaaan, I was hoping to see some of those Kungfu moves people keep talking about. I finally meet Camo Girl and all I see is her toss a couple of tied up Merchants onto their own front lawn. Not fight five linebacker sized Empire thugs with her thumb.” she finishes with a pout directed at me.

“I try not to get into fights if I can help it, I don’t have forcefields, lasers and super strength to throw around in a fight so I tend to avoid them” Ignoring the glaringly false story about my exploits.

“…what kind of cape are you that you don’t jump headfirst into danger?!?”

“The squishy kind that only has the power to think better and faster than normal people? I don’t know what you want me to say, you should know the fatality rate of solo capes as much as I do”…woops, that really took the wind out of her sails and Laserdream looks upset at what I just said as well. Too dark? Yeah, that was probably a bit to dark for the girl that seems to be all sunshine and brick breaker whenever she’s out in public.

“Sorry, that was a bit depressing. I’m just aware of how quickly fights with a gang can go south so I try not to start one without getting all the odds in my favor. I mean I’ve pretty much started a one-man gang war with the Merchants at this point”

Laserdream was the one to respond saying “You know you don’t have to go at it alone right? You could join us or even the Wards if that makes you feel safer.”

I smile at the not so discreet recruiting pitch, but again, she probably can’t tell through my mask.

“Thanks, but I’m not doing this for personal safety, otherwise I probably wouldn’t be out here to begin with. Right now, my entire plan of action is just trying to take the Merchants apart piece by piece.” Which hasn’t been going bad exactly, but I am aware that there’s only so much I can do as a solo Vigilante. The only vigilante hero in Brockton Bay since Shadow Stalker somehow got strong-armed into the Wards earlier this year, but who’s keeping track? “Now if you don’t mind, I’m kind of walking back home, so…”

“Oh sorry, we’ll get out of your hair. It was interesting to see how you go about doing your hero work though. I hope you keep doing well in your future endeavors!” Cheerfully waving at me Laserdream starts floating south back to the Downtown area.

“Yes, suuuper interesting” Glory Girl says, in the fakest interested tone I have ever heard, as she too starts floating after her cousin. “See you on the flipside CG” and with a sloppy salute she flies away.

Now it’s just me and the half hour walk back to my house. In this terrible humidity. Damnit, I wish I could fly.

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About ten minutes later I shuffle into an alley and chuck off the duffle bag into the cleanest spot I can see. It’s just past 4 a.m. and I’m sweating like a pig, so I’m like 99% sure no one will be one the street to see Camo Girl walking from the docks in a tank top. I have to get my jacket and
bulletproof vest off before I melt. And while contemplating where I can find a more breathable camo jacket I take off sweat-soaked jacket and start on my vest. Once that’s done I am once again scared half to death by a proclamation from who is rapidly becoming my least favorite person of the night.

“How holy shit! You’re jacked!!” but maybe I’m just being petty since this is the second time she has surprised me like this in the last hour by floating up behind me.

Powers are such bullshit.

“GAH!! What the hell! You can’t just keep sneaking up on me like that Glory Girl! What if I was changing into civilian clothes? You could have just unmasked me!”

Luckily, I left my mask on as I took my vest off. I only had my black tank top on and all the sweat from this damned humidity had it clinging to my body. And worst of all Glory Girl wasn’t even listening to me reprimand her.

“How has no one on PHO mentioned this?!!?” She seemed genuinely angry “I thought you were just some skinny martial arts wannabe in baggy clothes with thinker powers but holy hell, you look like you could take on Lung with those guns!”

She was exaggerating obviously, I’d only been working out for about ten months. I knew that just because I’m not the stick person I used to be doesn’t mean that I got a body builders muscle mass in so little time. But meeting Brian at the gym definitely helped me build up my physique more than just trying best to lift weights like I tried doing the first few weeks of my ‘rebuild Taylor’s image’ plan.

The compliment did feel good though, as exasperated as Glory Girl sounded saying it. She could probably see me blush with what little of my face I show.

“Oh, uh…thanks?” And the eloquence created by my social awkwardness bursts into the scene now that Glory Girl is being some approximation of nice to me.

Although now she’s just walking around me like a shark that found blood in the water now and I’m not sure how to feel about it. After passive aggressively sniping at each other for the past hour or so this whole situation has thrown me for a loop.

“Oh, I wanna go clothes shopping for you. These shoulders need to be shown off the world in the best kind of way” She wasn’t touching me, but I could feel her eyes raking over my arms and back as she circled me eventually settling on my front “well, I can figure out how to work with everything you give me” she said confidently.

Blushing again in indignant rage for her pretty much calling me out on my lack of certain…assets I open my mouth with a sharp retort in mind, but I’m interrupted by another flyer dropping in.

“There you are, sorry if it seems like we’re stalking you but I thought we could give you our numbers just in case you ever need backup” Laserdream must have sensed my anger toward her cousin because she landed right between us, but I notice her gaze lingering on my arms as well as she says “you know, just in case you accidentally get in over your head one of these days. Me and Vicky are the fastest fliers in Brockton Bay, so we can come and help at the drop of a hat if you need it.”

Getting over my indignation at Glory Girl’s insult I straighten up to properly face Laserdream while digging into one of my pockets to find one of the burner phones I bought half a year ago after I started going out as Camo Girl. Apologizing to Dad in my head once more because I really
need to be able to call the police without having to skulk—I mean wander!! around looking for a pay phone.

When I find it, I hand it to Laserdream who quickly puts her contact information into it before warily looking toward Glory Girl and back to me. I roll my eyes.

“Go ahead and give it to her, it’s not like she can call me if I don’t give her my number. And no matter how much she annoys me, you’re right she is one of the fastest flyers in the bay and would be helpful if I ever do get in over my head” I quickly cut off whatever Glory Girl was going to say “that doesn’t mean I’m ever going to go shopping with you, this is a tactical choice and personal feelings have nothing to do with it”

Glory Girl pouts as she puts her number into my burner phone and keeps pouting even when she hands it back to me. She then waves goodbye and starts flying south again. Laserdream turns to follow her but turns around at the last second.

“Sorry about her today, for whatever reason she’s been on edge ever since school started back up, she’s usually not this childish and in your face” There must have been something in my body language that showed my skepticism of that statement, so she amended it by saying “yeah, yeah I get it. Glory Girl is always in an in your face mood, but she’s not usually this blunt. Hopefully next time you guys can start out on the right foot instead of just being passive aggressive with every passing comment”

I sigh, Laserdream does seem genuine and honest about it so I concede a bit.

“And my mood hasn’t been great since I was just sitting around bored out of my wits for the past few hours, I get it. Her and I didn’t exactly hit it off. I’ll try and be less acerbic next time. But only if you talk to her about scaring the shit out of people by flying up behind them and yelling”

“Can do, see you later Camo Girl”

And with that she flew away to join Glory Girl in the sky. And once again making me wish I could as well as I walk out of the alley with my jacket and vest stuffed into my duffel bag full of stolen drug money. It’s just passed 4:30 and I still have at least twenty more minutes of walking before I get back home. So much for sleep tonight, I’d normally be waking up for my run in another hour or two, so it looks like I’ll have to trudge through another school day without sleep.

But as I walk down abandoned streets I feel a cool ocean breeze push me back towards home. It hadn’t been a perfect night. The heist went as planned even with New Wave dropping by. Glory Girl was a bit annoying but Laserdream seemed like a pleasant person. They even gave me their contact info just in case I needed to send out an SOS down the line. Sure, I had the PRT’s number on speed dial, but New Wave’s response time was probably that much better than the PRT’s simply because they had fliers with high mover ratings.

So overall, not a perfect night. But as another cool breeze overtook me I decided that it had been a good night.
Muggings have got to be the dumbest crime you can commit in Brockton Bay. With the average crime rate being as high as it is, everyone and their mother has to have some form of self defense device on them at all times. But also, if you’re dumb enough to walk around Brockton Bay at night without anything like that, in as sketchy a place as the docks, then you’re probably already a Darwinian anomaly and would not have lasted much longer anyway.

At least that’s what I think. But what do I know. I’m just a dumb teenage girl that’s been fighting crime for almost a year now.

But I’m derailing my train of thought now, back to the present.

The real reason I’m so annoyed by criminals and their dumb decisions is because on my way to scope out another Merchant safe house I find three of the idiots cornering what appears to be an eleven or twelve-year-old girl, threatening her and demanding all the money she has on her. Why the girl is wandering around the shady parts of the docks at around midnight is a question I’ll have to ask after I deal with the Merchants surrounding her.

Sneaking up behind the three stooges I kick the legs out from underneath the left most one. As the other two turn to me I quickly punch one on the right in the throat and wait for the middle one to try and charge me so that I can throw him onto the guy I put on the ground as he’s trying to get up.

While those two are scrambling to get back up and the one I punched in the throat is trying to catch his breath I grab the girl’s hand and take off out of the alley before any of the Merchants can really recover. I don’t want a fight where I might have to protect this girl while keeping a handle on three grown probably very angry men.

After running a few blocks in a convoluted path to make sure we weren’t followed, I slow down to stop and finally address the girl I just saved from a mugging, and probably worse.

“What are you doing here kid? This is the worst kind of place for a girl like you to be wandering around at this hour”

The girls face was an amalgamation of happiness and irritation. Switching between the two as I looked her over for any injuries. Her blond hair was curled into ringlets and she was wearing a navy-blue jacket, a faded pair of jeans and boots to help combat the cold January night air. She couldn’t have been much more than five feet tall. While searching for anywhere the Merchants might have hurt her, her face had apparently decided on happiness.

“Oh my gawsh! You’re Camo Girl!! I’ve read so much about you! Well, all that I could find about you at least. I couldn’t find a whole lot of stuff on PHO that didn’t sound like hearsay or ‘he said
she said’ kinds of stories. But if even half of all that stuff is true that’s amazing! You’re the only solo vigilante in Brockton Bay right now and you’ve been at it for so long and you sound so young and—” I quickly put my hand on her mouth to stop her rambling rant from continuing.

Well alright then, so she appears to be a fan of mine, or at least a fan of capes in general.

“Let’s slow it down kid. Can you answer a few of my questions?”

With my hand still on her mouth she nodded her head up and down with a vigor.

“Alright first question, what are you doing here kid?” I ask as I slowly take my hand away from her mouth.

“I’m looking for criminals, hoodlums, gangsters and other kinds of crooks that haunt the back alleys of Brockton Bay!” She replied happily as if she was reading from a memorized grocery shopping list counting one her hands as she recited the various terms for thugs like she got it straight from a thesaurus.

I just kind of incredulously stared at her for a moment, hundreds of thoughts and possibilities flowing through my head at what kind of trouble she can get into if that’s what her goal for the night is. It takes me another second to recover from that shock that statement caused me.

“And why would an innocent looking girl such as you be looking for that kind of trouble?” I ask while trying to keep my anger at either her naivety or stupidity for trying to do such a thing.

“Because I want to start taking down the villains in the city” She said with a savage grin that seemed unnatural on such a young kid.

Alright, so maybe she’s a new trigger flush with the feeling of invincibility that I hear most capes get after they gain powers. The fact that she’s not in a costume doesn’t really support that theory though. Maybe something recently happened in her life that made her want to act out and try and clean up the city. Either way I should need to stop her before she really gets hurt trying to do this.

“…what’s your name kid?” I ask hoping that I won’t have to try to hard to persuade her not to do this kind of thing again.

“Oh! My names Riley! Or did you want my cape name?!?” She asks practically vibrating with excitement.

“Your cape name?” Oh boy so she is a parahuman.

“Yeah yeah! you can call me…” She takes a few more steps away from me into the alley before turning around with a flourish.

“Bonesaw!”

At this proclamation see some kind of off-white material sprout from her uncovered hands and face and quickly spread to cover her whole body, leaving only her blond hair showing. I can see some of her clothes through small openings at her joints but almost instantaneously she has armored up in that off-white material.

…It kind of looks like bone but I can’t be 100% sure because she could be a Tinker with a kind of light, mobile armor focus or deployable organic machinery. As I continue to look at it, it does appear to be an organic material, not any kind of plastic or metal that I’ve seen or heard of. The aesthetic of it is pretty utilitarian, very practical in that it covers most of her body but lacking any kind of creative flourish. Before my thoughts continue going off on a tangent for the second time
tonight I see that she has formed a three-foot-long blade with serrated edges out of where her hand should be.

Probably the bone saw she named herself after. A literal saw made of bone.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting to do that in front of someone for so long!! What do you think? Was it super cool and intimidating? Do you think it would have scared those thugs that were about to attack me? Because that was my plan before you popped in and saved me, not that I’m complaining about you saving me or anything. It was super cool to see you in action, because you were like BAM! BAM! THROW! And then we were running, and it was super exciting and—” I put my hand over the lower part of her oval bone plate that makes her mask in the hopes that it would slow down her motor mouth again. Thankfully it worked.

Hoooooooly shit, that’s definitely some kind of powerful changer ability. It’s terrifying how quickly she was able to cover herself and make such a gruesome looking weapon in only a handful of seconds as well. But most importantly…

“Bonesaw? Are you trying to be a villain Riley?” I ask only because she sounded like she wanted to clean the streets of villains to make Brockton Bay a better place. But I might have misconstrued that if she wants to do it with as a faceless white bone monster that wants to saw her enemies into pieces.

“What??! Oh nononononono!” She exclaims, wave her hands frantically in front of her “I wanna be the hero that cleans up Brockton Bay after being under the thumb of so many villainous gangs!” She says, striking what I assume to be a heroic pose, but loses that kind of impact with the giant saw made of her own bones. That isn’t to say that proclamation didn’t resonate with me, considering that’s a similar reason as to why I even started my one-man war against the Merchants.

“Alright. So, you wanna be a hero kid?” I ask trying to think of a way of telling her that she certainly needs to work on her image before people will assume that “Has anyone given you The Cape Talk yet? It’s kind of like ‘The Talk’ about growing up but for new capes instead of adolescent teens” I say trying not to think to hard about my own talk with mom.

“Wait…uh…I haven’t heard either of those talks yet? Oh no! Can I not be a hero until I hear both of those talks?” I nearly face palm. Crap, she looks around twelve, her mom should have given her the talk by now right? “Can you give me both the talks? If I can’t be a hero until I’ve heard them I need to do it soon!”

“No!” I shout and see her deflate at that declaration. “I mean I can give you The Cape Talk, but you should probably ask your parents, specifically your mom, to give you ‘The Talk’. That’s more of a parent to child thing than one you get from a stranger”

And then all of that excited energy just kind of wooshes out of her when I finish saying that. And it strikes me again just how small this girl is underneath all her armor.

Shit, think Taylor, this is more than just disappointment at me not giving her ‘The Talk’. The girl probably triggered fairly recently if she’s just now trying to be a hero, trigger events are the single worst days in the lives of parahumans up to that point…

And I’m an idiot.

Her parents getting hurt or dying would probably be what set off her trigger event. And considering the rumor that the worse the trigger event is the stronger the power it creates points to the conclusion that it was probably pretty traumatic considering how quick and versatile her power
is without any kind of apparent training. All these thoughts are running through my head as Riley gathers herself after I violently shoved my foot in my mouth. But before she says anything I wrap her up in a hug.

“Oh kid, I’m so sorry” It’s a bit of an awkward hug since I have a little over ten inches on her in the height department. But she quickly returns my hug as she just kind of sags into me with her masked face pushing against my chest.

“It’s alright, you didn’t know. And I guess I’ll just have to ask Ms. Ashford to give me the other ‘talk’ you were talking about. She’s a bit forgetful but she can be nice and probably wouldn’t mind” But I stopped listening halfway through her second sentence because I think I can feel bone plates expanding and spreading across my back and enveloping me as she talks.

“Riley, what are you doing?” And I feel proud of myself for how level my voice comes out considering how much I’m beginning to internally freak out about being enclosed in a bone body cover.

But she must have noticed my distress anyway because the feeling quickly goes away as she pulls back the bones and jumps backward as if she’s been burned.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. It’s just been so long since I’ve been hugged, and it felt so warm and I just wanted to stay like that for a while and—” This time I stop her rant with another hug instead of covering her mouth with my hand. But this time I took a knee beforehand so that her head could rest on my shoulder.

Once again, she melts into the physical contact. And my mind is buzzing with a strange clarity even through the anger I feel toward this girl’s situation.

Foster care or an orphanage are the most likely options for what her current home situation is. If something happened to her parents, it probably wasn’t that recent. The PRT would have been watching her for signs of powers after something so traumatic and would have only stopped if she was able to effectively hide both her trigger event and her powers from them. And considering there hasn’t been rumors of a new ward coming to Brockton Bay and no Protectorate heroes have dropped in to recruit her I can assume the PRT doesn’t know about her. Also taking into consideration that this appears to be her first night out after having her powers for a while, I can also assume she only just got into the Brockton Bay area.

So, she’s in foster care. Ms. Ashford is probably some old or neglectful social worker judging by the fact she wouldn’t notice a twelve-year-old sneaking out of her room in the dead of night and was confident she wouldn’t be caught in the act. Riley must have been bounced around enough to not really become close to any of her foster parents then, if she’s this starved for physical affection. If she’s been moved to a new city she either ran out of foster homes in her old town or something happened that made those responsible for her want to move her to a new city. Not enough information to make a convincing argument either way.

Going back to her trigger event is looks like she had it long enough ago that the PRT isn’t keeping an eye on her. So, she’s either just been sitting on her powers waiting for an opportunity to use them or has been using them discreetly enough that she has avoided any kind of media attention. Considering her ignorance to a lot of the common practices of capes I’m more inclined to think the former.

So in review, what I can assume is that 1) she is currently in foster care 2) whoever her foster parent is does not have the means or will to really pay full attention to her at all times if Riley thinks she can sneak out like this and 3) she has moved into Brockton Bay fairly recently and in doing so decided that now is the time to actually do something publicly with her powers.
All other thoughts cease when I hear sniffling in my ears. I break the hug to look at Riley’s eyes through the eyeholes in her mask. And I see red wet eyes staring back at me. It breaks my heart so see this girl, who might as well be a stranger to me, so broken up about just receiving some human sympathy.

“Hey hey, it’s okay kid” I say a little too awkwardly from my kneeling position, because what else am I supposed to say to a crying twelve-year-old. They don’t exactly cover this kind of stuff at Winslow.

“Sorry” she says, receding her the bones in front of her eyes and on her arms so that she can wipe away her tears on the sleeve of her jacket “Heroes aren’t supposed to cry and here I am doing it like I’m a little kid”

“Little kids don’t get a monopoly on crying Riley” I tell her as I pull her back into a hug “Everyone gets to do it”

“…okay” she sniffs out from where her head is on my shoulder.

“You know what? I think I can try and give you both talks tonight” I say almost instantly knowing I’ll regret it, my mom had only just given me the talk a couple months before she died. But I can try my best to recollect what she told me and share it with Riley.

“But first we should probably move to a more private location than some dirty alley near the docks for something so important”

And just like that a switch is flipped in the young girl and she’s back to the energetic fighter of evil she was when we first started this conversation.

“Alright!” She yells excitedly to the sky after breaking from the hug.

I hold my hand out for her to take and she grabs it after reforming her bone armor around her body.

“Okay, so the first thing you need to know Ri—” And I hesitate, I can’t keep calling her Riley while we are both in our cape outfits and I refuse to actually call her Bonesaw “…would you be fine with me calling you Bones while you’re suited up?”

She excitedly jumps up and down while still holding my hand “Yes! Yes! Yes! Of course! My first night out and I already have a cool nickname and an awesome hero mentor. This is the BEST!”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her I was gonna tell her to join the Wards after our talk tonight. Mainly because it would be hypocritical of me to want her to do that only so that she’d be safer from the war zone that is Brockton Bay. Plus, if she was with the Protectorates they could help train her to use her powers more efficiently and more creatively. And do it more effectively than I ever could.

But I pushed back those thought as we walk out of the alleyway hand in hand.

“Alright Bones, so the first thing you need to know about cape life is ‘The Unwritten Rules’…..”

Chapter End Notes
Yes I gave Riley Marquis's shard. This will change both Marquis and Amy's power in this AU, which will be seen in future chapters.
I hope you enjoyed it!
Taylor meets Brian Laborn

December 23rd, 2009 (Wednesday)

After a fifteen-minute bus ride and a ten-minute walk I finally made it to my destination. A gym that looks like it came straight from an old seventies boxing movie.

This gym was the first of five on a list I made from an hour’s worth of internet searches at the library. It was a boxing gym that became a fitness gym after the existence of parahumans had practically ended the sport. Which suited me just fine. Even if it’s not located in the safest place in the city, it lies in a low-income area between the Empire and ABB. The lack of new looking gang tags on the buildings meant that it has been largely left alone by the two gangs and is too far away from any Merchant territory for them to become a problem in the area.

And in my opinion that makes it the ideal gym for me to come and workout at after school because I can easily lose any of Emma’s posse that try and follow me during the ten-minute walk from the bus stop.

The goal of today is to find a gym to lift weights at every day that I wasn’t training at the Krav Maga dojo I started going to last month.

This was also step two in the “Rebuild Taylor’s Image” plan I cooked up as a way to get Emma and her gang unpleasant teenagers to leave me alone.

I hadn’t really thought of how this was going to stop them from bullying me but figuring out step three is a future Taylor problem so for now I’m just gonna worry about finding a gym.

Now I just need to walk in and see if this is a decent place to work out in.

…all I have to do is walk in and talk to the person at the front desk.

And then get a tour.

And be able to ask questions about the facilities.

And not be awkward and introverted while also avoiding running my motor mouth if I get uncomfortable.

You know what? Maybe I’ll come back this weekend and try again. Come up with a plan of action and a list of questions so that I don’t say anything stupid or mentally stall out trying to talk to anyone in there.

That idea is thrown out the metaphorical window when I nearly jump out of my skin because someone beside me abruptly asked “Are you interested in the gym?”

And although I did not jump out of my skin, I did, embarrassingly enough, jump a few inches off the ground at the sudden question.

“Yeah, just trying to psych myself up to go inside I guess…” I say, blushing while still staring at the front of the gym. How long had I just been standing here staring at it?

“Well, you could walk in with me. I’m about to go and train with my old man. My name’s Brian by the way”
I finally tear my eyes away from the gym to look up at the person who started this conversation with me. And I have to crane my neck to look at his face. He was taller than me by at least a foot. His hair was done up in corn rows and he was wearing a tank top and athletic shorts. He had the kind of face and body that would have put male models and most of the Protectorate heroes to shame, and they can all pull off form fitting bodysuits very well. My gut reaction is that he must live at the gym to look this fit, so I feel safe in assuming that he’s one of the trainers for the gym.

It took me a couple of seconds of staring before I noticed the hand he had offered me with his introduction.

Still blushing from being caught staring again, this time at him and not the gym, I hastily take his hand and shake it while introducing myself.

“’I’m Taylor, it’s nice to meet you Brian’”  

“C’mon, follow me. I’ll give you the exclusive tour of the South Docks gym”  

Well, I guess a tactical retreat at this point would be pretty rude and he seems nice. I make my way through the door he was holding open for me and into the gym

The gym looked just as old on the inside as it did on the outside, but all of the weightlifting equipment was well maintained, and the bathrooms were clean, so it already has a lot of points in its favor in my book.

It turns out that Brian is not a trainer for the gym, but his dad is so that explains why he’s in such good shape.

Brian and Mr. Laborn, who’s a bit intimidating and I’m a little afraid to ask for his first name, are currently warming up in the back of the gym where the boxing ring is located, getting ready to spar.

After giving me a tour of the place, he told me what he was about to do with his dad so I asked if I could watch them practice. After giving me a look I couldn’t identify, he agreed and let me follow him to the ring where Mr. Laborn was waiting for him. I could see where Brian got his height and broad shoulders from. Mr. Laborn looked like an old championship boxer that could have punch your head clean off your shoulders back in his heyday.

After a very terse introduction to Brian’s dad, I took a seat on a bench to the side and settled in to watch what Brian called ‘me and my old man trying to beat each other to death for half an hour’. And although that shouldn’t be interesting to a teenage girl such as myself, Brian mentioning that he’s recently started studying Karate and Judo during his tour. So I was interested to see how those martial arts compared to Krav Maga, which had derived some of it’s techniques from both of those disciplines. After they finished warming up, they wrapped their hands, put some padded gloves on and put their mouthpieces in.

The fight that followed was some kind of bastardized boxing match. I only say that because they were only throwing punches at each other, but the fierce exchange of blows couldn’t be compared to any boxing match I’ve ever heard of. The most interesting thing about though was that I could tell when Brian wanted to go into a grapple when he stepped in sometimes or twitch his leg to try and get a kick in between some of his punches to create some distance. But he always aborted the action before he did anything. And I think I was right about the championship boxer thing, because Mr. Laborn’s punches were great, but he was too focused on Brian’s upper body to have
any recent experience of fighting outside a ring.

They maintained this ferocious pseudo boxing match for about ten minutes before Mr. Laborn got a good right hook on Brian’s jaw, knocking him down and putting the match on pause.

“You keep dropping your arms when you start getting tired, you keep that up even that little wisp of a girl over there could take you out” was the harsh critique that came out of Mr. Laborn’s mouth while he glared down at his son.

Ouch, I would be the first to tell you that I look more stick than girl sometimes, but I can still be offended by such a blunt statement toward both my fighting abilities and appearance. I refuse to just sit here and take that kind of talk.

“Hey!” Because who needs eloquence when you can just yell at someone indignantly.

“I’m working on it dad and apologize to Taylor. She’s looking to join the gym, don’t scare her away right off the bat.” Brian says as he stands back up, rubbing his jaw gingerly.

“What? I was just being honest here.” He replies, looking a little confused as to why he needs to apologize, he then looks at me. “Do you want to try and put him down in the ring try and prove me wrong girl?”

I was a little taken aback by the abruptness of that…would it be right to call it a request? But I recover quickly before Brian can try and talk to his dad about it.

“Actually, yes. I would.” I say as soon as I’ve gathered myself, and then I turn to Brian “If that’s alright with you of course.” And I stand up from my seat and look at him with as serious of a face I can make.

After giving both his dad and me a surprised look, he gives me an appraising look. “Alright, let’s get you some gloves and a mouth piece then.” Going to a cabinet off to the side producing hand wraps, gloves and a new mouthpiece. “Dad can you go heat up some water so we can form a mouth piece for her?”

He starts to help me wrap my hands before asking “do you really want to do this? You shouldn’t feel pressured too after just wanting to watch.”

“Yeah, I do. Mac, my instructor, says that I need to practice fighting against people that study different disciplines to be prepared for a real ‘violent encounter’ as he puts it.” And his gaze sharpens as I mention that I have an instructor “I’ve been going to this Krav Maga dojo for about a month now to learn self-defense, and I think fighting you will help give more experience defending myself from people who are bigger than me in the future.” I say, trying to come off as casual instead of vomiting out words to explain myself. I try to use my hand to push up my glasses only to realize that I wore my contacts today. Which is probably for the best, there’s no way I could have fought him while wearing my glasses.

“…then don’t hold back on me” is the only thing he says before starting the stretches I do before every Krav Maga lesson.

After that it’s just waiting for Brian’s dad to get back with some hot water for my mouthpiece.

Once that’s done I finish my stretches and meet Brian in the ring. I wasn’t kidding about getting practice fighting someone bigger than me. Brian fit the bill by being at least six and half feet tall and probably has over a hundred pounds on me.

“So, let’s set some grounds rules” Brian said, “no groin shots” he gave me a pointed look when he
said that “but grappling, kicks, knees, elbows and fists are fair game, sound good?” I didn’t think Karate used elbows or knees, so I just assumed he’s letting those be used for my advantage and give him an appreciative smile while nodding in agreement although I’m not sure how the smile looks with a mouthpiece in.

“Then we’ll start on my dad’s mark, you good to go?” he asked, putting his glove out for me to tap.

I tapped it before stepping back into my corner and replied with a muffled “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We both square up in the fighting stances of our respective discipline, and wait for Mr. Laborn to start us off.

I got my ass handed to me.

We had a total of six bouts, and only the first one lasted more than a minute. And that’s only because it took Brian a hot minute to take me seriously, but I’m sure the elbows I kept throwing into his ribs whenever he let me get too close helped speed that up.

Of the six times we fought I only won one of them. He had overextended on a punch and I was able to throw him onto the ground and get him into one of the best arm bars I’ve ever done. I was quite proud of that and made sure to give Mr. Laborn a look after Brian tapped out. All he did was smirk and shrug at me.

My losses were surprisingly less about him being bigger than me than it was about him just being a better and more experienced fighter. There were some moves I didn’t recognize coming from Judo or Karate, which I’ll be sure to ask him about later, after I was done wheezing on the floor of the ring since he knocked to wind clean out of me during our last spar with a solid punch to my solar plexus.

A bottle of water came into my field of vision as Brian silently offered it to me.

“So, do you think you’ll want to make this a regular thing?”

Oh, right. I forgot I was supposed to spend the day scouting out gyms to lift weights at. I vaguely recall the four other gyms I had planned on visiting today. I had already spent more time here than I had planned to and a whole lot more energy.

“That depends on how often you’ll be here.” I say before properly thinking about what just came out of my mouth. And once I have processed what I had just said I cover my face in horrified embarrassment. “I mean, to practice fighting against you not anything else I promise!”

I hear him laugh while I’m busy thinking of how quickly I can dig a hole and bury myself in it.

“Well this was interesting for me as well. The boxing ring here pretty much only gets used by me and my dad so it’s good to fight someone who practices a martial art. It’s a lot more challenging than any random thug who thinks he’s hot shit on the street”

“Do you fight random thugs often?” I ask, quickly getting over my mortification and gratefully trading it in for curiosity.

He looks a bit uncomfortable when I ask that, but just before I can apologize for whatever caused
that he answers me.

“I have to every once and awhile at my job.” He says with a kind of finality that makes me hesitate to ask any more questions, but I am curious to know what kind of job has a teenager fighting random thugs. He’s probably a bouncer at a bar or something.

“Tell you what, if you promise to teach me some stuff from whatever martial arts your studying whenever I come by, I think I can make working out at this gym a regular thing”

“Good!” Comes a booming voice from outside the ring, I had completely forgotten that Mr. Laborn was been standing there and I don’t think I want to know how much of that conversation he heard. Probably all of it with my luck. “I’ll have the paperwork ready for when you bring your parents or legal guardian here so that they can sign off on it” And I internally wince at the idea of having to convince dad to let me have a boxing gym membership after trying so hard to get him to let me sign up for Krav Maga.

But that’s a future Taylor problem. Right now, I have found a gym to lift weights in and another person that will help me get stronger. So, today can be a win in my book.
January 22nd, 2010 (Friday)

(One month after meeting Brian at the gym)

I almost had a panic attack when Brian had asked if I was doing anything this Friday. If he had asked me out on a date I would have had no idea what to do. Sure, he’s a nice guy and I’m sure he’d be a gentleman, but I thought we had the whole movie ‘battle bonded’ thing that was more like a student teacher relationship. With both of us being the teacher and student, because we had both been teaching each other the fighting disciplines we were each respectively earning over the past month. That and the fact that the shiner I got during my fight with Sophia is only just now starting to fade and didn’t do my looks any favors. And I’m getting distracted again.

Back to the original thought.

I almost had a panic attack because he asked me if I could watch his kid sister to make sure she didn’t get into any trouble on Friday. Apparently, she had started acting out and causing trouble recently. Brian also told me that she’s turning twelve next month, so realistically how much trouble could she be to look after?

So here I am, walking to the gym from the nearest bus stop because I still don’t have any friends at Winslow and most of my Friday night plans involve me and a good book. Meaning I had no real excuse to deny the only real friend I currently had.

It’s just past six in the afternoon when I finally walk up to the gym and see Brian inside, looking around and quite alone. Which I think is strange when I open the door to walk in and something suddenly jumps at me from seemingly nowhere screaming “AAAAAAH!!”

I positively screeched in frightened surprise.

I also almost fell over as well but was able to grab a chair that was beside the entrance and used it to keep myself up.

“SHIT!” I yelled, feeling my heart try and burst out of my chest.

One of these days I’ll stop being surprised by people, and when it happens I’ll be able to look back and laugh at these moments.

But that day is not today.

I look around and see a little gremlin that just shaved a few years off my life literally rolling on the floor laughing.

I see Brian walking up to me with a fretful look on his face. “I’m so sorry, she’s been hiding for the past ten minutes and I didn’t think she’d be hiding near the door to wait for you.”

Said little gremlin had gotten up and walked over to us, still cackling. She really did look like Brian’s kid sister. High cheekbones that promised a beautiful face when she grew up, and deep brown eyes that showed a mischievous gleam instead of Brian’s calm confidence. She must have just started puberty because the clothes I could see underneath her open winter jacket seemed too small for her already small frame.

I gave her the worst glare I could come up with.
All that accomplished was getting her to burst out laughing once more.

Brian and I just stood there silently as we waited for her to calm down. After a minute or two she went from laughing to cackling and then finally just smirking at me while wiping away imaginary tears from her eyes.

“Well, I’m Aisha and you must be Taylor. I’ve heard so much about you and it’s good to finally see you’re as big of a stick in the mud as my brother. I’m sure that’s why you two get along great!” She said as she put out a hand for me to shake.

I just kind of switch between staring at her face, to her hand and then back to her face. I don’t take her offered hand for fear of some other kind of prank but still introduce myself.

“Yeah, I’m Taylor but I can’t say that I’ve heard much about you from Brian and I’m beginning to see why.” So what if I’m a bit bitter about the whole ‘almost scaring me to death thing’, sue me.

“Aisha, Taylor is doing this as a favor to me so play nice.”

“And I don’t know what I did to make you hate me like this Brian.” Was said in a whiny voice that seemed to be weaponized judging by how much it annoyed me.

“I’ve already apologized fo—”

“So, what is the plan for tonight exactly?” I ask before the siblings can start bickering in earnest.

“…I got you both movie tickets at the new theater that just opened up at the boardwalk. Its some new action comedy that Aisha’s been excited about. I already gave Aisha money to cover dinner for both of you, so you can eat before you watch the movie. After that, Taylor if you could make sure Aisha makes it back home I would really appreciate it. You brought your pepper spray, right?”

“Never leave home without it” I say as I take it out of my pocket and twirl it around on the chain that it’s attached to.

“Alright, thanks again for doing this for me. I got a job sprung on me at work and I need to be there tonight” He seems genuinely remorseful, and not just toward me. Brian sends an apologetic look toward Aisha as well, who just huffs and looks away.

Huh, there’s something there but it’s probably none of my business.

“Then let’s head out then, I’d hate for you to be late for work.” I say, trying to inject a little cheer into the mood.

After looking at his watch he responds “Yeah, I do need to get going” And starts walking out the door of the gym but before he’s fully outside he looks back at Aisha and reminds her to ‘play nice’ again.

“Yeah yeah yeah. Go to your pretentious ‘job’, I’ll make sure nothing happens to your friend Taylor.” She says with a shit eating grin.

I sigh, because this has the makings of a long night.

Dinner was awkward, but the movie wasn’t bad. The one liners were cheesy and actually
knowing how to fight made me critique the fight scenes more than I used to, but for a movie that I didn’t pay for I can honestly say it wasn’t as horrible as I expected it to be. But that might be because I didn’t have to try and force an awkward conversation out of Aisha while she gave me the stink eye during the movie like I had happen at dinner.

The closest bus stop to the neighborhood that her dad lived at was still about five blocks away from his house. So, after a bus ride filled with a fidgety Aisha who kept glancing at me but refused to say anything I was grateful to step off the bus and finish up the night. I let Aisha lead the way since I had never been in this part of town before.

It was after thirty seconds of walking that Aisha finally said something to me.

“…He was supposed to take me to the movies tonight you know…We’d been planning this night for a few weeks now.” Aisha had stopped walking to turn around in front of an alley and look at me with eyes shining with tears. “But his stupid boss had to call him up with some new stupid job that had to be done tonight of all nights. You probably don’t even know what he does do you? Ugh” And it really hit me how young Aisha was right then as she wiped frustrated tears from her eyes over the fact she couldn’t hang out with her big brother tonight.

Brian had talked to me about how his mom had a drug problem as well as a bad habit of picking bad boyfriends and that his dad just didn’t know how to treat and raise children. And I understood how close these two would have to be to make it through being raised in that kind of situation.

“So yeah, you probably noticed how I’m not happy that I had you tonight instead of Brian, especially since he’s been talking about this cool girl he’s been swapping tricks with at the gym.”

That brought my thoughts to a halt.

“Wait, he thinks I’m cool?”

She gives me this unreadable look before saying, “Brian doesn’t really do friends, he’s so obsessed with growing up and making money that any kind of social interaction fell to the wayside, excluding yours truly of course.” She proudly points at herself at the end of that statement. “The fact that he has someone outside of work and family that he talks to is amazing enough.” She pauses as if to gather her thoughts before saying with a pained face “So if you want to date him I won’t be completely opposed to it, but if you hurt him I won’t be afraid to shank a bitch” and she finishes that statement a whole lot more menacingly than I ever expected an eleven-year-old to be capable of.

“Woah! I’m not trying to date Brian!”

That came out of nowhere…Well I guess if I am the only person that Brian has any kind of social interaction with outside of work and family, then I suppose I can see where Aisha is coming from.

But I have more important things to worry about then trying to start a relationship like that. Emma and her gang have stopped bothering me since my showdown with Sophia, but I need to make sure that continues before I make any more plans for the future.

As all of this goes through my mind Aisha looks me up and down before apparently taking me at my word and sighing.

“That’s good, I’m pretty sure Brian wouldn’t notice if you liked him anyway. He may act like a gentleman, but you kind of have to club him over the head to get him to notice social cues like that if you were trying to date him.”

“I’m not sure how to respond to that.”
“That’s because you only talk to him about fighting and working out.”

Which I couldn’t deny. Brian and I pretty much only talk shop at the gym and we never really have any kind of small talk that I can mention.

“Alright, social ineptitude from both parties notwithstanding, can I not just be friends with a guy I met at a gym?”

This caused Aisha to give me a look that is usually reserved for looking at biological anomalies, confused and a little repulsed.

“…whatever, let’s get walking again. I wouldn’t want you to miss your bus and be late to reading whatever nerd book you no doubt put off reading to babysit me tonight…Thanks for that by the way.”

She turned and started walking into the alley we’d stopped in front of. I followed her in a slight daze due to the unexpected thank you from this girl who I thought had hated my guts since I met her a few hours ago.

And because of this I didn’t notice the dark figure skulking beside a dumpster until he had already jumped me.

“Finally! I was wondering how long you two bitches would keep talking.” Was yelled directly into my ear by the man who ambushed me as he put something cold and metallic against my neck. I felt my hair stand on edge as my mind went blank with fear.

Aisha turned around in surprise to see me held at knife point by this asshole, and her face quickly paled.

“Now girlie, before you start screaming for help let’s be real clear here. If you make so much as a peep your race traitor of a friend here gets a nice red smile before I do the same to you.”

Race traitor? Oh shit, I’ve been taken hostage by some Empire thug!

I could feel outrage beginning to form in my mind. Slowly overtaking the fear of being mugged by some Nazi.

“If you don’t want this girl to get hurt put these on” he threw a pair of handcuffs with his off hand at Aisha’s feet “And lay down on the ground. You’ll be coming with me.”

Woah woah woah woah. What? He’s not trying to mug us? Shit, don’t new members of the Empire have to kill a minority or something to officially join the gang? And then it really hit me.

He planned on kidnapping Aisha.

And then killing her for shits and giggles just so he could join some NAZI PUNK GANG!!!

“What?”

I didn’t really even notice that I was the one that said that. I could feel my outrage at this situation build itself into a cold fury that I had never really experienced before. Not at Emma when she betrayed me, not at her little posse when they gang up on me not even a couple of weeks ago when I was with Sophia in an alleyway not so different than this one.

I almost felt numb in my anger, like my blood was turning to ice as I saw Aisha look at the thrown
handcuffs in fear.

She’s lived in Brockton Bay all her life, she can figure what he’s going to do with her just as easily as I had.

She keeps looking between the cuffs and me and I can see the internal struggle going on there. And she thinks she has to make a choice between my life or hers.

I’m not about to let an eleven-year-old be forced to make that kind of decision. I make it for her before she can.

I reach up and grab the knife’s blade with my palm facing its edged side. I can feel it cutting into my hand as I pull it away from my neck and use the pain to center my focus and fury.

“What are yo—”

Whatever else he was going to say in response to my self-mutilation was cut off when I planted the back of my head right into his nose.

He stumbled back, and I used the grip I already had on his knife to tear it from his hand.

After throwing the knife away I turned away from Aisha to face the wannabe Nazi and I can honestly say that he truly looks the part. Mid-twenties, shaved head, white tank top and blue jeans make him look like a skinhead straight from a twentieth century movie. I can’t say that I’m intimidated by what I see even if he is a little taller than me.

“Shit!! You weren’t supposed to fight back you uppity bitch. I need one for tonight and you aren’t gonna stop me!” Gingerly touching his bleeding nose as he yelled.

Well that was an interesting tidbit of information. What would be better than ruining one Nazi’s night? Ruining a whole initiation meeting of the assholes. But I needed more information, and I also needed to work off some of this blinding outrage I still held toward this bastard.

As I was momentarily lost in thought, he almost caught me with my metaphorical pants down and threw a sloppy haymaker at my head.

I easily twisted out of the way from such a telegraphed punch though. Did he really expect to hit me with such a shitty punch?

The skinhead wound up to try and punch me again, but I popped him in the chin before the punch was close to landing. I hadn’t really put any weight into it, but it took him by surprise and he stumbled back again.

Maybe he really believed in the saying ‘third times the charm’ because he started running at me again with a big wind up for another hay maker.

I responded by kicking him in the stomach before he could even start through the punch and he bent over double coughing.

…It can’t be this easy can it?

The Nazi growled out some profanity that I couldn’t really hear before running headfirst at me to…tackle me I think? All I had to do was put my foot in front of me and leaned forward while he willingly ran face first into the bottom of my shoe. Stumbling back again but this time he fell on his ass.
If his nose wasn’t broken before, it most certainly was now.

I walked up to him and kicked him in the chest. Knocking the wind out of him and putting him on his back.

I then grabbed him under his chin and held his head up, so he could look me in the eye. A plan forming in my head.

“You have monumentally fucked up my friend.” The growl that comes out of my mouth less intimidating than I wanted it to be. But I’m still too numb with fury to really care.

He shrinks back, tears in his eyes. But the tears are probably more from the broken nose than anything else.

“And now you have to answer my questions, but first.” Without looking away from him I call out “Aisha! Can you bring me those handcuffs?”

As I wait for the cuffs I use all the strength I got to drag the guy over to the dumpster he was hiding behind before he jumped Aisha and me. He whimpered the whole way.

Just as I finish dragging him there I hear Aisha walk up beside me and I finally look at her for the first time since I started beating down, because there was no way this could be considered a fight, the Empire wannabe.

She was looking at me like she was seeing me for the first time, and I’m not sure how I’m supposed to take that. But she handed me the handcuffs without a fuss, so I will cross that bridge later, probably another night. Right now, I have a Nazi to interrogate.

I turn to face the Nazi and slap one cuff on his right wrist and the other onto one of the dumpster’s handles.

“Alright, now that we are nice and comfortable, we can start with those questions.”

He was sitting down, leaning awkwardly against the dumpster due to his cuffed state. And when I knelt to look him in the eye he flinched and leaned further away from me.

Was he really such a coward that he would be so afraid of this girl he just held hostage. But then I remembered he just tried to kidnap an eleven-year-old so that he could murder her for an opportunity to join some little Nazi club, so I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Question one, when is the little Empire murder orientation you mentioned?”

“S-s-s-sometime tonight” is the stuttered response I get.

“I got that from what you said earlier, but what time specifically?”

“I can’t tell you that! They’ll kill me if they found out I told some race traitor about it.”

Well I was hoping he was so scared that he would answer all my questions without hesitation, but I guess that was too much to ask for. Now I got to think of a way to make him answer then. But it doesn’t take long for me to think of something.

I turn to Aisha.

“Hey, have you ever kicked a Nazi in the balls? I hear it’s a great stress reliever.” Seeing how he shrinks back I feel like I should probably feel bad about doing this to the guy, but the whole Nazi-
murder-kidnapping thing puts a real damper on any kind of sympathy I might be able to muster.

Aisha goes from thoughtfully watching the situation to gleeful joy so fast that if mood whiplash was a thing she’d need to go to the doctor.

She walks closer while I turn back to the dumpster Nazi, who has paled noticeably.

“Okay okay okay! It’s at midnight tonight!”

“And where will it be?”

He gave me a pained look and quickly glance at Aisha who had begun pulling back her leg in preparation for a kick.

“Some warehouse in the trainyard, we’re supposed to follow the spray-painted wolf heads from the abandoned station.”

“Third question, will there be any capes there?”

“I-I don’t know, I hear that Hookwolf and his gang are usually there, but I haven’t heard anything about any of their other capes being there.”

“Good, last question then. Was any of that a lie?” I stare into his eyes as I ask it, looking for any hesitation.

“N-n-no, all the truth. I swear to God!”

I release a deep breath I didn’t know I had been holding, feeling most of my anger flow out of me with it. Alright, that’s step one done. I check my watch and see that it’s almost ten. This was honestly a whole lot easier than I ever would have expected. But as my anger leaves me I feel a sharp throbbing in my right hand.

Oh right, I stupidly grabbed the blade of a knife. Wincing I look at the deep, still bleeding cut and decide that I probably don’t need stitches. Because if I come home injured again I think dad might have an aneurism and never let me leave the house again. I had just stopped the Trio from bullying me, I was not about to let anymore of my freedom ever be taken away from me again.

But I needed to shelf that thought for now. The second and final step of my ‘Fuck over Nazis’ plan involved calling the Protectorate.

“Can I borrow your phone Aisha?” Because I still haven’t asked dad for a cell phone yet. Still too touchy a subject for both of us.

“Oh, sure. What’s the plan?” And she seems genuinely curious about it. And oddly calm considering she just had her life threatened about five minutes ago. Huh, I’ll have to ask her about that.

“Gonna call the Protectorate with an anonymous tip about a supposed Nazi gathering that supposedly involves a few Empire capes. Also, would you…” And I nod toward our Nazi friend as I grab the phone with my not bloody hand and start to walk away.

I hear a thump and then a pained howl as Aisha kicks the guy in the balls and then she’s by my side before I’ve finished dialing the PRT.
After the nominal pain in the ass that is convincing the PRT that yes, I’m sure there is an Empire initiation that will have capes present that is also happening tonight, no, I will not give you my name that’s why it’s an ‘anonymous’ tip, no, this is not a prank call I’m very serious about this people could die! I finally gave them the time and how to find the location of the meeting and finished by telling them to hurry up! The had less than two hours before the Nazi murder ritual began.

By that time, the bleeding from my hand had almost stopped and we finally made it to Mr. Laborn’s house.

After answering the door and seeing that I was bleeding he was immediately in coach mode and quickly went and got a first aid kit to patch me up. He didn’t seem to mind that I didn’t want to go to a hospital and wrapped up my hand with gauze and tape. He also gave me some tips on how to treat it for the next few weeks as it healed.

After telling him what happened he seemed impressed in the same way he’s impressed when I get a good takedown on Brian in the gym. And not for the first time tonight I’m at a loss.

Mr. Laborn also told me that a cape could not have done much better in that situation. And that struck an odd cord with me.

Thinking back, it had been easy, taking down the thug, beating him down after every attempt to attack me. Not giving him a proper chance to fight back after the initial surprise. Could it be that easy if I tried fighting other gangbangers?

Mr. Laborn’s comment planted a seed in my mind. The beginnings of an idea, a plan. And I could see that it lead down a dangerous road. More dangerous than sparring with Brian and getting into alley fights with teenage girls like Sophia.

Something I’ll have to sleep on.

I say my goodbyes to a serious Mr. Laborn and mischievously smirking Aisha and start back toward the bus stop with my hands in my pockets finding something that I completely forgot I had. As I take the pepper spray out of my pocket I idly realize that I never did need to use it even though dad makes me bring it everywhere.

I mentally gnaw on that thought as I make the journey back home.

Thinking of plans upon plans that sprouted and have begun to grow from this night.
Chapter Summary

Camo Girl meets a certain vigilante

March 12th, 2010 (Friday)

--One month since Taylor became a vigilante--

‘I don’t have time for this’ was the thought that went through my mind as I jumped from roof, onto fire escape onto dumpster onto Merchant thug that was holding someone at gun point for reasons that I assume relate to money.

The alarming regularity at which I stumble upon muggings in progress is my second thought as I kick gun out of the hand of the Merchant finding residence underneath my boots. I then jump off his back and rush toward his friend, hearing the first guy wheeze as I push all the air out of his lungs as I jump off his back.

The other seems surprised that his fellow mugger just got taken out and sloppily tries to slash at me with the pocket knife he was using to threaten some business man at ten o’clock at night.

A quick kick to the stomach takes the wind out of his sails and lets me slide behind him and put him in a choke hold until he lost consciousness. Which allowed me to finally direct my attention to the would-be victim.

“You should probably get going before one of them gets up.” Was all I said before running to the fire escape I had just used for my descent. Leaving two unconscious Merchant’s and a confused but grateful man who hurriedly ran out the alley while yelling thanks.

I was about to start traversing the rooftops of the warehouses again before a voice angrily called me out from behind.

“You stole my prey!” Was growled at me before I could start jumping roofs again.

I’m proud to say all I did was stumble in surprise, as opposed to jumping like I usually do when someone suddenly yells at me when there shouldn’t be anyone around. Maybe all that hanging out with Aisha is helping me get over my bad reaction to surprises.

I turn around to face whoever just accused me of stealing their ‘prey’ only to come face to face with a floating black fog.

Huh.

“I wasn’t aware that Brockton Bay’s smog had gained enough sentience to try and fight muggers.”

“Don’t get fucking smart me. I had eyes on those assholes first.”

The fog coalesced into a feminine figure that looked like a cross between a ninja and a hockey player due to the amount of black her costume used and the hockey mask she used to cover her
face. The cloak and pair of crossbows strapped to her legs solidified the fact that I felt like I would cut myself on the amount of edge the girl exuded.

And now I’m looking at Shadow Stalker, another vigilante hero that has been fighting gangsters longer than I have and I had nothing but respect for that.

“If you had eyes on him first why didn’t you help him before he got shot and/or stabbed by Merchant thugs?” Knowing that her answer would most likely annoy me at best.

“I was waiting to see if he would try and defend himself instead of just taking it up the ass from those Merchants like prey.” Angrily crossing her arms as she if she was explaining the most obvious thing in the world. “I needed to see if he was worth saving, we don’t need more weaklings in the world.”

Wow, yeah. There goes that respect I had for the vigilante. I can’t really even call her a hero after hearing that.

“But you seemed to hand them their asses pretty easily.” She looked me up and down, searching like she was looking for something. Whatever she’s looking for, I have no idea what it could be and I’m pretty sure I didn’t want to know. “You must be a pretty good hunter with skills like that. What’s your name?”

As I worked toward ignoring the odd feeling in my gut that weird compliment invoked she obviously had an epiphany as she uncrossed her arms and pointed a finger at me. Somehow still having anger radiate off her posture.

“Wait wait wait, a friend of mine was talking about this new cape she read about on PHO. Has a camo jacket and a major hate on for the merchants.” She then gave me what approximated as a pointed look through her shaded hockey mask. “You must be Camo Girl, I’ve heard about your ass kicking skills, but seeing a video of you fighting muggers and seeing it in real life is pretty fucking different. That was efficient, and brutal. I can respect that”

I wince internally at the name some idiot on PHO gave me after a video of one of the beatdowns I gave to a few muggers exploded on PHO a couple weeks ago. I also noticed that Stalker’s body language had changed from angry to slightly less annoyed? What was that supposed to mean?

C’mon Taylor, you’re not so anti-social that you can’t remember the meanings of simple body language. She’s noticeably relaxing in front of me. Body language and posture are definitely things I’ll need to look up if I’m ever gonna start working with more capes in any kind of capacity.

But back to Shadow Stalker. Now she’s leaning forward ever so slightly, still looking me up and down but she seems to be satisfied with what she sees? Maybe?

“Oh, yeah. Camo Girl, that’s me.” And I suddenly remembered why I didn’t have time to stop a mugging. I need to get to that Merchant safe house to see if it was undermanned enough for me to take down. And if it wasn’t, wait and see what they were storing in it for later reference. “Shit, I gotta go. It was uh…enlightening to meet you Shadow Stalker.”

As I turned around to go I felt a chill go up my spine as if someone had just walked over my grave.

Turns out it was just Shadow Stalker going through me in her gaseous form so that she could get in front of me again.

“Where are you headed to in such a hurry?” And it wasn’t angry per say, more like aggressively
curious because why be pleasant when asking someone a question about their plans for the night.

“I got a hot date.” I deadpanned, because let’s be real if I had asked her that same question she probably would have bitten my head off. Figuratively or literally, it could probably go either way with her.

“A date with the Merchants would only be hot if they set you on fire and used you to light their pipes.” Which would sound like a kind of gallows humor joke if it wasn’t for the murderous tone she adopted while saying it.

I gave her a skeptical look and she scoffed.

“Please, PHO says that you’ve only been sighted six times and each time some kind of Merchant get together gets busted and left for the police to clean up. You don’t go out on patrol hoping to find trouble. You know exactly where the trouble is, go there and only leave once everyone’s been beaten down.” And although I couldn’t see it, I could hear the vicious smile that was no doubt underneath her mask as she finished talking. “I want in on whatever the fuck you’re doing tonight.”

“And if I refuse?” Already knowing the answer, I still need to ask the question out of principal.

“Then I follow you, and even if I don’t know what your power actually is. I know that it’s not a mover or brute, so there’s no way you can outrun me.” And I really want to make a break for it if only to try and prove her wrong if wipes no smug grin she no doubt donned when saying that. But I don’t have the time or energy to make the attempt so instead I just sigh and stick out my hand.

“Fine. I’m Camo Girl. I’m a thinker who plans on raiding a Merchant safe house tonight. Would you like to join me as I beat up strung out druggies?” With an obviously fake chipper tone.

Think of the positives this could bring. Sure, she seems like a psychopath, but you’ve been putting up with plenty of psycho teenage girls since high school started last August. Shadow Stalker can’t be worse than the likes of Emma, Sophia and Madison. At least she directs her aggression towards gang members and not defenseless girls who were still recovering from their mother’s death and being betrayed by their closest friend

…and let’s stop those thoughts before I jump down the mental rabbit hole.

Where was I? Oh right, the positives this could bring.

It would be helpful to have someone that has actual powers to help me with this. From what I’ve heard, Shadow Stalker is an effective close quarters combatant and skilled with her crossbows. Having her there to watch my back would definitely reduce the chances of getting another 2x4 to my back, that bruise still hasn’t gone away.

But, she is also overly aggressive and abrasive. So much so that many of the thugs she has beaten have needed to go to the hospital and that’s not including the people she’s shot with those brutal looking crossbow bolts.

While I was thinking I assumed she was losing her patience as she started tapping her foot against the gravel metal roof we were standing on. Mumbling something that I wasn’t paying enough attention to hear.

Back to my thoughts, I had started coming around to the idea and being fine with letting her help. Instead of just popping into the safe house in an inopportune time. Because the more I thought about it the less optimistic I was about being able to shake her if she followed me.
“But!” I pointed a finger at her. “If you come with me you do exactly as I say. I like to get a read on these situations before I jump into them. Because I won’t get back up if some Merchant gets a lucky shot at me.” Judging by the angry posture she adopted I could safely assume she was about to protest. “If you don’t agree to that then we’re done here. I go home, and you don’t get the location to a Merchant safe house. Neither of us would be happy with that, now would we?”

“We’re cape! Why should we pussyfoot around if we can just bust in there and kick some ass!?!?”

I gave her my best incredulous look, hopefully she could tell even if she could only see my eyes.

“Because I’m a Thinker, remember? Half the shit I do is ‘pussyfoot’ around so that I don’t get shanked by a thug in an alleyway. You get shot at you turn into smog or gas or whatever it is your power does. I get shot I go to the hospital maybe, and then that becomes a whole thing of ‘hide the bullet wound’ in my civilian life. And I shouldn’t have to tell you the problems that would cause.”

That seemed to at least stop her from protesting more, but she still looked ready to rip someone’s throat out.

“So, do we have an understanding? We both go there together, make a plan of attack and then we beat the shit out of however many thugs are there.” I stick out my hand. “Deal?”

She still looked angry, but eventually made what I assumed was an agreeing grunt before shaking my hand.

“Great, now follow me.”

“Why would I not despise the people who tried to ruin my life? I talked to one of them about it. She said they only bullied me to see if I could become strong, and because I did they finally left
me alone.”

“What’s the problem then? Sounds like it worked out better for you.”

“It’s not about that! It’s about how if I just tried to weather it, they would have continued to try and beat me down until I was ground to dust. The strength that they center their beliefs on is fucked up at its core, and I don’t agree with it as a means to figure out if someone is strong or not.”

“I still don’t know why you’re still hung up about it, it’s because of that that you’re here now, being a kickass cape, making kickass plans. YES! Fine, I think that the plan you thought of is kickass, even if I do hate waiting. And you know how to kick Merchant ass while looking good doing it.”

“The outcome isn’t what I’m hung up about. It’s the whole ‘the ends justify the means’ thing that would only-Wait…Time to go. But we are settling this argument in the future. You ready?”

“Finally, I’ve been ready since you finished telling me the plan half an hour ago. I still don’t understand why we had to wait this long.”

“Doesn’t matter if you understand it as long as you follow directions. If this works out, they should be pissing their collective pants before the first punch is even thrown.”

“Yeah yeah, I know I know. Don’t worry, it’s not like it’s difficult or anything.”

“Good, see you in five”

As with that Shadow Stalker floated to the roof of the safe house I wondered if I’d ever tell her there actually wasn’t a reason to wait other than the fact I knew it annoyed her. Even thinking that I walked to the front door for my own part of the plan.

The plan had actually worked better than I had hoped. I had banged on the front door to get the attention of the eight Merchants in the warehouse and Shadow Stalker would phase down from the roof into their midst while I went around the outside and jumped through one of the busted window.

The fight didn’t last longer than a minute after that. Stalker had taken out the two Merchants with firearms and catching the rest flat footed enough that subduing them was as easy as the two muggers from an hour ago were.

The problems started directly after all the Merchants were groaning on the ground.

Shadow Stalker had decided that less than a minute for a beatdown was much too short and was standing over one of the Merchants she had shot with her crossbow.

“I’m gonna need that back you piece of shit” Roughly tearing out the bolt from the guys thigh and making him scream in pain.

I was having none of that.

“What the hell are you doing Stalker?!!?” About to stoop and apply pressure to the wound before Shadow Stalker grabbed my arm to stop me.

“Getting my bolt back, they aint cheap y’know. And don’t waste your time on him, I didn’t hit an
artery and the police will take care of him when they get here. Even if he doesn’t make it, it’s not like anybody will miss a drugged-out thug like him.”

The surprising fact that the guy wasn’t bleeding profusely was the only reason I didn’t shrug off her hand and start applying the first aid I had learned before becoming a vigilante. Instead I pulled out my burner phone and called the police, telling them they should bring an ambulance for someone who’d been shot with a crossbow bolt.

I heard another scream behind me and told the officer to expect two open bolt wounds instead.

Ignoring Shadow Stalker in passive aggressive silence, I zipped tie all the merchants and started gathering all the money I could find in two paper bags, no use letting it be kept by the police when I could use it for better things. After getting both of those tasks done I started walking toward a side exit of the warehouse, hearing Shadow Stalker fall into step behind me.

“…Well that was fun.” And she sounded oddly hesitant, I think it’s the first-time anger wasn’t the most apparent emotion in her voice.

“It was certainly eye opening.” Because I was still feeling passive aggressive toward this supposed ‘hero’.

“Alright, I get it. We both look at this caping thing differently. I think it’s about beating the shit out of thugs, since no one else apparently wants to do it. You do it because of some stu-weird reason that I have yet to figure out.”

And I sighed trying to think of a way to explain it that she would actually understand.

“It’s not about beating up thugs, that’s just a means to an end. It’s about weakening the Merchants, keeping them on their toes in the most efficient way available to me. And what you did in there, tearing out the barbed bolts you use, was meant only to make them suffer. And that flies too close to home with me.” I took a deep calming breath. “So, we have different ways of doing this, fine. We also have different views on how those with power should act, not exactly fine but I don’t have the time or energy tonight to start that argument again. For now, let’s agree to disagree and call it a night.” I held out one of the paper bags full of the Merchant’s cash before continuing. “Thanks for working with me today. I wouldn’t have been able to hit that safe house tonight without your back up.”

“…No problem.” She sounded annoyed, but also…contemplative? “It was good working with someone competent. You’re a beast, and even if you don’t agree with me about predators and prey you definitely fit as a predator now…even if you didn’t like how you got there.”

And with that weird farewell, she took the offered paper bag and floated off in a seemingly random direction.

When she was out of sight I sighed and turned into the direction of home. Contemplating my first cape team up and how I felt about Shadow Stalker as a person. The team up went great during the actual action, but we both had obviously conflicting views on being heroes. And although I wasn’t necessarily looking forward to our next meeting, I would have time to think about her oddly familiar world view and how to deconstruct it for her. Next time I hoped to show her how believing something like ‘only predators and prey exist’ would only end up crashing down around her somewhere down the line.

And like that, imaginary arguments between Shadow Stalker and I filled my head as I headed home.
January 9th, 2011 (Sunday)

-Six days after meeting Bonesaw-

I was walking a path around Captain’s hill, through a nice park on the outskirts of Brockton Bay.

The ground was covered in white slush from the snowfall we had a couple days ago, the sun high in the sky. A cold front had been going through Brockton Bay, so I was bundled up in enough clothing to not feel the biting chill that been assaultsing our city the past few days.

Not exactly an ideal temperature for a long walk through a park but I wasn’t exactly here for a relaxing stroll. Although the evergreens that had started popping up as I got closer to the mountain certainly had their own appeal, I’m here more for business than anything else.

Even if said business is to be done with a small, energetic blonde with a skewed idea of heroism. I mean, she certainly has the attitude to back up her desire to be a hero, but whoever gave a twelve-year-old girl the idea that “Bonesaw” was a good name for a hero had some kind instability in their brain.

It was with thoughts like these that I saw said blonde come hopping down the path toward me. I checked my watch. Huh, we weren’t supposed to meet for another fifteen minutes.

She barreled into me when she got close to pull me into a hug, a screamed “Taylor!!” the only verbal warning given.

“Hey Bones! What are you doing here so early?” Reciprocating the hug even if I felt like that I was being suffocated with how tightly she was holding onto me.

“I was just so excited that I couldn’t wait any longer, so I decided to burn off some energy before you got here!” Separating herself from me I got a good look at her, an she seemed like she still had more energy to burn since she looked like she was vibrating in place as she stood in front of me. “And I’m glad I did because you’re here early too, so we can start earlier so it was totally worth it.”

“Well, you aren’t wrong.” I grabbed her hand and we started down the trail in the direction Riley had just come from. “If you’ve been here for a while, can you tell me if you’ve seen anyone on the paths around here?”

I had assumed that no one else would want to make the trek to Captain’s Hill in this terrible weather, but it’s always good to check. The conversation I was hoping to have with Riley isn’t one that I want overheard by just anyone.

“I haven’t seen or heard anyone since I got here, which was…. She took out her cellphone to check the time. “About an hour ago!”

I almost wanted to facepalm at how early she had gotten here, but I suppose I could understand her excitement. She told me that she’s wanted to be a hero for a more than a few years now but held back because there weren’t any real villains in her old hometown. Which I was perfectly fine with, I shivered at the thought of what a villain would have done with a younger Riley. Now that
she lives in Brockton Bay though… We have enough villains for any aspiring cape to drool at, at least until they get chewed up like most independent capes do. But that’s also why I’m meeting here with her. She’s probably old enough for talks about how to properly fight villains right?

After the interesting event that was our first meeting and having both ‘The Cape Talk’ (yay!) and ‘The Talk’ (ew…) with her last week, we exchanged phone numbers. Why a twelve-year-old has a cell phone while I had to get mine without my dad’s knowledge, I can only begin to guess at, but that’s beside the point. After texting each other for a few days I finally asked if she wanted to meet to discuss plans for the future, both mine and hers, since she flat out rejected my suggestion for her to join the local Wards. I don’t really feel comfortable leaving her on her own in Brockton Bay, the city of ever escalating cape fights.

I was happy when she said that she wanted to work with me and be the “best heroes the Bay has ever seen!” but I also knew that I had planned on being solo for at least a few more months to finish a proof of concept I’d been working on, before going into any kind of permanent partnership. My occasional work with a certain Stalker notwithstanding, considering her status as a Ward has made it more difficult to work together anymore and the fact that I could only stand to work with her in short bursts.

We continued walking further into a park before sitting down at one of the many stone picnic tables a little way off the path we had been on. I probably could have stopped us sooner but I wanted to be sure this conversation wouldn’t be overheard.

“Alright Riley, let’s start off with what we want to talk about and get out of this meeting.” I spent an hour looking up how meetings like this were supposed to go and almost every site I found involved setting an ‘agenda’ or topics that the meeting should touch on. For all intents and purposes this is a business meeting and would be good practice if I have to do something like this in the future. Which if everything goes to according to plan, I should.

“I want to take down every villain in the city!”

Straight to the point then. I guess I won’t be able to complain about a lack of direction.

But she gave me a good in to see what she actually intended to do as a hero, other than just… y’know…beating up villains until they leave. Hopefully that isn’t the entirety of her plan.

“Okay, how do you plan on doing that?” I cut her off before she could reply, adding. “And before you answer think about how you are going to do it step by step, and not just what you would do, but think about how other people directly involved in your plan would react as well as taking into account how they would try and stop you. Because none of the gangs here will just roll over and get taken down, people have been trying to do that for years.”

Riley face turned pensive as she stared at the table and began to think.

“I want to stop all the villains from doing bad stuff in Brockton Bay.” She started slowly. “I was going to beat them up until they stopped” I tried not to cringe at how on the mark I had been “but they probably wouldn’t like that and try to stop me.” Then she looked up from the table to look me in the eyes. “So, I need to figure out a way to beat them and keep them beat while not letting the rest of them stop me.”

“That’s a good start. What are some good ways to keep them beat and off the streets then?” Glad that she seemed to pick up the intention behind my questions.

“Get them arrested I guess, the PRT send a lot of them to prison or Birdcage. But only Birdcage ever actually keeps villains, they break out of normal jail super easily…” She trailed off, thinking
of other ways to keep villains from doing evil. “The only other way is to…kill them I guess?”

“You’re mostly right, but let’s not get to deep into murdering people as a villain deterrent. That’s a very slippery slope for heroes to go down, going into Gavel territory which we should try and avoid.”

“Gavel?”

“He’s an Australian vigilante that murdered criminals, he got thrown into Birdcage years ago.”

“Oh…So no murder got it.”

“Yes, no murder right now. But remember, I only said mostly right. There is still another way to stop villains.”

“Uh…what is it?” A look of consternation crossing her face as she tried to think of another way to stop villains from being villains.

“You convince them that they should stop being villains.” I tried to say it as if it was the simplest thing in the world. It wasn’t simple, but it was possible. And since it was the only way that I currently had some kind of ability to use, not being able to Birdcage people through my own power or having the willingness to murder people, it was the option I’d been trying out since I started becoming a vigilante.

Riley did not seem to believe that was a good option, going from the constipated look she’s currently giving me. Or maybe she does need to poop, who can tell.

“How are you supposed to do that? Just ask them to stop being villains?” She was squinting at me as she asked the questions, confused and a little annoyed that that was the last option.

“That’s one way. I’m sure you realize how difficult and unrealistic that kind of approach is.” I smiled. “No, there are two effective ways that I can think of that could be considered ‘convincing’ villains to stop being evil.” I held up a finger to Riley. “The first is capturing them and making them join your side through some kind of coercion, this is something that the Protectorate and Wards do fairly often.” I tried to think of an example of that she might have heard of. “Have you heard of the Ward Psyche?”

“Yeah yeah, she’s one of the Brockton Bay Wards.”

“Have you heard the rumors that she used to be an Empire cape?” And Riley shook her head. “Well, when she first joined the Wards, rumors were all over PHO of her being a new Cape for the Empire, but she got captured after the PRT crashed the her and a few of their non-powered members initiation into the gang. So, she can be considered a villain that the PRT ‘convinced’ to stop being a villain and turned her into a Ward.”

“Alright, so are we gonna start recruiting villains to make a hero team them?” Riley sounded both skeptical and confused.

“No, my way is the second option I mentioned. The second option,” Holding up two fingers toward Riley now. “and the one that I’ve been working toward for a while now is simply undoing everything the villain does until they give up.”

“What does that mean?”

“I can explain that with a hypothetical. Let’s say you are running a gang whose sole purpose is to make, use and sell drugs.”
“The Merchants?”

“Let me finish. Now let’s say that you make this gang, and it sucks. It’s the worst, most disrespected gang in the city you’re in. But, the gang still makes a lot of money pushing drugs onto the lower-class citizens of the city, so you can call it some form of a successful gang. So, if you methodically take down every attempt they make to expand their business--”

“Why are you calling this a hypothetical when this is obviously about how you’ve been attacking the Merchants ever since you started being a vigilante?” And now Riley was pouting because I wanted to present this as a learning experience more than merely explaining what I’ve been trying to do for the past year.

Well…The whole point of this meeting was to share how I was gonna clean up Brockton Bay. So maybe I should drop the dramatics and just tell her.

“Alright, no hypotheticals then.” I sighed and then looked Riley in the eyes. “You said that you wanted to get rid of every villain in Brockton Bay, right?”

A quick and vigorous nod in the affirmative answered that question.

“I made a plan before I started out as a vigilante to do just that. Granted, it’s changed a lot since I first made it and I’m not stupidly optimistic enough to think that it’s so perfect that I won’t have to change it again in the future. But I still consider it a plan to clean up Brockton Bay.”

I was serious, ever since that night with Aisha I had found a new goal. After floundering aimlessly when I got the Trio to stop bullying me. I had lacked somewhere to direct my energy. Taking down that Nazi had started my plan, got the cogs of my mind moving once again. I would fix Brockton Bay instead of stopping a couple of teenage girls from ruining my life. A bit of an escalation, but dad always said to aim big.

“How?” Was the slightly awed response to my claim.

I looked at Riley, and I mean really looked at her for the first time since we sat down at this lone stone picnic table in the middle of a deserted park. She wasn’t vibrating in her seat like she had been, no longer burning off excited energy. Riley sat there with a face that looked out of place on a preteen. A mix of curiosity, awe, and thoughtful consideration all mixed into a kind of calm I hadn’t seen from her until this point.

I smiled a vicious smile.

“By unmaking every gang in Brockton Bay, piece by piece. Step by step. It won’t be fast. It won’t be easy. But I’m fully prepared to take back the city that gangs and villains have so callously eroded for so long.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of the frigid winter air. Releasing it, I opened my eyes and looked back at Riley. “Would you like to help me take back my city Bones?”

I was met by an equally vicious smile, a charming, terrible thing that promised pain and violence from the preteen sitting in front of me.

“Absolutely!” Reverberated through the park, its girlish inflection at odds with a wicked tone.

Chapter End Notes
A little shorter than I intended but I felt like that was as good a place as any to end it.
March 5th, 2011 (Saturday)

--Two months after teaming up with Riley—

Things have been going well.

With Riley’s help, the Merchants have pretty much been scrambling for any kind of foothold outside of the seediest and most squalid parts of the city. Every attempt to expand or plant themselves in new territory is met with near instantaneous response thanks to information from my Contact and Riley’ help. Being able to act right when I receive information regarding a new merchant activity in any area as well as having another body to help with the clean up has sped the downfall of the Merchants faster than I expected.

‘Now I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop’ is the thought that crosses my mind as Riley and I walk deeper into ABB territory on this chilly Saturday night.

I’d been told that the Merchants had tried to start pushing drugs inside Lungs territory, which I considered both good and bad.

Good because I have never seen them try and put themselves somewhere that an honest to god dragon would come down on them for trying to steal his customers drug money. I’ve seen them try it in Empire territory before, but the fact that they are braving Lung’s wrath shows just how desperate they’re getting. Which means the Merchants are really starting to feel the heat from losing all their drug and safe houses.

This is bad because I need to end the Merchants attempts here before Lung catches wind of it and brings down his fiery wrath on them, probably causing all kinds of grief and property damage in the meantime, not to mention the probable murder of any Merchant involved. So now I have to venture into Lung’s territory with Riley and try not to poke the dragon while cleaning up his house.

“Remember Bones, we need to be discreet right now, starting a fight with Lung right now would not work well for anyone involved.”

“But you made like five different plans to take down Lung. We can beat him easy if we use one of those.” Her exasperation was just about tangible, but this was not something I could budge on.

“Plans rarely survive first contact.” I sighed “I never had any intention of ever using any of the ‘anti-Lung’ plans that I told you about. Those are the kind of plans that are never meant to actually be used because contrary to popular belief this is not a story and even if it was I am not Siegfried. If we run into him, I won’t be able to hide myself in a hill and wait for him to fly over me, he’d probably just burn down the hill anyway. I’ve also told you why we can’t start a feud with Lung right.”
Even all costumed up with her full-face mask I could tell she was frowning as she looked up at me to stare into my eyes, either with confusion about my mythology reference or disappointment that I don’t want us to fight Lung. Either way I did not want to explain either of those points right now.

After a beat she threw her hands up in the air and broke off her stare. “Fine! I won’t go looking for Lung tonight. We go and beat up Merchants and then we get out.” She started to walk away while saying “Just like we did last time, and the time before that and the time before that…” under her breath.

I sped up to catch up with her and pulled her into a side hug while we walked. “Yes, I know. Beating up thugs is only so much fun before you want to fight someone stronger.” I don’t personally believe that, but Riley is young and has a really strong and versatile power, so I can understand why she wants to see how far she can go in a fight with Lung.

But just because I understand it doesn’t mean that I’m going to willingly let her first real cape fight be against a guy that went toe to toe with Leviathan. I don’t think my conscience could take it.

“Yeah, I know. No serious cape fights until we take care of the Merchants.” She released a long, dramatic sigh. “But it’s just taking so long.” Then, looking up at me from where she was at my side said, “And yes, I know we knew it was going to take a while, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Well what if I put it this way. The Merchants must be getting desperate if they’re trying to set up shop in ABB territory. Lung’s never let anyone who’s tried to get away with less than third degree burns. So that must mean that we’re getting close to the grand ending act of the Archers Bridge Merchants before they are forced to permanently bow out from Brockton Bay.” Then, separating from the side hug so I could look her in the eyes I said, “that means that we should be able to move to the next step relatively soon.”

Riley seemed to perk up at that, getting that excitable jittery energy she always gets when she’s looking forward to something.

“I can’t wait!! I hope they’re all as cool as you!”

“They all seemed nice when I met them. Well, except Shadow Stalker, but I’ve worked with her before and she’s not too bad if you know what how to handle her.”

“What!?! You never said that you met them before!”

I started walking again, this time turning into an alley way to try and avoid civilian notice as we got farther into ABB territory while also keeping an ear open for any thugs we may want to avoid.

“I never met them all at once, I’ve also never met Gallant. But I run into their patrols every now and again. Sometimes I get them to lend a hand I think they can help me.”

Riley stopped walking to, I assume, gape at me. It’s a little hard to tell with her mask on.

“I haven’t heard about anything like that on PHO? When did you team up with the Wards?”

“That’s a story for another day.” I look at the street signs at the intersection we stopped just short of. “Right now, we need to start looking for the Merchants, this is the area I was told that they’ve been seen around for the past few nights. Let’s split up and—”

I was interrupted by a loud crash, like a wrecking ball ploughing through a wall, and when I turned in the direction of the noise a large fire started lighting up the night a couple blocks away.
Shit “I think Lung found them before we did.” I saw Riley take off in the direction of the fire.

Double shit. Looks like I’m destined to get in a fight with Lung.

I took off after Riley, because I’m not about to let Lung kill anybody when I could have stopped him. Even if the people I’m trying to save are Merchants.

I’d just finished sending a text with my burner when I rounded the corner to see a seven-foot-tall Lung holding a Merchant up by the neck in the middle of the street. He was also surrounded by prone bodies that I assumed were the other Merchants that Riley and I were looking for. A few of the cars parked on the road side were on fire or smoldering as collateral from the fight, as short and one sided as it was.

I saw Riley preparing to take on Lung, her armor growing spikes and her bone saw forming in her hand. I wasn’t about to let her jump in there without thinking though.

“Bones!” I got her attention before she could jump in. “We are going with ‘disarm and defeat’ for this. Use ‘knight’ and make ‘duel’ with ‘axe’ on deck for me, alright? Remember what we talked about, Lung’s power escalates the more danger he’s in. If we want to beat him, we have to bide time and then escalate faster than he can.”

She looked between Lung and I before sighing. The spikes and saw receded back into her armor morphed into what looked like a dull white plate mail, while a sphere of bone formed in her off hand. With a snap, she tossed the sphere at my feet where it separated into two separate bone blobs that quickly formed a kite shield and a single edged short sword. A spear formed in her hands as I picked up the sword and shield and looked at Riley, no, Bones.

“Help should be here in a few minutes, so we just need to stop him from killing those Merchants” a beat, and then I added “and us.” Trying to sound nonchalant when I was anything but right now with a plan set I turned my attention from Riley to face Lung who was…looking directly at us.

Triple shit.

“Get out of here Merchant hunters, you have lost your prey today.” He then turned his attention back to the Merchant in his hand, who was moaning weakly in pain.

Bones was having none of that and spoke up before I could think of anything to say to such a blunt dismissal.

“C’mon Lung! You can’t be that afraid of fighting a couple of girls!!” And it took a lot of will power to not slap my hand to my face in sheer incredulity that Bones would try and taunt Lung like that.

He glanced at us again before throwing the Merchant to the ground. He was still groaning so at least he was still alive, that’s a good thing. What wasn’t good was that Lung was now walking towards us.

“I do not take disrespect lightly, no matter the source girl.” And that seemed to be the last bit of civil conversation Lung was willing to give us as he lunged toward us much faster than a guy that big should have been able to. Damn brute ratings.

“Scatter!” was all I got as I dove to the side to dodge Lung’s charge.

Lung landed in the middle of the street while Riley and I stood on either side of him by the
sidewalks a small had formed underneath him. Riley had two minivans parked between her and the sidewalk, but my side was free of any such obstacles. That left the opening move to me so that Riley could move to better ground before she was caught between Lung and possible exploding gas tanks.

“BONES!” We were gonna have to change up the original plan if I didn’t want either of us to get flambéed by Lung. I couldn’t afford to look away from Lung to make sure she heard me, so I just prayed that she remembered what this meant. I held the shield in front of me and held my sword up as I took a deep breath.

“Lets!” I lunged bringing up my sword “Get!” With my shield still in front of me I stabbed at Lung’s head. “Dangerous!” He dodged it, but I had succeeded in getting his full attention.

My mind was racing. Every action needed to be flawlessly executed, every reaction perfectly done because if he got anything past my guard I was out of this fight or worse.

The fact that this also needed to be a purely defensive fight on my part and somehow not get mauled by a brute while only able to dodge and deflect anything he could throw at me. I couldn’t afford to hurt him and let him ramp up before Riley found a chance to strike. A war of attrition with a guy that only got stronger, simple enough.

All this passed through my mind, plus multiple profanities about how stupid this decision was, in the second it took for me to finish my opening attack.

After my failed attempt at stabbing his face he wound up a textbook telephone punch. I put my shield up, ready to try and deflect it when…

“Shit!” He had lashed out his fist as quick as lightning and stopped it right in front of my face. The air displaced by the force of it knocking my head back.

“Last chance girl, or you won’t walk away.” He absolutely towered over me as he gave his final warning.

My response was to bash his nose in with my shield, because I needed to act before fear took hold of me and started to slow me down.

Lung roared in response through his bleeding and, hopefully, broken nose. Hopefully that was the last time I would need to provoke him. He also brought down a fist to try and cave my head in, but I was able to divert it with my shield. Which was a good decision considering he left a stream of fire in his fists wake.

Luckily the bone shield wasn’t too flammable and weathered the hit and the fire well.

He swung again from the side, and I ducked while putting the shield over my head to stop my balaclava from being ignited.

This exchange, if you could call me desperately trying not to get maimed and/or set ablaze by the increasingly irate dragon man, continued for what felt like an eternity.

When I felt like I was finally finding a rhythm to his punches he started trying to claw at me instead. I never noticed when his hands began that transition, but it also jerked me out of my tunnel vision enough to notice that Lung was well over eight feet tall now.

I began to wonder why he was scaling up even though I’d only hit him once. My research led me to believe that he gets more powerful the more he’s injured, and I didn’t think a broken nose against a non-parahuman opponent would really have him start powering up.
My moment of contemplation cost me, as he was able to rake his claws through my shield, getting a grip on my forearm and then he wrenched it to the side. I felt my left shoulder pop out of socket.

A wordless scream left me as he then lifted me up by my shield arm bringing me in front of his face.

“A foolish—” was all Lung was able to get out as he jerked his head to his left, where Bones looked to be flying toward us screaming a high-pitched battle cry.

Before Lung could react in any other way, Bones brought down a large axe on the arm Lung was holding me off the ground with. Cutting it off at the elbow. Letting me hit the ground while barely staying on my feet.

I painfully dropped the damaged shield from my now useless arm and yelled at the top of my lungs “Axe!” while touching the tip of my short sword to the shield.

Lung had turned to attack Riley, noticeably growing in size as the two began to exchange blows, bone blades and claw clashing against each other. Thankfully Riley had heard me over the sounds of combat and I saw both weapons fuse together, the shield changing to a double-sided axe head and the sword’s blade rounding out into a cylindrical rod.

I hefted the axe onto my shoulder with my one good arm, thankful for the lightness of the bone weapon as I waited for an opening, standing between Lung and the cars parked near the sidewalk.

Lung seemed to be ignoring me now in favor of Riley, which is completely understandable, I would ignore me too if someone was trying to mutilate me with blades made from their own bones.

But even with his back facing me, his increased perception would alert him to my approach if I tried to jump in half-cocked. So, I just needed to be patient.

Not for long though, Riley was able to bat his arm away, opening his guard and leaving it wide open for some more dismemberment. I saw scales starting to grow out of his skin so I needed to act quickly.

I lunged, bringing down the axe on his last arm to finish the disarming part our ‘disarm and defeat’ plan.

…At least that was my intention, but with only one hand to guide the axe I missed where I was aiming, the middle of his upper arm, and instead brought down the axe on the meat of his shoulder. Getting my axe stuck in the increasingly angry dragon man.

He turned his head, was his neck getting longer? To glare at me and before I could let go of my axe and retreat he donkey kicked me in the chest.

My world exploded into white, hot pain as I was launched off my feet into the air. But my flight was cut short by the crunching of metal and the shattering of glass as I was violently imbedded into a car.

At least I hoped that the crunching and shattering sounds I heard were strictly from the car and not my own bones.

I started blacking out, hearing someone scream as I felt myself losing consciousness.
I abruptly regained awareness after hearing a loud cracking sound.

I frantically tried to turn my head to look for the source of it but found that I was still embedded in the car Lung had kicked me into.

Luckily, I didn’t have to turn my head too far to see what had happened.

Lung, who was significantly bigger than I remember him being before I blacked out, was standing over a crater, dozens of bone spikes sticking out of him as I saw him start pouring fire into the hole in the middle of the street.

The crater then produced a shrill scream of pain after he started.

Shit.

No.

Riley’s in that crater and Lung’s trying to cook her.

Gotta move.

Gotta do something to get his attention.

I frantically extricated myself from the minivan, almost blinding myself with pain by jostling my abused body. Even with one arm, my desperation won out and the seemingly herculean feat was done. I strained to remain standing and started digging through the pockets of my cargo pants, well, one pocket in particular.

I quickly found and pulled out what I was looking for, a small handgun I took from a Merchant a week after Uber and Leets Mortal Kombat fiasco. My own anti-cape weapon just in case a very rainy day would ever happen to me.

It wouldn’t do anything to Lung but tickle him, but it should distract him from continuing to roast Riley. Hopefully.

With my only good arm I turned the safety off and fired at Lung. Feeling pain lance through my body as the recoil reverberated and magnified the pain in my ribs.

The shot went wide, but got him to stop pouring fire into the crater I had assumed Riley was in.

He looked at me, turning his head slightly as if confused or surprised by the fact that I was conscious.

I thought that the only reasonable response to that was to shoot at him again. Multiple times. I think a few of them might have even hit him.

It was totally worth the pain in my ribs to hear his annoyed growl as he started to stomp towards me. I’ll take my small victories where I can.

“oo’ aw ah ‘ool ‘url” was the slightly comprehensible growl he directed toward me as he approached my barely standing form.

He stopped in front of me, letting me really take in how much he had transformed since I blacked out. He stood well over a dozen feet tall, gray scales covering his form as he stood half man, half dragon before me. The bone spikes were already getting pushed out as his body healed him The arm Riley had cut off almost completely regrown at this point. Was I out that long or was his
healing factor just that fast?

I took a deep breath and winced both in pain and at the wet sound that come from me as I did it. Shit, I shouldn’t even be standing, let alone trying to continue my fight with Lung.

“I’ve made…a lot…of dumb decisions…shooting you…isn’t one…of them” And started to bring up my gun to try and shoot him again, because fuck it, standing was hard enough, I doubt I’ll be walking away from this fight anyway.

But before I could even bring my arm a white blur slammed into Lung, sending him careening off the street and into the side of a building.

I nearly collapsed in relief but someone in red was at my side to catch me before I could. What a jerk, couldn’t he see I was in no condition to be on my feet right now.

“Woah there, don’t pass out on me. We need to get you out of here quick.” Said the guy in red.

I gestured vaguely at the hole in the road with my good arm. “There’s…someone in there…you gotta…help her.” The wet sound my breathing was making had started to sound worse.

“Really, crap.” I felt more than saw him wave at someone, but I was already blacking out now that adrenaline was wearing off.

“…crater…get them…Panacea…” was all I heard before the blessed relief of unconsciousness took me.
March 6th, 2011 (Sunday)

-Four hours after fighting Lung-

My return to consciousness was a bit disorienting.

I could hear and feel before I could see.

I could hear beeping.

I could feel some kind of cord on my left arm and something holding my right hand. I was reclining on something soft.

I could also feel a bone deep ache in my body, as if I’d been hit by a truck. Or a dragon, I suppose.

Right, I was fighting Lung, or rather losing badly against Lung.

I put my hand to my head to stave off a headache that was beginning to form at memory of me and a car getting well acquainted and felt my balaclava still on my face. I was still masked, that’s good.

I opened my eyes and everything I saw was just a blur.

Damn it, is this what happens when you sleep with contacts in? Or did someone actually take my contacts out of my own eyes while I was unconscious?

Wait, get back on track thoughts. Where am I? The steady beeping had picked up speed as my mind began to race, but I still felt groggy from just waking up and I couldn’t see so I couldn’t make sense of anything.

The beeping continued, becoming faster and until-

“I’m glad you finally decided to wake up.” Said a sarcastic feminine voice.

I squinted at the source of the it, a red and white blur from somewhere in front of me. I think she was sitting down before because the blur suddenly got taller and came closer to me.

The beeping sped up again as I felt my battered body tense.

“Woah, hey! I’m not trying to hurt you! I just spent the last couple of hours saving your life for god’s sake.” She stopped when she was at my left side and reached toward my face and then the world came into focus. “The PRT found a glasses case in one of your pockets after they got you here, I took your contacts out before you got put on my table, so I thought you’d appreciate having them when you woke up.”

As she was talking to me I started to look around and drink in my surroundings. I was in a primarily white room with soft fluorescent lighting. What I was reclining on was a hospital bed and I was underneath white sheets and a blue blanket. The cord I felt on my left arm was an IV
and the beeping was my heart monitor. From what was uncovered by the blanket I could see that I was in a hospital gown. There was a door directly in front of me and what I assumed was a one-way mirror that let people look in on whoever occupied the room. The door had a few chairs on either side of it, which I assume is where the girl who just put my glasses on was sitting before I woke up.

But most importantly, Riley was in the room, or Bones I should say. She had her street clothes on but still wore her blank bone mask and looked completely fine, no singe marks or burned skin to be seen. She was sleeping, curled up in a chair next to my bed with one of her hands holding mine. It was absolutely adorable but after getting a good look around the room my eyes finally came to rest on the girl who had just given me my glasses.

The girl that had just said she spent the past few hours saving my life.

Finally getting a good look at her I could see that she was short, wearing white scrubs with red crosses on them and a surgeon's mask pulled down around her neck. She had a freckled, mousy face and frizzy brown hair. She was also looking at me with a raised eyebrow and an appraising look. We stared at each other for a beat before it clicked.

“OH! You’re Panacea!” I smiled at her, even if she couldn’t see it through my mask. “I’m a big fan of your work.”

Her appraising look changed into a smirk at that. “Well, considering that you now count among my work I would hope so.”

That might have killed my smile, I had assumed my chest's soreness was the extent of my injuries but if that was wrong and I had needed to get on Panacea’s surgical table after my fight then… well, that’s not good at all.

I hastily took my hand out of Riley’s grip and pulled at the back of my hospital gown to untie it and pull it down to get a look at my chest, searching for post-surgery stitches. I, for all intents and purposes, had taken my top off to look and feel for where my chest had no doubt been opened up. And there they were, right under my breasts were two long stitched together cuts as well as six smaller incisions that dotted my ribcage. The only odd part was that they looked like they had already been healing for a few days.

“Shit. How long have I been out?”

“It’s been about four hours since your gargantuanly stupid attempt at fighting one of the most powerful capes on the east coast. They look healed because of a personal ointment I applied to them after the surgery. They should be healed in a couple of days and the stitches should dissolve into your skin by then as well.” She pointedly did not look at my exposed chest while reprimanding me. “Can you cover up? I have another bone I wanna pick with you, but I’d rather not be distracted while asking how an idiot like you is still alive.”

‘Not much to be distracted by’ was my first thought but I instead chose to say “Didn’t you just open me up on a table? Why is this” I gestured to my breasts, or lack there of “where you draw the line?”

“Seeing those” she gestured blindly toward my chest while staring a hole in the wall “inside and outside of surgery are two completely different situations. Besides, how can you be fine just sitting there with them out?”

I raised an eyebrow at that, which went entirely unseen by the flustered girl in front of me, I think I could see her blushing. “I worked hard for this body and I’m proud of it. If I can change in a
locker room full of people I loathe and not feel embarrassed about my body, I can certainly sit here in front of the girl that saved my fucking life by doing emergency surgery on me without feeling any shame.”

“…it certainly is a body to be proud of…” was the mumbled reply to my statement, and was she blushing? Did my body really fluster THE Panacea? That’s certainly a confidence boost I didn’t know I wanted.

I finally decided to take pity on the poor girl and slide the gown back over my exposed chest. “Alright, it’s safe to look now. And do you mind if I ask you a question, or three?”

Panacea looked a bit pensive at that before answering me “Sure, but only if I get to ask you a few questions as well.”

Well that’s certainly not the response I expected, “I’m not sure what kind of questions you could have about me, but that sounds fair. Can I start?”

“Sure”

“All right, do you know what happened with Lung after the Protectorate saved me from him?”

While I was asking my question, Panacea began to drag one of the chairs lined up against one of the walls to my bedside, so that she could sit opposite of Riley. She detached my IV saying it was ‘only to put fluids in me and pretty much pointless now’ and sat down, pulling a manila folder out from somewhere and put in on her lap as she did so.

“It wasn’t just the Protectorate that came to help you, New Wave came as well. Because, y’know, you did text Crystal with just an intersection, and the words ‘Lung’ and ‘help’ before you apparently got into a fist fight with him. Apparently, her parents thought she was having a heart attack because of how distressed the message made her.”

I nodded at that, silently promising to apologize to Laserdream later and ignoring the misconstrued fact that I tried to fist fight Lung. I wasn’t dumb enough to do that, I fought him with a sword and shield. But instead of saying any of that I said, “That still doesn’t answer my question.”

She looked up, pensive again, “I guess not. Well, after they got you and your friend” She gestured to the still sleeping Riley, “out of there the Protectorate and my family fought Lung for a bit before making a ‘tactical retreat’ after he got to hot to handle. Much property was damaged but there were no casualties, innocent or otherwise.”

I felt myself relax when she said that there were no casualties. So, it had been worth it to fight Lung.

“And now it’s my turn to ask a question.” She paused briefly, dramatically tapping her chin with a finger as if carefully considering her words. “Ah yes, here’s one. What kind of IDIOT are you to try and beat Lung in a fight!?!?!?”

I jumped slightly at the sheer volume of her voice as she practically screamed her question. I also saw Riley jump out of her chair and start growing armor as she frantically looked around to find the source of the noise.

“What’s up?! Did Lung attack the PRT? Did he follow us?!” Bones’ head was on a swivel as a club started forming in her hand. But judging by her words we weren’t in a hospital but the PRT building. Interesting.

I let out an exasperated sigh as I glared at Panacea for waking Bones up. She seemed a bit
ashamed but held my gaze as she waited for an answer.

“Bones, no one’s attacking us. Panacea just got a little too into our Q and A session.” Breaking off my stare down to look at Bones.

“Oh, thank goodness!” was all Bones sad before she practically deflated back into the chair she was sleeping in bringing the bones back into her body. “I don’t think I’ll feel like fighting for at least another week.”

I smirked at that, “A whole week huh?”

“Yeah a whole week. I almost died.” And then she turned to face me, leaning forward in her seat to take my hand again. “You almost died.” And I could hear the tears forming before I could see them through the eyeholes in her mask.

My attention was brought back to Panacea when she said, “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“That…right.” I took a deep breath so that I could gather my thoughts and then looked at Panacea. “The purpose of the fight wasn’t to beat Lung. I’m not strong enough for it and Bones doesn’t have enough experience fighting capes to be able to pull something like that off. I realize that. The point of it was to distract Lung long enough for Laserdream to bring help so that Lung wouldn’t slaughter the Merchants he found in his territory.” I broke eye contact to look at Riley’s hand, clasped in mine. “It was only a delaying tactic, I thought we would be able to last the few minutes it should have taken for help to arrive.” I was keenly aware of all the aches and pains in my body when I finished my explanation.

Panacea then asked, in an accusatory and disbelieving tone, “You’d sacrifice your life so that a few Merchants wouldn’t get killed by Lung?”

“Yes, I believe that there are very few people in this world that deserve death, and if I walked away when I could have stopped it I wouldn’t have forgiven myself.” I looked back up at Panacea, daring her to argue with me on that point. “So, we confronted Lung, with a plan, and this is the consequences of it. I understand that it probably looks stupid, but so are a lot of the things that capes like us do.”

Something in Panacea’s face twitched at what I had just said but I decided to ask my next question instead of what that meant.

“But that’s two questions for you so now I get to ask two.” A shit eating grin growing on my face that she might not have been able to see, but certainly heard in my voice.

Panacea conceded the point with a cross face and a nod. I looked at Riley to see if she was still awake. She’s been uncharacteristically quiet. But she seems to have just been content with listening to our conversation, either unsure of how or unwilling to participate at this point.

I looked back at Panacea, “Next question then, how bad were Bones and I when we got here?”

“Bones’ was perfectly fine when she was brought here. Physically at least, she refused to leave your side even when you were put on my operating table, worrying about you the whole time.”

I quickly looked at Riley when I heard that.

She meekly said, “I didn’t want to leave you alone with them.” The unspoken ‘I didn’t want to be alone with them’ still communicated between us. I squeezed her hand as reassuringly as I could.
“You on the other hand were beat to shit-I mean crap”

“I’ve heard curse words before…” was Riley’s response to barely caught profanity.

“Beat to crap? Is that your scientific analysis or is that just how the world’s foremost bio-tinker describes her patient’s condition?”

She smiled at that, if you can call that small, angry thing a smile. “Sure, I can give you the nitty gritty details. But that will cost you your other question.”

“How very petty of you.”

“You started it and I can say that I am very skilled at being petty. It’s the only way I survive living with Vicky. Are you fine with that being your question?”

“Yes, fine that’s my question.” I wave my hand to try and speed her up and get on with it. “How close was I to dying oh great and wonderful Panacea.”

She raised her eyebrow at my awkward, sarcastic praise but finally let me know what Lung’s kick did to me.

“You had six broken ribs, three on each side of the front of your rib cage. Almost all of them punctured your lungs. You’re actually very lucky that Lung’s foot was so big when he kicked you, if it had been any smaller some of those broken ribs would have gone straight into your heart. Your bulletproof vest also stopped him from kicking through your chest and made sure your spine didn’t turn to dust when you hit the side of that minivan, so you should thank whoever you got that from as well.”

Well shit. “I really did almost die.” It felt unreal, being that close to death from getting hit once.

“Yeah, most normal people don’t walk away from a fight with Lung. Which brings me to my next question.” She paused and began to take what looked like x-ray photos out of it and tossed them on my lap. “After I finished fixing you up, ‘Bones’ over there helping fuse your ribs back together, the PRT had you get an MRI done to make sure you didn’t have any brain damage from the fight. I told them you didn’t but who wants to listen to Panacea about her own patient’s health.” She donned an annoyed look at the wall as she muttered that last part.

“But yeah, you got an MRI and I got a better look at your brain. And hey, here’s an off-topic, rhetorical question. You know what a Corona Pollentia is?” She held her hand up to stop me from answering. “It’s the part of the brain that lets people have and control superpowers.”

I felt my body go cold at that.

Felt the blood drain from my face because I never even suspected that anybody would ever get an MRI scan of me while I was Camo Girl. Shit, I didn’t plan for anyone to know I was powerless for a long time.

“After saying all that, here’s my final question.” Panacea was looking me in the eyes now, with an intensity that made it feel like she had my soul stripped bare before her. “What kind of idiot lasts a year as a cape without actually having any powers? What kind of fool takes on a gang by herself when she’s just as normal as almost everyone else in the world? What makes a person think they can do that and not die in the process?” It came out softly, almost a whisper.

I hadn’t looked at the MRI scans she put on my lap, but I knew if I did I would have found a normal brain, with normal part, lacking the required equipment to actually become a parahuman.
No, instead of looking at the scans I was still looking at Panacea’s face. Never breaking eye contact even as she said those damning words that were no doubt being recorded in this PRT hospital room. Even as she spoke my secret out loud for the whole of the PRT and Protectorate to hear, saved for posterity by their security cameras.

I decided that it was only fair to answer her question.

“The kind of idiot, the kind of fool that would do those things without any powers is someone who got tired of waiting for someone to come and help her. The kind of person who saw what was happening in the city around her and decided that the people that had power weren’t doing enough. So, she had to do it herself, even if it was dangerous, even if there was a large chance that she wouldn’t survive the attempt. That’s the kind of person that would do those idiotic, stupid things.”

And I could feel the fear, the bone crushing anxiety that everything I’d been working toward for the past year had been for naught. Ready to come crumbling down around me now that the PRT knew my secret.

And then I looked at Panacea, really looked at her. The bags under her eyes, the frown lines around her mouth, the way she didn’t fill up a room with her presence like a lot of heroes seem to do. Things that I hadn’t noticed when this conversation started. She looked tired. And then I looked at her expression, confused, angry, hopeful and then mish-mash of a whole lot of other emotions that past her face in the blink of an eye after hearing my answer.

“…wait, you don’t have any powers?” Aaaand I forgot Riley was here.

Damn it.

I looked away from Panacea and turned to face Riley, expecting anger and betrayal to show through her eyes. Instead I found that she had climbed onto my bed without me noticing and was now almost mask to mask with me. Her eyes practically sparkling from what I could see through her mask’s eyeholes.

“That’s amazing! I thought you were so cool before because you did so much with only low-level thinker power, but everything you’ve done was without a power at all. That’s so cool! You’re such badass and I-“

I put my hand on the part of her mask that her mouth should be to try and stop her before she went on another rambling rampage. Thankfully she understood the gesture.

And then I pulled her into a hug, feeling some of the fear and tension drain out of me with her words.

That’s right, I am a badass. I can still make this work even if people find out that I don’t have powers faster than I had hoped. I still have a year of taking the Merchants apart under my belt. I could still fix my city.

I heard an awkward cough to my side and looked back over at Panacea without breaking my hug with Riley.

She pointedly sent a text message on her phone before looking back up at us.

“Director Piggot wanted to talk with you two as soon as you regained consciousness. And since my curiosity has now been satisfied I just let her know that you’re good for a talking too.” And then she gave me a shit-eating grin, probably a perfect mirror of the one I gave her a few minutes ago. “I hear that both the Protectorate and the PRT have been trying to get in contact with you for
a long time, so I bet you’ve been looking forward to this meeting just as much as they have.”

And with that she started to walk toward the door.

But I had one more question, “Wait!” Panacea turned around “Last question. Does the director already know I don’t have powers?”

She turned around to answer me, “I wasn’t the first person to see your MRI scans, so it’s probably a safe bet that she does. And if not, someone watching this room probably heard and is letting all the people that need to know, know.” She then turned back around and continued toward the door. Stopping to knock on it. She turned her head to say one final thing, “And thanks for answering my questions, I know that last one probably wasn’t something you wanted to hear from me but I wanted to hear why you’ve been doing what you’ve been doing especially since you don’t have powers.”

And with that the door was opened from the outside, letting Panacea out while a helmeted PRT trooper took her place in the room.

He or she, the troopers look fairly androgynous in their armor, had a stack of clothes in their hands as they walked up to my bed and placed them on the blue blanket.

“Here are your clothes ma’am” definitely a she by the voice “cleaned and restored to the best of our abilities. If you could put these on when I exit so that I may escort you two to a conference room to meet with the director.”

I looked at the clothes she had just put on the bed, my costume. I could see my jacket, pants and long-sleeved shirt with my boots on top of the stack.

“Sounds like we don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“The director was fairly…vehement about how she wished to speak with you.”

Riley, still clinging onto me whispered in my ear, “I can probably break us out of here if you want to, I remember the way out from here.”

I sighed, saying “This meeting was a long time coming anyway Bones, let’s just get it over with so we can put this night behind us.”

The trooper nodded and exited the room, the door opening automatically for her.

I untangle myself from Riley so that I could stand up and change out of this hospital gown.

I also started mentally preparing for this talk with Piggot, looks like a lot of my plans were being pushed forward tonight.

As I slipped my pants on I began to wonder just how badly this meeting could go.

Chapter End Notes

Panacea is here and with a different shard! She still has her share of problems though, changing her shard can't fix all of them.
Cg and BS meet Piggot

Chapter Summary

A tense meeting with the PRT’s Director.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

March 6th, 2011 (Sunday)

--Two minutes after Panacea left the PRT building—

After I finish changing, Riley and I are escorted to a conference room to talk to Director Piggot.

Said director is already in the room, with a laptop and thick folder in front of her, when we walk in. She is sitting on one of the long sides of an oval table, to let Riley and I sit opposite her. I expected some kind of power play from her like sitting at the head of the table, to confirm that she had all the power in this meeting. I can honestly say that I’m pleasantly surprised by the attempt to make it look like we are on an even playing field. Or I could be reading to much into where Piggot chose to sit.

It was only after making that supposition that I noticed Armsmaster standing right behind her. Damn it. My last encounter with him having been a bit…acerbic to say the least might make this meeting a little awkward.

But first introductions and all that. I should probably be polite to the head of this branch of the PRT.

“It’s nice to finally meet you Director Piggot. And I’m glad I could meet you under better circumstances this time Armsmaster, I was a bit…irate the last time we met.” There, pleasant and apologetic, hopefully that can be counted for something, since I pretty much blew up on him after he came to help me out of Uber and Leet’s tournament.

“Camo Girl, Bones, I would say that I’ve been looking forward to speaking to you two, but it appears we’ve had a mutual hesitation for this meeting.” Her face was set in a frown that looks like it’s been on her face since Scion appeared. That mixed with her unhealthy pallor and weight make for an unexpectedly intimidating image, showing her military background, rather than a political one that I’ve read that some other directors have.

This was followed by Armsmaster saying, “I was also given the impression that you were unwilling to talk with the PRT in any capacity as well Camo Girl, except for when you try and recruit some of the Wards for your little Merchant hunting exercises.” And I was impressed by the lack of annoyance or anger in his voice. I had assumed he would have been more antagonistic toward me for high jacking some of the Ward patrols, but he sounded fairly indifferent.

And I couldn’t really deny that, I have been avoiding any kind of interaction with the PRT and Protectorate to avoid any chance of them figuring out that I had no powers. Not much of a problem now though.
“There was information that I thought would be more easily hidden if you didn’t try to put me through power testing.” Was my reply.

Piggot spoke next, “Yes we’ve seen your MRI scans and listened in on your conversation with Panacea.”

I raised my eyebrow at that “I guess private conversations aren’t allowed here then?” A bit annoyed but not surprised that what I had hoped was a private talk was in fact not private at all.

“Only when I allow it.” Piggot then started typing into the laptop in front of her. I heard a hissing sound come from the door and suddenly felt a bit claustrophobic when a faint electrical hum filled the windowless room. “This room is now a dead zone. A faraday cage now surrounds this room and any attempts to record or listen in on what happens in here will be stopped with the best anti-surveillance technology the PRT can bring to bear.”

“Coooool” Riley was the first to respond to that.

And I spoke second, “And why would you feel the need to make this room into a dead zone? I doubt there is anything that Bones and I know to warrant such measures.”

“That would normally be the case, except that certain information regarding you came to light tonight and I wish to ensure that no one that I don’t approve of even has the chance of learning what was discovered in the past few hours.” Was the calm and cool response from the director, and even as she spoke she seemed to be trying to stare a hole through my skull. It was a little intimidating.

Although it is interesting to hear that she wishes to keep my lack of powers a secret even within the PRT itself. Unless she found out something else about me that I’m not aware of. I don’t think it would be my identity, that wouldn’t call for such an intricate way of stopping surveillance.

“Well that certainly seems drastic “Umm…”

“I feel that I can demonstrate just why that fact would change things.” As she said that Piggot opened the thick folder in front of her, flipping through the pages and stopping at some seemingly arbitrary point. “Throughout the past year we have recorded what we know of your exploits, created a psychological profile and estimated what your intentions and goals are, all under the assumption that you were a parahuman.” She then picked up about half of the four inches of paper “These are assumptions and analysis about you as a person and a cape that have been written and recorded by various PRT employees set to study you and your actions” and promptly threw them in the garbage can to her right. “Almost all of it worthless now that we are aware of your lack of a Corona Pollentia.”

Well that certainly seems drastic “Um…”

“The reason it is now worthless is because it has been found that parahumans have their mental states altered by their powers, and the PRT takes that into consideration when psychologically evaluating the capes that appear in their spheres of influence.” She gave me an unreadable look. “And since you are not a parahuman, all assumptions based on that fact must now be thrown out the window. Congratulations Camo Girl, you probably hold the record wasted PRT man hours studying an unpowered individual.” I assumed that the number of people on that list could be counted on my hand, but her tone showed annoyance with an undertone of…respect? I couldn’t tell, Piggot seemed to keep any emotion that wasn’t annoyed or angry close to her chest.

This is not how I expected this conversation to go. I felt like a fish, floundering and gaping at what
I had just heard.

I finally found my voice and asked “Why has the PRT done so much research toward my actions? And other than the fact that you probably think I’m some kind of lunatic for pretending to be a cape, what are you going to do now that you know?” I heard my voice crack in fear near the end of saying that and felt someone grab my hand. I looked to my left to see Riley giving me a reassuring look, at least that’s the impression I got through her mask.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

To my surprise it was Armsmaster who answered my question, “Any solo vigilante that stays solo for as long as you have is worth keeping an eye on, especially in Brockton Bay.”

They thought I’ve been solo this whole time, which mean they never thought I was permanently working with Shadow Stalker and they are unaware that I’ve been getting information from my Contact for almost a year now.

Then Director Piggot said “We began keeping track of you in earnest about a month after your first reported activities. Would you like to hear all that we recorded about your exploits for the past year?”

I almost said no when I felt Riley squeeze my hand and quietly start bouncing in her seat. She started looking back and forth, from Piggot to me, silently begging to be told all the no doubt nitty gritty details the PRT was able to dig up about my activities.

I fought back a sigh and told Piggot, “I think Bones wants to hear it, but can you give the short version please? I’m sure there are other things you want to discuss, and it’s been a long night for us.”

“Then I’ll keep it brief” she seemed annoyed at me for that, but I’m beginning to think that’s just her reaction to anyone that she has to converse with. “February 1st: BBPD receives a call from an anonymous female source about four Merchants that were tied up in front of a supposed meth lab. The reported Merchants later admit to a camouflaged blur attacking and subduing them. These reports continued for roughly four weeks until February 26th when the PRT received reports of Skidmark and Mush loudly chasing someone through the docks and trainyard, loudly yelling expletives about someone wearing camouflage clothing.” She gave me what I could only describe as a look when she finished relating that information.

It felt like a teacher or parent silently demanding an explanation. “I knew the place was a Merchant safehouse. I made the mistake of thinking that they would simply let me continue to bust up their operations, and instead of a few strung-out junkies I had Mush and Skidmark sitting there when I broke in. So, I ran away.” I tried to shrug nonchalantly but it probably looked as forced as it felt judging by how Riley sympathetically squeezed my hand “I learned a few lessons that day about recon, planning and execution.”

“A lesson that many powered capes die before learning. But let’s continue. After about two weeks of inactivity, you came back and started attacking the Merchants again on March 12th where you were seen working with Shadow Stalker, a well-known vigilante with an aggressive preference for solo operation.”

“I’d ask how she’s getting along with the Wards, but I’ve already spoken to her about that.”

Piggot made an unflatteringly angry face at that, probably directed equally towards Shadow Stalker and myself for bringing up Stalker’s…unhappiness with the whole ‘strong-armed into the Wards’ situation. “I’m well aware of both Shadow Stalker’s attitude and how she’s communicated
it to you.” And then the anger simmered down and was once again replaced with that ever-present irritation. “This temporary partnership would continue to be seen on and off with irregularity for the next few months.”

“Stalker and I had an unspoken agreement. If she could find me before I got to my targets we would work together.” I stared into Piggot’s eyes as I said the next part “We have very different views on what is and what is not ok with the treatment of subdued gang members but knowing what you know about me now will help you figure out why I didn’t exactly turn her down when she wanted to team up. We work well together and can tolerate each other, which was good enough for me to set aside our differences and let her help me.”

“I can understand that, Stalker is as effective a combatant as she is ferocious against her enemies.”

Armsmaster decided to say his piece as well regarding Shadow Stalker as well, “She is competent, but we have yet to have her cooperate with anyone within the Protectorate or Wards nearly as well as she’s been seen working with you. Psyche told us that Stalker listened to your plans explicitly the first time you met both of them on a patrol.” And he seemed more curious than annoyed at the fact that Shadow Stalker actually attempted to work with me.

“We came to an agreement on the first night we met. I’m sure she’ll tell you the specifics if you ask politely.” I said this knowing full well that Stalker was probably physically incapable of responding to any request, politely stated or not, without caustic derision.

Piggot and Armsmaster must have had the same belief because they both had a brief sour look on their faces when I said that, at least what I could see of Armsmaster’s mouth looked like it. But just as quickly as it came the look was wiped off their faces and replaced with something more professional.

Piggot steered the conversation back on topic “But we are getting ahead of ourselves.” She flipped through her papers again and found what she was looking for. “You continued your crusade against the Merchants without anything major happening for several months after your initial work with Shadow Stalker, working with her on and off until she joined the Wards on August 15th. Nothing major happened until we received a report from New Wave that Glory Girl and Laserdream found you before you started one of your raids on August 24th. But you refused their assistance when it was offered.”

I felt Riley’s hand tighten around mine again when Glory Girl and Laserdream were brought up, she will definitely be interrogating for all the details on that meeting later.

“That is correct, I thought that Laserdream could have helped but I am not a fan of Glory Girls record for collateral damage. I explained that to them and they respected my wishes to act alone.”

“And then they each gave you their phone numbers in case you needed some help down the line.”

I was surprised that New Wave was so thorough in whatever information they gave to the PRT.

“Yes, they did, but other than last night I never really got a chance to use either of them.”

“I’m sure” and I thought I heard the barest hints of sarcasm and doubt in those two words, but not sure enough to really be offended by it. “The next major event that we are aware of is on September 11th when you, shall we say, ‘recruited’ Shadow Stalker and Psyche to help you take down Merchant activity near the Boardwalk, that combined with the fact that you wanted none of the credit left some of us scratching our heads.”

“I thought I would take pity on poor Shadow Stalker and give her the bedlam and chaos that she
so constantly craves. I imagined that she was starting to itch under all the pesky rules she has to follow now.” Because if the great minds of the PRT couldn’t figure out why I did it, then why would I tell them so easily.

That got me an unimpressed look from Piggot and a frown from Armsmaster.

“You’re lying” was Armsmaster’s response to that, and the call out kind of threw me off. And well yes, the first part of that could be considered a lie, but I think my evaluation of Shadow Stalker was truthful enough.

“Fine, me taking pity on Stalker isn’t the ‘whole truth’, I actually wanted the Wards to take the credit in the hopes that Skidmark would think he finally got one over on me since I wasn’t the person to stop his people from trying to get a foothold somewhere outside their normal territory.” I would have pouted and crossed my arms my arms at being caught, but Riley’s hand and my own hope to appear mature put a damper on that.

“So, you used my Wards as a smokescreen for your personal war with the Merchants?” And there was a subdued annoyance in her voice, like she had already had an inkling of what my intention was already.

“Yes, I also don’t think any of the Wards would really care if they knew that was my reason. They got to see some action, you got some good PR for catching the Merchants trying to push drugs near the Boardwalk and I get help stopping the Merchants. It’s a win for everyone involved.”

“And yet on the two separate occasions that you have used the Wards to your own ends was with Shadow Stalker and Psyche, then Vista and Clockblocker.” This seemed to get both Armsmaster and Riley’s attention, if the respective frown and squeezing of my hand were any indication.

“Would you care to explain your reasoning for that?”

I sat for a second and thought about how I should answer that particular question.

“It wasn’t as if I sought to work with them specifically.” I said slowly, chewing on the words. “I was mainly just trying to avoid Aegis and Gallant’s patrols and whoever else I got I was fairly confident I could convince them to work with me.”

“And why try to avoid Aegis and Gallant?” Armsmaster asked first, although Piggot did look like she was about to ask a question as well.

“From what I’ve read about them they seemed to be the most likely people to try and get the Protectorate or PRT involved before they would want to make a move. Very by-the-books personalities by what I could gather. As you now know, I wanted to avoid any kind of interaction for as long as I could. So, when I saw that it was Shadow Stalker and Psyche on patrol that night I was confident I could get them to help me without them getting any of their superiors involved.” And I gestured to Piggot and Armsmaster as I said that. “Vista and Clockblocker I was less sure about, but I thought I could swing Vista’s craving for action and Clockblocker’s well known rebellious nature against authority into helping me.”

I was barely able to meet Piggot’s glare as her eyes bore into me because of my blatant admittance at being able to easily persuade the Wards into unauthorized actions. It was a scary thing that I’m sure she has used on many unfortunate souls.

“Good to know.” She looked back at her file “After hijacking a Ward patrol the next major altercation you were involved in would be on October 1st during ‘Uber and Leet’s Mortal Kombat Tournament’” Her face wrinkled in distaste when she said the name, mine probably would have
looked the same if I hadn’t been wearing my mask, that night was not a great memory for me. “Where you were forcibly teleported into a warehouse that was later found to be near the trainyard by one of Leet’s inventions to participate in a fighting tournament they wished to broadcast.” Piggot then turned a scrutinizing gaze toward me “Which you were later rescued from with the help of Armsmaster and Kid Win.”

I almost scoffed at that, almost. “And although now I can say that I greatly appreciate the distraction that let me beat Uber over the head with one of my batons, I hope that it can be understood that I was a little angry that it took me fighting Uber for what seemed like an eternity for someone to figure out where they were broadcasting from.”

“Kid Win’s report stated that he feared you would ‘rip his head off’ when you spoke to him and Armsmaster after they entered the warehouse.” And I saw Armsmaster frown again because if that was Kid Win’s impression of me, then my yelling at Armsmaster probably looked much worse than I had thought.

“I hope my loss of temper at that time can be forgiven since Uber had set me on fire about half a minute before you and Kid Win burst in.”

Piggot held her hand up stop Armsmaster from responding as he opened his mouth, which was pretty impressive considering he was standing behind her and her gaze never strayed from my face.

“Discussing the…unfortunate circumstances and events that conspired afterwards are not the topic of this discussion. Let’s move on to the next recorded incident, which occurred December 10th. The aforementioned recruitment of Vista and Clockblocker.” She looked at me as if expecting some kind of comment on that.

I felt I might as well oblige her, “Their powers complement each other which made taking out the Merchants a cakewalk.” I paused, remembering that night “Although I was surprised at how readily Clockblocker took orders, that wasn’t at all the impression I got from his interviews or what I had read online.”

Piggot flipped through her folder some more before stating “In his report he stated that ‘she sounded like she would rip my head off if I didn’t do exactly as she said’” I winced slightly at the fact that two Wards thought I would rip their heads off after only meeting them once. “You seem to have a certain skill at intimidating my Wards Camo Girl. In the reports that have been filed about you the Wards have reported you as fear inducing or awe inspiring, sometimes both.” She almost sounded impressed, although maybe it was just another shade of annoyed that I had yet to hear. It was hard to tell with this woman.

It took another second to register that every Ward I had interacted with was scared or awed by me, but then she was probably exaggerating. Kid Win and Clockblocker were probably exaggerating, I doubt I could ever scare a real cape.

“Finally, we have January 15th, the first night we had received reports of you working with a small, bone-manipulating parahuman when taking down a Merchant warehouse. The first sighting of the parahuman known as ‘Bones’” And for the first time since Riley and I entered the room Piggot directed her gaze to the girl sitting beside me. Some unrecognizable emotion flickered in her eyes as she glanced at Riley, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared leaving me to question what the look was supposed to mean or if it was ever really there.

In response to the glance I felt Riley’s hold on my hand tighten once again, but this time was most likely due to nerves at having Piggot’s attention than excitement.
Riley’s grip loosened noticeably when Piggot redirected her gaze back to me.

“But even with a new, seemingly permanent partner you did not speed up your established pace of hitting Merchant activities once every week or so. And then finally culminating into your fight with Lung just a few hours ago.” And with that Piggot closed her folder with finality. “Have I missed anything.”

Well, yes, but I wasn’t going to be the one to tell her about my run in with Circus. That was just embarrassing and if I never hear about it again it’ll be too soon.

Thinking that and being conscious of Armsmaster’s lie detector I said, “That covers everything related to the little one-woman gang war I started.”

Piggot gave me a look like she knew I wasn’t telling the whole truth, but thankfully she did not seem willing to push it since Armsmaster didn’t say anything.

“Then that’s a brief summary of all of your actions to date. Now we can move onto business.” And that statement set off all kinds of alarm bells in my head.

Now that I thought about it, what was the point of bringing up the major points of my actions of the past year? I was expecting a Wards pitch, but why summarize my actions if that’s just what they wanted to do.

Why would she spend her time relaying all the facts that three of the four of us were already aware of if she didn’t have some kind of overarching design for this meeting.

There was no way that the director of this part of the PRT would waste her time reminding me of every eye-catching event that I either caused or participated in.

No, Piggot had some sort of end-goal for this, and it wasn’t giving Riley a recap of what I had done for the past year.

I gave my best glare at Piggot, the director and leader of PRT branch ENE, and asked “And just what does this ‘business’ entail?”

And Piggot smiled, an outright triumphant smile, something that I don’t think she has had on her face in years. And it was something both terrible and awe-inspiring.

This smile stayed on her face as she said, “Because as a cape, these events would be seen in court as a routine occurrence. Never pursued by a normal jury if someone with parahuman abilities was involved.” And then that unnatural smile turned into something more serious, “but as a mentally unstable, ‘normal’, person it could send you to a penitentiary for a long time and that might be the best-case scenario.”

And then I saw that she believed she held all the cards in this game. And I was still clueless as to what the game even was.

To her she held all the cards. I was scrambling to figure out just what that even meant.

She knew I didn’t have powers. She knew that if it got out that I didn’t have powers, I would be subject to a courtroom for countless acts of questionable legality, acts that wouldn’t be overlooked the same way that a parahuman’s actions would be. But that didn’t make sense, no court room would hang me out to dry for fighting a gang. Even if I didn’t have powers.

What could I do when a major governmental organization knew my most dangerous secret? “So, what now? You turn me into the BBPD and add my civilian identity to a watchlist as some crazy
wannabe cape?” Was that her plan?

That couldn’t be her plan. I had too much of a reputation to tear down as some crazy, unpowered normal. The PRT had too much to lose to do that. One day Brian had told me that hero capes, from a PR and societal perspective, were harder to take down the more well known they were. And from what Riley has told me, I was a fairly well known and even respected vigilante cape on PHO.

That just left me with the same the question though, what was Piggot’s end goal?

“You know my secret, and this meeting wouldn’t be happening unless you wanted something from me. It would be so easy with your resources to just throw me to the wolves and say that I was just some crazy, unpowered girl that tried too hard to get involved in the cape scene.” I didn’t, couldn’t take my eyes off her as I asked he question. There had to be something more, some other intention or reason behind her actions. And if she wouldn’t tell me, I had to be able to figure it out myself. Would she still try a Wards pitch? Strongarm me into it or they would reveal my secret?

She seemed to catch my intentions nonetheless, saying “the reason I bring this all up is, after the recent discovery of your powers, or lack-there-of, it could be said that you are not in your right mind. Leading to an investigation of your civilian life, as you are not an actual parahuman you wouldn’t be protected from their ‘unwritten rules’. Which would lead to a quagmire of red tape and convoluted legal battles. Not to mention other capes being able to figure out who you are with a little deduction. It would be… unpleasant for everyone involved.”

And in that moment, I hated everything about Piggot. The seemingly nonchalant threat to involve my family, brought about a maliciousness that I had not felt since Emma’s betrayal. I was seeing red. I wanted to jump across the table and throttle her for even having the idea.

But all of those burning, angry thoughts ground to a halt when I felt my hand get squeezed again.

Right, Riley was here. And whatever happened to me would most likely involve her.

I took a deep breath.

I squeezed Riley’s hand in gratitude.

I needed to be objective here.

Why all this grandstanding? Why try to corner me? Get me to lash out. I looked at Piggot, tried to get a measure of the women. Her smile was gone but she still exuded an aura of triumph. She’s assured of her victory, whatever it is.

Piggot broke up my thoughts by saying “Let me be clear, I intend to do none of those things.”

And my knee jerk reaction to that statement was “Why not?”

But seriously, what the absolute fuck is her game here?

She gave me a nonplussed look “Because revealing that the cape that’s been systematically taking apart a gang lead by parahumans for the past year was in fact not a true cape, would cause irreparable damage to the PRT and Protectorate’s reputation.” She paused, adding gravity to the next part “As I just mentioned doing so might as well be me leaving you and your loved ones to be killed as well. And there is no reason for me to do that to someone who has spent so much time trying to do good.”

Well she’s not wrong, if I wasn’t dead in an alley a week after it was revealed powerless Taylor
Hebert made a fool of the Merchants for so long I would be pleasantly surprised.

“The fact that you did so alone would also step on too many toes, hero and villain alike.”

“But I wasn’t alone for most of it.” Both Shadow Stalker and my Contact worked with me over the course of the last year, and the last two months had Riley by my side as well.

“Your occasional work with Shadow Stalker and recent partnership with Bones does not take away from the fact that you were the driving force and the one responsible. But we are getting off track again. With all of that cleared away, I would like to extend a formal invitation to the Wards to you and Bones. After speaking to you, hearing your thoughts on your past actions and finally speaking to you as a person I’d be willing to keep your secret, even if you choose not to join. That would allow you to remain in the PRT’s jurisdiction and you would still be able to act as a cape.”

Finally! Something I came into this meeting that I had fully expected. But knowing that this entire meeting was to get a handle on who I was as a person would never have crossed my mind.

Piggot continued, “I expect that you probably don’t want to join them, but I think it would be beneficial to both of you to join—”

I didn’t let her finish “We accept the invitation” and I could see Riley start vibrating in her seat. She knew that this meant we were setting the next step in motion with this. “But, we have a few conditions that need to be met before we sign anything.”

Piggot’s annoyance at being interrupted was tempered by surprise at my acceptance of the invitation and then fell back to annoyance when she heard that I had conditions. I also saw Armsmaster’s jaw tense slightly as well, but I had no idea what that meant coming from him.

“Very well, we can plan a meeting in the next few days with both of your parents or guardians and see if we can meet your ‘conditions’”

At those words my mind ground to a halt.

Oh no.

I forgot about dad.

It also looked like Piggot read my mind, because one look at my eyes had her adopt another sour look.

“And of course, your parents don’t know you’re a cape. Why would they?” And she looked like she wanted to face palm and slap the back of my head at the same time but was able to stop herself through a monumental force of will.

But really, how could she be surprised. It was probably hard enough for a normal parahuman kid to tell their parents that they were a cape. Those parents would be worried to no end. I knew that dad would, well…will, have an aneurism and then want to ground me for the rest my life when I tell him I’ve been a cape without powers for the last year.

But I wasn’t going to let Piggot and Armsmaster know that.

“I’ll convince my dad to let me join the Wards.” I said, sounding a lot more confident than I felt.

Riley spoke up as well saying, “And I’ll let you know my situation when I come in with Camo Girl” because she would likely become a ward of the state through the PRT after this. I think that she will still stay with the foster family she was currently with. But we had discussed how this
would go down before and the different possibilities a while ago.

She glanced at Riley again when she said that, but immediately diverted her eyes back to me. “If you have any problems with your father, give us a call and we can try to persuade him on our end of things.”

As uncomfortable as I was at the thought of letting them handle my dad, I wanted to talk to him and persuade him myself, I agreed to keep them in the know.

After that was a brief warning from Piggot to not do anything too strenuous for at least a week so that my wounds could properly heal. Turns out not even Panacea could instantly heal punctured lungs. Although she told me that Panacea said I could still do some light calisthenics if I felt the need to work out.

We were then lead out of the conference room and to an unmarked PRT van. Where they would drop off Bones and I at destinations of our choosing. I gave them addresses that were several blocks away from our respective houses.

I was confident that Riley could see herself home and hugged her goodbye when she got dropped off. Her endless energy still carrying her down the street as she walked a circuitous route to her house.

It was five-o-clock in the morning when I walked through my front door. I left a note in the kitchen telling dad that I was sleeping in but needed to talk to him when I woke up.

I trudged up the stairs to my room and barely got my jacket and pants off before I collapsed in my bed. The stress and pain of the night finally catching up with me. I set my alarm so that I would get about four hours of sleep before closing my eyes to end this long night. Knowing that in a few hours I would probably have another tough fight that I needed to win.

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The next day was a whirlwind of emotions.

My talk with dad was full of angry words, tears that were shed and unsatisfying compromises made by both parties.

But I was able to do it. After an eternally long argument I got him to support my decision.

In the next few days I would begin the process of joining the Wards.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter just kept getting longer and longer. So sorry if it seems rambly.

And yeah, Piggot just wanted to get a grasp on who Camo Girl was as a person before inviting her into the Wards. Watching her talk with Panacea certainly helped with the decision.

Also Panacea's exact words were "She should still be able to do some light calisthenics to maintain that great bod" but only Piggot heard her and Panacea was so flustered at the fact that she said that out loud that she made Piggot promise never to tell anyone she said that.
I currently have no plans to write Danny and Taylor's argument, but it will be brought up and referenced by them whenever their relationship comes up.

Thank you to everyone for reading!

The next chapter is the Wards's interlude and the conclusion of Arc 1:Meetings. See you all then!

After this chapter, updates should be every Friday or Saturday.
May 20th, 2010 (Thursday)

--Three months after Camo Girl debuted as a vigilante--

The good thing about summer vacation was that I got to spend more time at HQ and therefore spend more time as a hero.

It’s great, being able to be Vista without having to worry about homework or studying or not accidently blowing your secret identity to one of your classmates because I might have to leave school in a rush to help take down criminals.

The bad thing about summer is that I can’t spend all my time at HQ without someone in the PRT coming in and saying that I need to ‘go home and be with my family’ and to ‘not work my life away’. Is it really work when it’s more enjoyable than being home with mom or dad? Mom has a new boyfriend that tries to be ‘the cool dad guy’ whenever he comes over almost every day and my real dad just buys me stuff so that I will like him better than mom.

I just get sick of dealing with home, so why can’t I just be a hero where I can at least feel like I’m accomplishing something instead of being a normal eleven-year-old girl. Even if everyone handles me with kids gloves, which I’m still not okay with, it’s still better than just sitting around, watching TV or listening to mom argue with her new boyfriend.

Which is the current reason why I’m currently walking around my neighborhood at around ten at night. The PRT (read current on rotation therapist) said that I’ve worked too much this week and can’t go back to HQ until Monday, so I need to think of a way to kill the rest of the week and listening to my mom yell wasn’t helping me think.

It was when I got to the opening of an alleyway that that train of thought halted. I saw someone in dark clothes walking towards me.

Oh crap, I looked around and noticed that I was no longer in my neighborhood, how had I been so distracted that I missed that. Now some druggie was probably going to try and stab me.

I tried to remember the self-defense stuff I was taught at the PRT but all I could remember was ‘kick them between the legs’ and how was I going to do that and not use my powers if it didn’t work?

I felt myself tense as I just stood at the entrance of the alley, a deer in the headlights. Should I use my powers to get away? Have they seen my face?

Before I could make a decision a low, feminine voice rang out, “It’s a bad night for you to be wandering around alone.” And it didn’t sound like the voice of someone that wants to stab me and harvest my organs.

But I wasn’t about to be patronized by some shady person walking around in alleyways at ten o’clock at night.
“Why shouldn’t I be?” And I puffed out my chest “Because I’m a little girl? I can protect myself!”

The figure stopped walking for a moment when she heard that, then shook her head and continued walking toward me, only stopping when she stepped into where the streetlights lit up the alley.

She was wearing black pants, a camouflage jacket and a balaclava.

Holy shit, did I really just run into Camo Girl?

My jaw dropped in surprise and as I stood there she said, “I don’t say that specifically because you’re a young girl, I don’t think anyone should walk the streets at Brockton Bay alone at night. It’s a good way to get…jumped by a gang member.” And she didn’t sound patronizing when she said it.

But then I remembered something, “Wait…you never go out unless you’re hitting the Merchants, but they aren’t based anywhere near here.” The Merchants were based near the docks and old trainyard in the northern part of the city, we were way south of Merchant territory. “What are you doing here?”

Her eyes widened in surprise, probably since I apparently knew so much about her MO, “I heard some Merchants had started hanging around near here.” She looked me up and down “And they’re probably looking for as many easy marks they can get before anyone catches their scent around here. Which direction do you live?”

Well that was an abrupt change of subject. “Why?”

“Because if it’s in the same direction I’m going I’ll walk you at least partway back to your house.” I opened my mouth, something scathing on my tongue for trying to handle me with kid gloves before she continued, “And no this isn’t because you’re young, I’d be worried about anyone walking around while Merchants think they have free rein of a new territory.”

My teeth clicked together as I shut my mouth. I didn’t quite believe that she would do this for just anybody, but I probably needed to get back home soon anyway. Plus, I can try and get some information about her while we walked. No one’s really figured anything out anything about her since she showed up in February.

So, I pointed in the direction of mom’s house, “I live deeper in that neighborhood.”

She looked in the direction I had pointed and tilted her head as she thought.

“That’s in the general direction I need to head, would you like to accompany me until we get close to your house?” And while she said it she started digging through her pockets and walking in the direction I had pointed.

“…sure, my mom has probably stopped arguing long enough to notice I’m gone anyway.” And I forgot to bring my phone, so she has no way of contacting me, but I’m not gonna tell Camo Girl that. I started following her.

“Is it a usual thing?” She asked, after she stopped looking in her pockets.

“What? My mom arguing so much that she doesn’t notice me or me going out for a walk when she does?”

There was a silence as she took that in, then said “Going out for walks in the dead of night mostly, but does your mom ignore you like that often?” She sounded something like sympathetic.
“My mom argues with whatever boyfriend she has all the time, but this is the first time I’ve decided to go out at night to get away from it.”

We walked in silence for a bit after that.

Finally, she stopped as we came to an intersection and asked, “Which way do you need to go from here?” I pointed to my left “I’m going right, so this is where we part ways.” And then she turned toward me and held her hand out “I want you to take this. Keep it with you if you ever go on these walks again.” I looked in her hand and saw a can of pepper spray. Is that what she took out of her pocket when we started walking? “I won’t lecture you about how dangerous it is to walk around at night because I can tell you won’t appreciate it and probably won’t listen anyway. So, for my own peace of mind take it because next time it probably won’t be me in the alley.”

I reached out and took it from her looking down at the tiny can in my hands not really sure how to feel, “…thanks”

“It’s no problem” Then she sighed “I can understand wanting to get away from it all every once in a while. It would be hypocritical of me to try and deny you that.” She started walking off but said over her shoulder “Just remember, spray the eyes, kick the balls, then run like hell.”

And then I watched her dramatically walk into the night. It was only then that I remembered the main reason I agreed to let her walk me home.

Damn it! I didn’t learn anything about her at all!!!!

< Dennis >

June 12th, 2010 (Saturday)

--One month after walking Missy home--

Walking fast through the entrance of the hospital I held two board games under my arm while texting. I was reminding a friend that I was visiting my dad in the hospital today, so I couldn’t hang out until tomorrow.

I followed the path I knew by heart to my dad’s room, finishing my text when I ran into a solid object that I didn’t remember being in the middle of the hallway.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, I was just lost in thought and I wasn’t paying attention and here, let me help you up.” Said a rambling, feminine voice. The next thing I knew I felt someone grab me by the arms and effortlessly pick me up off the ground. She was a blur of blue scrubs and dark curly hair as she scrambled to pick up the board games I dropped and rushed to hand them back to me.

Now that she was standing at her full height I noticed that she was a bit taller than me, she also had a wide mouth, thick glasses and from what I could see of her arms, more muscle definition than I did.

…and she was still apologizing for knocking me over.

“You’re good! You’re good!” I said waving my hands frantically to try and stop her rambling apology. “I wasn’t paying attention either so we both walked into each other. I’m just a lightweight that can’t stay on his feet and you’re built like a…” brick wall, but some random girl I literally just ran into probably wouldn’t take that as a compliment, “yeah…” Real smooth Dennis.
Thankfully this girl either didn’t realize what I was about to say or was polite enough to ignore the aborted statement when she said, “Well sorry anyway then, I was lost in my thoughts since my shift just ended.”

I almost did a double take at hearing that she worked at the hospital, although I don’t know why I was surprised, she was wearing scrubs like a normal nurse. But she looked like she was younger then me. Did she just look really young? I thought girls were always supposed to look older than they actually were, not the opposite.

“Then I’m sorry too miss, I shouldn’t have been walking so fast and trying to text at the same time.” And she looked slightly confused when I said that.

“Miss? Why are you…oh! I’m not a nurse! I just come here and volunteer when I have the time.” She blushed and looked down at what she was wearing, “They tell me to wear scrubs so that the people in rehab would be more likely to listen to me. I’m not even fifteen yet.”

I latched onto that bit of info before I could embarrass myself further, “I didn’t know they let volunteers help out around here?” Yes, change the subject from how you thought this fourteen-year-old girl was a nurse in her twenties.

She grabbed onto the change in subject quickly, she probably wanted to forget that I called her miss as much as I did. “I didn’t either, but after I took the first aid class they give here they asked me if I wanted to help out. I’ve been assisting a lot of patients with their rehab, either from sickness, surgery or drugs. It can be difficult at times but I’m really enjoying it and I don’t know why I’m telling you all of this.” Her blush renewed itself as she caught herself rambling again.

She straightened up, her posture changing in a way that made her look bigger, closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

When she released it, she seemed to have calmed down, “Sorry about that, let’s start over. I’m Taylor and I volunteer at the rehabilitation center when I can.” She then stuck out her hand for me to shake.

A little old fashioned but I took it anyway and quickly realized that me comparing her to a brick wall was pretty accurate. She had an iron grip that would have impressed my dad.

“I’m Dennis, and I’m here to visit my dad.” I shook the board game boxes slightly for emphasis, “He’s stuck here, so I try and help him pass the time when I get the chance.”

Her gaze went to a clock on the wall. “Well it was…nice to meet you, but my dad should be here to pick me up. I hope you have fun with your dad.” And with a smile and a nod she started walking past me to the hospital’s entrance.

“It was nice to meet you too, maybe I’ll see you around?”

She turned around before she rounded a corner and said “Probably!”

Well that was a whirlwind of a first meeting. But damn, spending her weekend helping at a hospital when she’s fourteen? She’s more of a hero than a lot of capes. I looked down at my hands, remembering what I could do with them. Maybe I’ll get to ask her about it next weekend.

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< Aegis >

August 23rd, 2010 (Monday)
--Eight days after Shadow Stalker joins the Wards--

It was around five in the afternoon when Vista and I were walking away from some tourists on the Boardwalk that had wanted a couple pictures that I heard a pained scream come from an alleyway down the street.

It was faint, and far enough away from the Boardwalk that most people probably didn’t hear it, but I motioned Vista to follow me as I spoke into my earpiece.

“Console, this is Aegis. I just heard someone scream from an alleyway about a block from Boardwalk proper. Permission to investigate?”

“That falls within our area of patrol and there’s no indication it’s a parahuman threat, why the fuck are you asking?” Was console’s, Sophia’s, reply. She still hasn’t warmed up to anyone on the team yet, but I got a good feeling that her attitude will get better once she gets to know us.

I started flying to the alley, trusting Vista to keep up “Because it’s a good habit to have, just in case we actually have a situation where we need to ask permission. I know you’ve only been with us about a week, but we don’t want to fly into a volatile conflict by the seat of our pants. That will only get civilians and us hurt.”

I got to the alleyway in time to see a dark-haired girl in baggy jeans and a t-shirt walk out of it.

“Are you alright miss?” The question was honestly just a formality, she seemed fine. No indication of her being hurt or out of breath from an altercation, no rush getting out of the alley to get away from a would-be assailant. But I could have sworn the scream came from around here.

I heard Vista step up beside me while the girl took a second to answer, seeming to chew on the words. “I’m alright, that guy over there though” and she pointed over her shoulder back into the alley where I now saw someone that was curled up on the ground, moaning pitifully “might need a few minutes to recover though.”

I was about to ask about that, but Vista beat me to it, asking “What happened to him?”

The dark-haired girl just shrugged nonchalantly, saying “He politely asked me if I would be interested in going to a Nazi power hour, I politely declined, he tried to push it and negotiations collapsed from there.”

“But what did you do to him?” And Vista asked, she could probably guess it, but wanted to hear it from the girls mouth.

“Oh, I kicked him between the legs as hard as I could” And then she mimed a quick, powerful kick, which made me wince with sympathy pains.

I heard Sophia let out a surprised laugh when the girl said that.

I asked “Would you like us to take him in? If he was going to get physical with you, we can report him to the enforcers or the BBPD.”

She looked back at the guy, still curled up in the alleyway and seemed to think for a moment.

“No, I think he learned his lesson about trying to spread his bigotry. Thanks for offering though.” For someone who just stopped what I assumed was attempted assault and also met a couple capes directly afterward she seemed unnaturally calm. I would tell one of the enforcers about it once we got back to the boardwalk anyway.
Vista and I exchanged glances as the dark-haired girl walked in between us toward the Boardwalk.

“Is there anything we can do for you miss? Since we were a bit late to help out?” I asked as Vista and I moved to follow her back to the boardwalk.

She stopped walking when I asked that. She turned around to look at us with an appraising eye.

“…Do you know a good store to get athletic shorts?” Was the question she asked after a moment. But she looked away from us when she asked the question.

“Athletic shorts?” I looked at Vista. Who would go to the expensive shops on the Boardwalk to buy athletic shorts?

The girl seemed to pick up my confusion and quickly said, “It doesn’t have to be a shop here, any store in the city is fine. A…classmate of mine” and there was about a second that she had a sour look on her face “gave me a really comfy pair earlier this year and I’ve been meaning to find another pair from the same brand. I just haven’t had the time and I kind of assumed one of the Wards would be a good person to ask about stuff like that, considering, y’know all of you have to stay in shape somehow. And besides I only came here to people watch not to…buy…anything.” And she had started gesticulating with her hands as she tried to explain her train of thought before kind of deflating towards the end.

While I tried to parse the fact that this girl who had just calmly explained that had stopped an Empire flunky from assaulting her was now nervously rambling about why she wanted to know where to buy athletic shorts, Sophia spoke to me through my earpiece in the least angry voice I’d heard her use “Tell her ‘Triathlon Sporting Goods’ near the Market is a good place to get stuff like that.”

I told the dark-haired girl as much and she thanked me and walked toward the Boardwalk a little faster than she had been.

Vista waited until the girl had turned the corner before asking “Um, were you just nice to someone console?”

And then I heard an caustic scoff, there’s that ever present anger, through my earpiece “Hell no, I just decided that you two were taking too long to answer her question. Her rambling was getting annoying.”

I gave Vista a look to cut off any kind of argument that might have started given the angry frown I could see on her face. “Thank you for the assist console, I appreciate it.”

“…Just one quick question though. That girl, she was tall with black curly hair right?” Came a second later.

“Well…Yes. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. You should get back on patrol soon though. Don’t want a rich tourist to drop their ice cream without you there to help ‘em out.”

Well that was something to ask her about later.

Vista and I walked back to the Boardwalk anyway. We still needed to finish our patrol.
September 11th, 2010 (Saturday)

--A month after Shadow Stalker joined the Wards--

I’ve been dreading this ever since we’d met.

It’s not as if I’m afraid she’ll get violent towards me, they have us both on a short enough leash that all that would do was get her off the team and into juvie. But she’s too smart to do something that blatant.

What I am afraid of is how far this could possibly set me back in therapy. I’d been doing so well with handling or even getting rid of my prejudices before she’d joined up.

But then the PRT just had to recruit local vigilante Shadow Stalker into the Wards because ‘she’s a danger to herself and others if left alone’. I don’t think I even have a problem with the fact she’s black, Carlos has helped immensely with the fact that skin color doesn’t stop someone from being able to work with you.

But Shadow Stalker was such a bitch.

She only got worse when someone let it slip I almost joined the Empire before the PRT captured me at my ‘initiation’.

And even after I told the on-rotation therapist that even talking to her makes me think I’m regressing back to my old mind set from…before, they could only help for so long.

So here I am, on an evening patrol with fucking Shadow Stalker, after successfully avoiding it for almost three weeks.

Stalker was floating over rooftops while I followed on the metal longboard I was controlling with my powers to move through the sky, my robes swishing through the wind.

“This is console, anything to report?” Came Dennis’s voice from my earpiece.

“There’s nothing going on.” Was my reply, I hadn’t muted my mic the entire patrol, since me and Stalker had said nothing to each other the whole time, there was no conversation for Dennis to overhear.

Stalker hadn’t said anything so when I turned my attention back to her I was surprised to see her squatting on a random roof, peering over the side. I said “But I think Stalker’s seeing something” as I floated down to her to find out what got her interest.

Stalker said something before Dennis could reply “Nothing going on here, same as always on these patrols” was said in the same, annoyed voice she used whenever she spoke to any of us. She then put her hand to her ear and muted her mic. She then pointedly glared at me until I did the same.

When I did she put a finger on the part of my robe that covers my chest and in a low, angry growl said “Don’t you dare ruin this for me, what’s about to happen will not be reported back to console until we finish up with her. And when we do we will tell them that the situation made us unable to report until after the fact. Understood?”

Confused and unsure of how the hell I was supposed to take that I felt it was reasonable to ask, “What the fuck are you talking about?”
Instead of answering she turned around and floated off the roof in the direction she was just looking toward.

What a bitch.

I wanted to tell Dennis something was up just to spite her, but curiosity to see what got her panties in a twist won out and I rode my long board over the roof to follow her.

And since I can fly faster than Stalker can float I caught up with her pretty easily and we both landed on the roof of some random one-story building about a block from the Boardwalk.

It took me a second to notice that someone was already on the roof after I stepped off my long board. I was about to send it flying into them when the unknown person greeted us.

“Hello Stalker, how’s working for the government?” Came a low, breathy voice. Almost like the growl Shadow Stalker uses while in costume but much more pleasant to listen to. The camouflage jacket and black…everything else told me that this was Camo Girl.

“Shut up Cam, it’s been terrible. I’ve told you how rules make me itch.” And I was baffled by the fact that there wasn’t a trace of the underlying anger and irritation she has in her tone whenever I’ve heard her speak. I would almost say it was affectionate if it wasn’t Shadow Stalker, known mega-bitch, who said them.

“And I told you that one day you’d get too violent in a fight and the PRT would come down hard on you. But you said you had better self-control than that.” And I was baffled that Camo Girl just reprimanded a cape that broke a thug’s arm because ‘he looked at me funny’. Camo Girl has worked with her before, she should know about Stalker’s temper.

Instead of trying to murder Camo Girl, like I expected, Shadow Stalker just scoffed with no real heat and said, “Yeah, yeah. You were right, as always, my unresolved anger issues finally caught up with me and now I’m stuck working with a bunch of wusses. Are you satisfied?” And again, I was thrown off by the fact that I couldn’t hear even a fraction of the caustic annoyance that normally fills Stalkers words. This was more like, tired acceptance?

What the hell? Shadow Stalker actually felt emotions that weren’t annoyed, angry or bitchy?

“I’m never satisfied Stalker.” And then she looked in my direction and started walking toward me, “Sorry, I don’t think we’ve been introduced, and I’m Camo Girl, if you haven’t already guessed.” And it was only after she got right in front of me that I noticed how tall and broad she was, something about her posture just exuded strength. She put her hand out for me to shake, “I’m going to assume you’re Psyche our friendly neighborhood psychokinetic. It’s nice to meet you in the flesh.” And even though I couldn’t see her mouth her eyes were doing that crinkling thing that Ms. Militia does whenever she smiles.

Well, she was friendlier than Shadow Stalker, so that’s a point in her favor. I took her hand and she had a firm grip that didn’t crush my hand but still demonstrated that she could probably throw me off this roof without much trouble.

I couldn’t really tell underneath the jacket and cargo pants, but she was probably more fit than Shadow Stalker underneath them if her handshake was any indication.

After a moment I realized that I hadn’t said anything, “It’s nice to finally meet you too.”

Shadow Stalker chose that moment to finally lose her patience. “Alright now you two know each other. Cam, what have you got tonight?” And there was that anger I’ve come to hate and loathe.
Camo Girl just turned and looked at Stalker for a moment, then she nodded her head toward a closed down shop in a strip mall across the street saying, “We have seven Merchants setting up shop over there. They are set up in the back of the store and shouldn’t be expecting an attack considering they just got here yesterday.” She walked to the edge of the roof at a crouch and peered at the glass front of the building. “There is a locked door in the back. That’ll be our entrance, are you good to be my Cloak?”

I could see Stalker clench her fists at that and in an excited whisper say, “Hell yeah I am, I haven’t seen any action since I joined the Wards.”

Camo Girl then drew her gaze to me, “Can you watch the entrance and make sure none of them can escape through it if Shadow Stalker and I can’t catch them?”

I withdrew a few yard-long flexible metal strips from where they were stored on my long board and started attuning to them. “I’ll be ready in a minute or two.” I could wrap them around arms and legs to incapacitate anyone that wasn’t a brute.

Camo Girl nodded at that, then turned to Stalker, “Let’s head around the strip mall now then.” Then turned back to me, “See you in a few.”

She jumped off the side of the roof onto a dumpster and made her way to an alley to get to the other side of the store while Shadow Stalker floated after her.

I just kind of sat there after I finished attuning to my metal strips.

Nothing happened until several terrified screams came from inside the store. For the next thirty seconds I could hear individual screams abruptly stop one after the other until only one was left. Then, through the glass, I saw someone burst into the front area of the store from a back room, tripping and then scrambling on all fours toward the front door, looking like a character from a horror movie running away from a monster.

It was then that dark figure calmly walked through the door the Merchant had just burst from.

It was Camo Girl, wreathed in Shadow Stalker’s breaker from, looking like she just walked out of some horror movie nightmare.

So that’s why the Merchant looked like he was running for his life.

As Camo Girl’s shrouded figure she slowly approached the Merchant that was now turned onto his back and looking at her from the floor. I heard a terrified, ear-piercing scream come from the Merchant before a crossbow materialized over Camo Girl’s shoulder and shot the Merchant, cutting off his scream as he collapsed into unconsciousness from Stalker’s tranq bolt.

Camo Girl then looked up at me through the window and gave me a thumbs up with her shadowed hand. The disconcerting image made me feel sympathy for the now unconscious Merchant.

I felt chills role down my spine.

It was then that Dennis started speaking in my ear again saying in a bored tone, “Checking in again because I have nothing left to kill time. Has anything exciting happened?”

After unmuting my mic, I said, “Let me get back to you on that” while mentally changing Camo Girl from ‘nice and pleasant’ in my mind to ‘fucking god damn terrifying’.

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< Kid Win >

October 1st, 2010 (Friday)

--One minute after Uber and Leets Tournament was interrupted--

I remembered how Missy had told us that Camo Girl was a very nice and sympathetic person when she met the vigilante. How Shadow Stalker said she was more of a badass than all the Wards put together. How Ruth had said she seemed pleasant at first but turned into something from a nightmare when she fought alongside Shadow Stalker.

I was beginning to think ‘Missy is a liar’ as I witnessed Camo Girl reprimanding Armsmaster. THE Armsmaster. After she knocked out Uber with a baton when we burst through the front door of the warehouse. And now she was yelling at him over the recently foamed form of Uber, gesticulating angrily with what I assumed was the burned remains of her iconic jacket in one of her hands.

I was watching the broadcast before we got here and knew that Uber had used some kind of tinker tech to launch a fireball out of his hands and lit her jacket on fire about a minute before we got here. I’ve been watching the broadcast Uber and Leet had been streaming off and on as we tried to triangulate where they were holding this ‘Tournament’.

So I knew that she had been fighting almost non-stop for almost thirty minutes and she still found the energy and ability to verbally tear at Armsmaster for “having the absolute GALL to tell her she had to stay and answer questions after the hell Uber and Leet just put her through” and other things along those lines.

When she seemed to run out of steam, Armsmaster told her to stay put and turned away from her to go and look for Leet in the offices of the warehouse. When he left the room, her eyes and attention turned to me.

I felt my situation start to go downhill when she started stalking towards me. As she got closer I could fully appreciate how tall and imposing she was, how her eyes were the only part of her face you could see, how they burned with anger and how she walked with long, graceful strides that all mixed together into something that reminded me of documentary about large predators I saw at school once.

And she was headed straight for me!

Once she was about a foot away from me, she somehow managed to stretch the few inches of height she had on me into feet because it felt like she was looming over me, all fury and anger in her frame.

Then a deep, angry growl of a voice.

“Move.”

I just about scrambled out of the way, because that was a Shadow Stalker ‘do what I say, or I rip your head off’ tone that was all the more scary in the quiet fury that Camo Girl had adopted once Armsmaster left the room.

Oh, I had forgotten I was standing in front of the one exit in the room.

As she angrily strode out the door I realized that Armsmaster would probably be mad at me for letting her leave without talking to him again. But I think he’ll understand why I didn’t to stop her.
If not…oh well.

Yep, Missy was a liar and Ruth obviously had a grasp on how terrifying someone could be from her time in the Empire. And Shadow Stalker was probably right. But I’d never tell her that.

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< Dean >

March 9th, 2011 (Wednesday)

--Four days after Camo Girl and Bones fought Lung--

Everyone was sitting in the common room, fully dressed in costume and waiting to meet the two new Wards that would be joining us.

No one has officially told us that, but we’ve heard the rumors going around HQ that Camo Girl and Bones have been spotted around the building over the past few days and the fact that we were all told to get in costume pretty much confirmed everyone’s suspicions.

I looked around the semicircle of couches and chairs everyone was currently sitting at.

Dennis and Chris were exuding orange fear, they’ve both talked about how intimidating Camo Girl is to them and are probably feeling a bit anxious about working with her and Bones.

Ruth was a mix of orange fear and green happiness. Like with Chris and Dennis she thinks Camo Girl can be scary, but also said that she seemed like a nice person when she wasn’t taking down Merchants. Maybe she was happy to get another girl her age, who isn’t Sophia, on the team.

Missy and Sophia were both almost completely green with happiness. They’ve separately said that they like Camo Girl. That and I assume they both want to meet Bones for different reasons. Sophia likes that we are getting two ‘strong’ additions to the team and Missy will get another girl her age and someone who she said, ‘doesn’t judge me because I’m young’.

Carlos was a bit more muddled then everyone else though. His aura was a mix of orange fear, purple anger and dark blue sadness. I couldn’t even begin to parse why he looked like that. I was about to ask him about it when the mask alarm rang out in the common area.

I saw everyone’s emotions flair up in sky blue surprise as we all scrambled up off the couch to stand shoulder to shoulder and face the door that was set to open.

After a long thirty seconds the door finally opened to reveal Armsmaster and Director Piggot. They walked in and stood to the side to reveal two figures behind them.

It was my first-time meeting Camo Girl and Bones and I noticed that they couldn’t be more of a visual contrast.

Camo Girl stood at about six feet tall, although her combat boots probably gave her a few inches of that height, with the loose-fitting jacket and pants giving her a broad figure. She had a rigid, almost military bearing and dark brown eyes, the only part of her face that you could see due to her balaclava, that were looking around the room, taking in everything before they fell on us. All this mixed together to create an intimidating figure that was further reinforced by the muted emotions I was getting from her, although I could still see a small amount of orange fear and green happiness come off her.

Bones on the other hand couldn’t be more than five foot and covered in her namesake from head
to toe. Where Camo Girl was tall, dark and imposing Bones was small, bright and energetic. She was practically vibrating in place next to Camo Girl, but only just holding herself back. Her armor was a smooth textureless bone that covered her like a body suit, moving with her as if it was cloth and not bone, with an almost featureless mask that only had eyeholes to let her see. Her green happiness almost filled up the room.

Armsmaster spoke first, saying “Wards, as you have no doubt heard we have been meeting with Camo Girl and Bones on the subject of them joining the Wards program for the past few days. We have finally finished all the involved paperwork and will now be inducting them today, although they will not be publicly joining until April 15th.” His head moved from our group to where Camo Girl and Bones were standing. “Camo Girl will also be transferring to Arcadia’s high school and Bones to its middle school on March 21st the week after spring break.” Then he nodded toward the two capes.

Camo Girl and Bones exchanged glances and nodded to each other.

Bones took a step forward and her mask split down the middle and receded to the back of her head, letting blonde hair spill downward onto her shoulders and showing us her face.

“I’m Bones, but you guys can call me Riley!” was the excited cheer that came from a girl that couldn’t have been older than Missy. Her green happiness filling up more of the room when she ended her introduction.

Then Camo Girl stepped forward, tugging the balaclava off her head and introducing herself as well.

“And my name’s Taylor, its nice to meet you all and I look forward to working with you.”

I heard a couple gasps from beside me when she had unmasked, but before I could figure out who they came from two people spoke up at the same time.

“I fucking knew it” and “Wait you’re Camo Girl” came from Sophia and Dennis respectively. Dennis looked at Sophia, but she ignored him and reached up to pull off her mask.

“Sup Hebert, looking forward to working with you too.” And there was green happiness mixed with yellow affection coming off her to match her shit eating grin.

This is the first time I’ve seen Sophia not have a constant purple anger in her aura or smiling for that matter.

I looked back at Camo Girl, no, I looked back at Taylor to see her face go blank for a moment before she groaned and smacked her forehead with her hand.

“Of course, she’s Sophia, all the hints were there. How did I not put that shit together” was the muttered response as well as light blue surprise and a hint of purple anger.

Piggot spoke up “Is there a problem Camo Girl?”

Taylor jerked her head to look at Piggot “No, Sophia and I have an agreement.” Then she looked back at Sophia, a mild glare on her face “One that we will have to talk about later.”

Sophia’s response to that was a satisfied grin.

Dennis finally seemed to gather himself enough to speak “Hold on back up.” He reached up to take his mask off as well, showing his face “Taylor, you’re actually Camo Girl?”
Light blue surprise flared up from Taylor as she saw Dennis’ face.

“Dennis? You’re Clockblocker?”

“Is this going to be a problem?” Was the Director’s exasperated question.

“No, we just see each other at the hospital I volunteer at occasionally.”

Dennis’s light blue surprise was still wafting off him as he turned around and made a short walk around the room, muttering to himself all the while.

I decided to be the next person to unmask while he did that.

“Well I’m Dean and it’s nice to meet you Taylor.”

The ones left were quick to follow.

“My names Carlos”

“Missy”

“And I’m Ruth”

Taylor nodded in turn as everyone introduced themselves, a flash of recognition showed when Missy unmasked, but she didn’t comment on it.

Once everyone was finished unmasking, Taylor glanced in Armsmaster and Director Piggott’s direction where she received a nod from the Director.

Orange fear and blue sadness flared up from Taylor as she turned back to us. Riley looked like she wanted to do something, her hands flinching toward Taylor but hesitated and stopped herself before she could.

She took a deep breath and her emotions visibly dimmed before my eyes.

“There’s one more thing I need to tell you, it has to do with my power.” She looked directly at Carlos as she spoke, and I saw his aura showed the same fear, anger and sadness he had before Camo Girl got here. Was her power something controversial? Did he know what it was and didn’t like it?

Taylor looked at each of us in turn “More specifically my lack of powers, I don’t have a Corona Pollentia, I never triggered.” She shrugged nonchalantly but I could still see her orange fear.

A pin could be heard in the heavy silence that followed that statement.

It was a long moment before the silence was broken by Dennis, incredulousness, disbelief, surprise and a whole lot of other things mixing into his tone as he asked.

“What the FUCK?”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this chapter got away from me. I had intended each Ward's section to be about
500 words, but they just kept getting longer.

And if it wasn't obvious enough Psyche/Ruth is Rune (I didn't want to straight up say it but I'm not sure how well I communicated it).

Not much else I can think to say other than expect the lengths of my chapters to go back down to the 3k range next week, this one took a lot out of me to finish.

Other than that let me know what you thought of the chapter and see you next week!

This chapter conclude Arc 1: Meetings.
Taylor's last day at Winslow

Chapter Summary

Taylor's last day at Winslow isn't as uneventful as she had hoped.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

January 11th, 2010 (Monday)

--Two days after fighting Sophia in an alley--

My first school day of the year could not be more awkward. My body is covered in bruises and sore and trying not to limp down the hallway is such a hassle. It was hard enough convincing my dad I just got too into fighting at Mr. Laborn’s gym, now I have to deal with Winslow and all the jerks that inhabit it.

Why did I even come today?

A baggy sweatshirt and pants cover up most of the bruises I have, and the swelling in my face has gone down a lot since Saturday night. That still leaves the giant shiner on my eye and my bruised knuckles open to the public though.

I can see everyone stare at when as I walked to my first period classroom.

The only silver lining is that I haven’t run into Emma or that girl…Madison? She had started harassing me towards the end of last semester as well.

I also hadn’t run into Sophia yet, but I had a good feeling that she wouldn’t try anything, at least until her broken nose healed.

“What are you smirking at jackass?!?” Came an angry voice from further down the hall.

What’s that saying? Speak of the devil and she will come. Just how I wanted to start my day, Sophia yelling somewhere between me and my first period class.

“I’m not allowed to smile when I see something funny?” Came the reedy voice of some teenage boy I didn’t recognize.

The crowd of students in the hallway parted before me so that more people could stare at my bruised face before I finally got to where Sophia was.

“You gonna get your rocks off to this later ya prick? Black girls with broken noses get you off at night?”

Turns out the person she was yelling at was some kid with a shaved head and a not quite covered up eighty-eight tattoo on his arm. He also had a smirk on his face that made me want to punch him. I think Sophia had the same opinion about it by the look on her face and I promptly shunted that thought out of my head.
Sophia covered up most of her body like I did, albeit with more formfitting pants and jacket combo to my preferred baggy clothes. But those couldn’t hide the bruised cheek and bandaged nose.

I had stopped to look at the two of them, debating if it was worth it to try and sneak by or if I should just double back and find a different way to class.

Before I could make a decision both of them had turned to me to see why the hallway had parted in the middle of their ‘argument’.

Unsure of what to do with so many eyes on me now I decided to just glare at both of them as I started walking again, switching between the Sophia and the skinhead until I passed them. While I did so I could see understanding dawning on a lot of faces in the crowd and as soon as I turned the corner I head the skinhead yell “No fucking way!!” followed by Sophia starting to curse the guy out. I kept walking until I couldn’t hear them anymore.

After enduring four periods of stares from students and faculty alike, I had hoped to eat my lunch quietly outside, without anyone messing with me, for the first time since middle school.

My hopes and dreams were dashed by the schools PA system.

“Sophia Hess and Taylor Hebert, please come to principle Blackwell’s office”

Well crap.

I started making my way to Blackwell’s office, wondering how quickly people put together that mine and Sophia’s injuries might be related, and how quickly it got to Blackwell from there.

I reached Blackwell’s office unsure of how the meeting would pan out but very sure it probably wouldn’t be in my favor. I passed by the inattentive secretary without a word.

And Sophia’s already here, of course the track star beats me to the Principal’s office as well.

“Ms. Hebert, please take a seat. The are a few questions I would like to ask you.”

I took a seat across from Blackwell, putting my backpack on the ground and never looking at Sophia.

“And what kind of questions do you have for me?”

“It’s been brought to my attention that you and Ms. Hess here” She gestured to Sophia, I never looked away from Blackwell “may have had an altercation over the winter holiday.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, I go to a boxing gym and this happened when the other guy got too into it” I pointed at my bruised face.

“As believable as that sounds, many students believe that you have an unwarranted vendetta against Ms. Hess and a few of her friends. And disliking someone like Ms. Hess for something like her skin color-“

I wasn’t about to let that slide “I do not have an ‘unwarranted vendetta’ against Sophia because of the color of her skin! I had, and I put an emphasis on had, a problem with her, Emma and their friends bullying me. Which I told you about last semester, but you ignored me and-“
“You will not interrupt me young lady, you will show me respect while you are in my office.” Was Blackwell’s angry response.

And I glared at her, because she didn’t care about me, she just cared about her potential track star and keeping her happy. Not the friendless, bullied girl.

I had opened my mouth to say something scathing, something that I would probably regret, but before I could the third person in the room spoke up for the first time.

“Taylor’s not the person who broke my nose.” And Blackwell looked just as surprised as I felt when I heard Sophia say that. For the first time since I entered the office, I looked at Sophia, a no doubt incredulous look on my face.

Her face turned into a snarl as she looked at Blackwell “What? You never asked me who assaulted me. All you did was call me here and then told me to wait for Hebert to get in.” She sat up a bit straighter “And if the only reason you brought us both here was because I was on the other end of a hate crime your barking up the wrong tree. Some Empire schmuck jumped me while I was out for a run over the break. I’ve never even seen Hebert outside of school before.”

I caught myself glancing back and forth between Blackwell and Sophia, and thought about pinching myself, because this was certainly a dream.

The meeting wrapped up quickly after that, so Sophia and I were shunted out of the office.

As we walked out of the administration area into the front lobby I saw Emma sitting on a bench, probably waiting for Sophia.

As I turned to head outside to shove my lunch down my throat during the five minutes of lunch I had left I saw Emma run up to Sophia, and ask, “What happened? Is Blackwell doing anything after what she did?” And I turned my head to see her glaring pointedly at me when she finished saying that.

I glared back but didn’t say anything. I was about to start walking toward the door again when I heard Sophia say “Enough Ems, I told you already that we’re done with Hebert”

I stopped mid step when I heard that, actually surprised that she was honoring the agreement we made.

“But you won’t even tell me what really happened, or what you talked about. She’s weak, if she threatened you I can-“

“There was an agreement made between two parties Emma” I decided to cut her off, turning around to face her. “It was decided, after a lengthy…discussion, that we wouldn’t bother each other, talk with each other, or interact with each other for the rest of high school.”

I took a deep breath and walked up to them, my eyes only on Emma, but I could still see Sophia with that god damned smirk on her face in my peripherals.

“I was under the impression that the terms of the agreement had been shared between best friends, but I guess I can repeat myself.” Putting a little venom when I said ‘best’.

I stopped directly in front of Emma, and even though we were both tall for girls I still had a few inches on her, I used them to look down at her disdainfully.
“So, let me be clear Emma, don’t bother to me, don’t talk to me, don’t even look at me for the rest of high school. I’m done putting up with your shit.” I was apparently more intimidating than I expected because I saw her visibly shrink at the menace in my voice and an expression appeared on her face that I didn’t recognize.

I glanced at Sophia, which was a mistake because that smirk had somehow gotten bigger, and then turned to the front door so that I could eat outside in peace.

Apparently, I was wrong about having five minutes left of lunch because the bell decided to ring over the PA system just as I reached the doors.

Guess I won’t be eating lunch today.

March 11th, 2011 (Friday)

--Two days after joining the Wards--

I stared out the window of dad’s old beat up truck as I watched us pass by old beat up houses and old beat up strip malls on the way to Winslow. My last day at Winslow, if the PRT really was transferring me to Arcadia after spring break, I would have felt giddy if not for the awkward, tense air that was currently filling the car.

Dad and I haven’t really spoken since Sunday, where I kind of strong-armed him into letting me join the Wards. He still insisted that he drive me to school until I’m fully healed, but when I told him that Panacea had already healed me I accidently let it slip that she didn’t want me doing much exercise for about a week. So here I was, sitting in a car, banned from my morning runs and trips to the gym until next Monday.

Having to explain to my Krav Maga teacher and the Laborn family why I wouldn’t be seeing them this week had been…difficult to explain without being able to give the real reason. But telling them that dad suddenly felt very overprotective of me wasn’t a complete lie, so it could have been more difficult.

That, and the fact that Aisha is forcing me to go shopping with her tomorrow as payment for not seeing her all week.

But back to the awkward car ride.

…yeah. Even though he’s been driving me to school all week we still haven’t had a proper conversation since I got him to agree to let me join the Wards. Just the meaningless ‘hello’ and ‘how was your day?’ greetings that never lead to any kind of real conversation and leave an awkward silence as we eat dinner.

As we pulled up to the front of Winslow he turned to me, his mouth opened then closed, leaving something unspoken in the air, all I had to do was ask what he was going to say. It would have been so easy.

“So see you tonight dad” but I took the cowards way out. Neither of us wanted to talk about me being a cape any further than we got last Sunday, and I didn’t want to be the one to start that conversation back up again.

So, I opened the door and waved goodbye to him, walking towards Winslow’s front entrance. Thinking for the first time ever that Winslow might be a breath of fresh air from the stifling atmosphere that is now my home life.
My last day at Winslow appeared to be wrapping up without a hitch. Mrs. Knotts’s class passed as easily as it ever did and even Mr. Gladly’s group assignment passed relatively painlessly once I stopped Greg from rambling to much before we presented.

My last class was both my favorite and most loathed. It was my physical education class.

I enjoyed it because I used school time for cardio and weightlifting, instead of wasting time in another class than Winslow would no doubt screw up. I disliked it because it was a required class for students that participated in any of the school’s extracurricular activities. Which wouldn’t be a problem except for the fact that track was an extracurricular. Which means that I shared this class with Sophia, who for the past year I have gone out of my way to not interact with.

But things are different now, Sophia now knows both of my most important secrets. So, I can’t say that I’m surprised that as I go through my normal warm ups beside the track I see Sophia approaching me after she walks out of the locker room.

Damn, I’d skipped PE yesterday half to avoid talking with her and half to follow Panacea’s advice to not do anything too physically strenuous, but I guess avoiding her was doomed from the start since I’ll be working with her until one of us turns eighteen.

“Sup Hebert” was all she said before she sat down and started doing warm up stretches right next to me.

“Hello Hess” was my curt reply before I stood up to stretch my quads “any particular reason that you’re here or…?”

She glanced around before answering me, probably to make sure no one was in earshot, “Me? Oh, I don’t have nearly as many questions as some of our…acquaintances. You leaving so quickly after dropping a bomb like that tends to make most people tear their hair out than anything.”

Which I suppose I could understand, a lot of the Wards got in my face and asked questions about me, but it just reminded me of back when Emma and her tagalongs would get in my face and harass me at school least year and I started panicking. I think Piggot noticed because she ended the questions right then and told me to go home afterward.

I guess Sophia didn’t notice how…uncomfortable I had been since she wasn’t more scathing towards me for doing something that probably looked weak to her.

“Yeah, I wasn’t a fan of how they rushed in to ask all those questions though” was all said about it.

Sophia grunted in response, then said “yeah, they can be annoying as shit goodie two shoes most of the time.”

I got up and started to walk to the track and Sophia hopped up to follow me. Was she gonna talk to me all period?

As I took off at a jog I said “They seem like nice people, and I’ve already met Dennis and… Missy? before then.” A beat “You really aren’t a fan of them, are you?” Most of the girls were sitting on the bleachers, talking with each other or on their phones so I felt safe sharing non-cape names.

“They annoy me because they could be doing so much more to beat on villains but don’t because of ’rules and regulation’” then she side-eyed me “which vigilantes don’t have a problem with”
I waited to respond until we passed a pair of girls that were walking on the track.

Once we were out of earshot I said, “Let’s shelve this topic for someplace else.” Now I was side-eyeing Sophia “Now what’s the real reason you’re talking to me right now.”

She smirked at me when I side-eyed her, it kind of made me want to punch her, and said “I might have let it slip to Emma that you would be dropping the ‘don’t even look at me’ thing after what happened on Wednesday.”

“And why would you tell her that, I will hopefully never see her again after today. And I hope you didn’t tell her anything else about Wednesday.”

And Sophia gave me this weird look when I said that, on any other person it would have been a sad look, but the very idea of Sophia and sad being in the same sentence seemed impossible. Usually it’s just angry or arrogant, nothing else.

“I only talked about the talking stuff. And I get why you don’t like me, but damn, you must still really hate Emma.”

I stopped running when she said that. Did I really hate Emma? I decided to hate her after Sophia told me why she dumped me as a friend at the beginning of high school. But that anger had cooled significantly over the past year of ignoring her. Now my attitude towards Emma was more the cold indifference that I felt toward every student at Winslow.

That doesn’t mean that I’ve forgiven her actions, I still shut down anyone at Winslow that tries to talk to me out of principle, since they did nothing to help me when I was bullied I had decided that I would have nothing to do with any of them.

“I don’t like anyone at Winslow, they did nothing as they saw a girl’s life get torn apart by her peers, and if they suddenly got more interested in the girl after she grew a backbone then I decided to have nothing to do with it.” I gave Sophia a hard look “I don’t hate anyone here, not even Emma, they’re not worth the energy but I won’t forgive them for their action or inaction.”

Sophia gave me another weird look and whispered, “And so we made the Ice Queen” it was probably more to herself than me, but it was loud enough for me to hear.

But instead of saying anything further, she threw an arm around my shoulders and started walking me back to the locker room, saying “Then you don’t hate her. That’s good. Then you wouldn’t mind talking to her one last time, would you?”

I felt myself tense at the unexpected physical contact and suppressed the urge to throw Sophia over my shoulder in response.

I took a deep breath as I let her lead me back to the girls’ locker room.

Maybe it would be good to have one last conversation with my old, traitor of a friend before she was hopefully out of my life forever. Something like closure.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I was almost instantly set on edge when Sophia and I entered the locker room because it wasn’t just Emma waiting for me, there were also a handful of her friends hanging around as well.

This activated my fight or flight instincts immediately, although except for Sophia, I don’t think one of them had been in a fight before so my chances in a fight would have been pretty good if
Shadow Stalker wasn’t on their side.

I felt Sophia squeeze my shoulder before she let me go and sat on a bench directly between where Emma and I were standing.

Which means she wasn’t standing with Emma on this, interesting.

While Sophia just about lounged on the bench like a relaxed cat, Emma and her other friends looked nervous, none of them looking me in the eye. And I wasn’t sure how I should feel about that.

I was staring at Emma now, waiting for her to say something, but all she was doing was opening and closing her mouth in aborted attempts to start this off.

It was almost too pitiful, so I decided to be the one to break the ice, saying “So what did you want to talk about Emma?” as I leaned back against a locker and crossing my arms to get a bit more comfortable, after running for the first time since I got my ribs fixed I felt a phantom itch where the stitches used to be on my chest. They’d disappeared after the second day and I wasn’t about to question it.

I saw her tense, then look anywhere but at me as she tried to find the words for whatever she wanted to say.

Her face and posture turned sheepish as she said, “Sophia said that you’re talking to her now, so that means the ‘agreement’ you made is done with, right?” She finally looked me in the eyes when she finished asking that “so can we start talking again Taylor? Maybe start over? Or go back to when we were friends.”

And then my brain short circuited for a moment.

Once it started back up my mind was caught between bafflement, rage and hysterics.

A giggle escaped me before I could stop it, but I was able to stop myself from laughing like a psychopath through force of will alone.

“You want to go back to being friends?” And I let myself smile incredulously at that thought, because the alternative was getting angry and my self-control was quickly fraying. “After you dropped me like a bad habit before high school, and then made my life hell until I had to physically stop you?”

I gave her a moment to see if she wanted to add anything, she just stood there, mouth open like a fish.

“Do your friends here” and I gestured to these vapid, shallow girls that she had surrounded herself with ever since she started high school “even know why you started bullying me?”

Again, she said nothing, just staring at me as I continued to work myself up.

“You dropped me and started making my life hell because you got in your head that it would make you strong” I pushed myself off the locker “and through some absolutely misguided attempt to try and see if I could become your definition of ’strong’” I stopped in front of her again, reminding me of the last time we spoke, so long ago “did you really expect me to become best friends with you again if I did end up becoming strong like you supposedly wanted? Like you think could happen now?”

A heavy silence followed as Emma started floundering in place, my gaze locked onto hers, our
faces only inches apart as I willed her to answer me.

I doubt that this is how she expected the conversation to go.

In the silence the sound of someone opening the door to the locker room might as well have been a thunderclap as a single pair of footsteps made their way towards us.

A dark-haired girl turned the corner only to stop abruptly as she saw every girl present turn to look at her.

“Uh…I’ll just go change somewhere else, sorry to interrupt” but before she could fully turn away I called out to her.

“Actually, you’re just who we needed, can you come over here for a second? We could use a third party.” An idea forming in my head that would probably keep Emma away from me for a long time.

I could see the new girl visibly wilt at the request but acquiesced all the same. Walking cautiously to where Emma and I were standing.

I took a step back from Emma and asked, “What’s your name?” trying to keep the anger that had been building up out of my voice.

The girl nervously looked around, probably not used to being the center of attention.

“I’m Charlotte” and then after a second, she added “and you’re Taylor Hebert” in a voice filled with trepidation.

Ignoring the fact that she somehow knew my name I turned back to Emma. She was adopting a more neutral expression now that she had room to breathe and think.

I took a deep breath.

“Alright Emma, you want to try and be friends again. How about this. I’ll change the rules of the agreement with Charlotte here as a witness.” I gestured to the dark-haired girl “All you have to do to have me consider being friends again is one simple thing” I took a second to let her process that, then I dropped the metaphorical bomb “All that you have to do is beat me in a fight, then we can start talking about being friends again.”

I saw her eyes widen, then her face pale as I finished speaking. Similar reactions happening around the locker room. Which I could understand, I was wearing a tank top and running shorts, showing off the lean, defined muscles that I’d gained from working out and fighting for almost a year and a half now.

And Emma was standing there, model thin and probably hadn’t exerted herself physically since we played hide and seek in elementary school.

“I work out at a boxing gym on Tuesday and Thursday nights” I nodded my head toward Sophia “she should remember where it is, if not, find it yourself.”

“But-but how am I supposed to ever be able to beat you when you’re like…that” then she gestured up and down at my body.

I stopped myself from snorting at that, but just barely.

“All you have to do is become as strong as you made me be.” Was all I said, making it sound like
a simple thing. I turned to Charlotte “You get to be the witness” and then looked back at Emma “I changed Sophia’s terms, and now I’ve changed yours. Charlotte, as a neutral third party, has witnessed it. I’ll uphold my end of the deal when you do yours. I’m sure this is something your dad has gone through before in court, this should make you feel so important.”

Maybe it was petty and unfair to make her have to beat me in a fight, but I’m still angry that she had the gall to think we could ever be friends again, like back when we were kids.

No. Not after her betrayal.

I turned around to walk out when I saw Sophia bring her eyes up to meet mine, she smirked but didn’t say anything. Neither did I. We’d be seeing each other at PRT HQ after school anyway, so conversation could be saved until then.

As I walked by I saw her eyes drop down as I passed her, and thinking nothing of it I left Sophia, Charlotte, Emma and her friends in the locker room.

I had a run to finish.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to focus more on Taylor getting through the day, but Emma and Sophia took up too much of the chapter to let me go into detail about anything else.

Oh well.

In a fight, I’d put my money on Taylor any day, but maybe Emma can pull off a win…eventually (like super eventually).

Next chapter is more time with the Wards, I hope you guys are looking forward to it!
March 11th, 2011 (Friday)

--Two hours after shutting down Emma--

After finishing my workout, showering and being picked up by another unmarked van at an obscure location, I arrived at PRT HQ.

Now I was sitting in the Wards common room, Riley sitting on my lap as I braided her hair on a couch with Dennis sitting across from us in his costume sans helmet. He was waiting for Vista to finish getting dressed so that they could go out on patrol. We had been in a comfortable silence when he abruptly said, “I still can’t get over it, y’know?”

He’d been looking like he was deep in thought since we all sat down ten minutes ago, so at least now I knew what it was he’d been thinking about. Although I say that in a very loose sense because that was one of the vaguest things I’ve heard someone say.

“That I know how to braid hair or…?” There are probably a lot of things about me that he’s still trying to properly register in his mind, but he’s gonna have to be more specific if he wants an answer.

Riley was facing away from me, so I couldn’t see her face, but she must have looked as lost as I felt because Dennis looked between us several times before realizing that he didn’t properly voice what he had been thinking about.

“No, I mean that I can’t get over the fact that the girl that volunteers at the hospital my dad is staying at is Camo Girl” he gestured to me “and that Camo Girl, who is you, never actually had powers” he crossed his arms and closed his eyes, as if contemplating “it’s just a lot to take in and I know it’s been a few days since the big reveal, but” he made a vague gesture with his hands toward me.

Riley decided to speak up saying, “Yeah, but she’s awesome, as a cape and as Taylor.” She started rubbing her chin, trying to think of something “Like…oh! A couple weeks ago she came and got me on one of her morning runs because I asked if I could run with her. But I got really tired before we got back to the house I’m staying at, so she gave me a piggyback ride all the way back.” She had started bouncing up and down as she said that, getting excited and making it difficult to keep braiding her hair.

Dennis looked at me and nodded, “Yeah, that’s something I could see Taylor doing.” And then he looked at Riley “I know she’s nice, like I said, she volunteers at the hospital’s rehab center on her weekends, the problem that I’m having is that the girl who helps people through rehabilitation and the cape that I’ve literally seen violently throw people twice her size like it’s nothing become the
same person in my mind.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but Dennis held up a hand, stalling me, “And yes, I’ve seen you practically carry people in the hospital, but that’s different than tossing a Merchant at my feet from over five feet away so that I can tag them.” I then closed my mouth because that was the point I was going to make.

“Ooooooooh! You have to tell me more about that! Piggot mentioned that you guys worked together before I got to Brockton Bay when we met her last week, but Taylor” She vaguely gestured behind her toward me since she didn’t want to turn her head and ruin her braid “doesn’t like talking about it.”

Dennis raised an eyebrow at me upon hearing that.

I decided that explaining myself to him would probably work better than it had on Riley.

“Piggot already told her what happened, and all she wants to know about it is what you and Vista were like to meet in person” I finished her braid, tying the end off with a hair band and then shook her by the shoulders in mock exasperation “and she already knows that I’m not a small talk kind of person so I wouldn’t be able to tell her anything worthwhile about either of you. No matter how many times she asks.”

Riley started giggling as I let her shoulders go “But I still want to hear what you thought about it, first hand or something like that, not read from a piece of paper.” She straightened up, and even though she was facing away from me still I knew enough about her to know she had a big smile on her face “and now that we’re Wards I can get super awesome cape stories from everyone here too!”

From the hallway leading to the Wards personal rooms came “Don’t get too excited about hearing cool stories, Camo Girl has been almost the sole source of any kind of action the Wards have gotten in the past six months” Vista had apparently finished changing and walked over to us, visor on and ready to go, with Carlos right behind her, in jeans and a t-shirt.

Carlos’s face twitched to a frown as he said “We’re Wards, we’re not supposed to have a lot of ‘action’ anyway. The Wards is meant to be a place for kids with powers to meet and learn together, not for teenagers to have an excuse to fight crime.” And he looked at all four of us in turn as he said it, and I think his gaze lingered on me a bit longer than it did the others.

Vista started glaring at the ground at that, although it was hard to tell with the visor covering her eyes.

“Hey, we help the Protectorate all the time with joint patrols every once in a while” Dennis stood up after saying this, with a tiredness and forced nonchalance that made me think this kind of topic was brought up regularly. “As Wards we are training to become heroes, once we hit eighteen they let us start really fighting capes” he grabbed his helmet from the coffee table that sat in the middle of the couch and chair semicircle and put it on “and let us to go to interviews without a PR agent breathing down our neck telling us to ‘be appropriate’ and ‘apologize for that joke you made on patrol last week’”

That got a snort from Vista and Riley, as well as a grin from Carlos who said, “you’re the only Ward that gets his hand held whenever he goes on camera after the whole name fiasco you made during your press release.”

Dennis put his helmet on and started walking to the entrance of the Wards common room “minor details oh fearless leader. Plus, you don’t need to beat up bad guys to be a hero in my book” was
his parting remark as he walked out the door, Vista following behind him so that they could start their patrol.

Once we heard the heavy automatic door hiss shut Carlos turned to the where Riley and I were seated on the couch.

“Alright, let’s get some chairs by the computer so that I can introduce you two to the exciting time that is console duty.” A wry grin on his face as he started walking toward the large monitor located on the opposite side of the common room, away from the couches.

I waited for Riley to get off my lap before making my way to the terminal and grabbed a chair from the large table that the Wards probably had group meetings at next to the console.

When Riley and I had gotten settled in our borrowed seats we waited for Carlos to finish typing something into the computer.

“So, the main role of the person on console duty is to check in with whoever’s out patrolling through their earpieces.” He gestured to a couple of windows with sound bars labeled ‘Vista’ and ‘Clockblocker’ “The people out on patrol can mute them if they want to but are expected to respond whenever the person on console speaks to them” then he muttered under his breath “even if some people take their sweet time responding.”

Unsure if I was supposed to hear that, I was just going to let that pass without comment, Riley on the other hand had other ideas.

She raised her hand and started waving it like an excited student in class “Oh! Oh! I bet it’s Shadow Stalker that takes a while to respond isn’t it?”

Carlos huffed at that, probably an attempt to smother a laugh at Riley’s antics. I was certainly smiling.

“You got it in one Riley, Stalker doesn’t really like being a part of a team.”

“Unless it’s with Camo Girl! Ms. Piggot said that Shadow Stalker she’s the only person that she listens too!” And then they both looked at me when she said that, Riley with an admiring smile and Carlos with that weird inscrutable look I’ve been catching ever since Piggot introduced us when we were hashing out the details of Riley and I joining the Wards.

I’d have to ask him about that sooner or later, but right now I should be learning what the responsibilities of the person manning the console are.

“Yes, yes Riley, we all know that Shadow Stalker walks to the beat of her own drum” is what I said instead, “even if the beat is angry and the drum is made from the remains of her enemies.” Looking at Carlos I said, “but back to console duty, what else should we know before we get left alone with the big bad computer.”

After another look from Carlos, I’m not sure if he even knows that he’s giving them to me if he’s gonna be this blatant about it, he started really getting into the details of console responsibilities during patrols.

As it turns out, there are a lot of rules and regulations involved with being a Ward, and I guess this extends to Protectorate cape as well, that need to be followed, and the person on console needs to be able to react the ‘proper way’ to whatever the patrolling Wards report. Whether it be giving advice or getting in touch with a Protectorate cape or PRT agent.
And there are a lot of rules and regulations.

Luckily Carlos showed Riley and I that you can pull up a pdf of the handbook on the computer so that we don’t have to know it completely by rote, I wasn’t exactly looking forward to reading it and I saw Riley’s eyes begin to cross as Carlos went into detail about some of the more commonly brought up regulations in between check ups with Vista and Clockblocker.

As the console duty went on, the rest of the Wards slowly began trickling in. Another thing that Carlos told me was that although the Wards regularly send out two patrols a day, with the occasional early patrol, the same person is usually on console throughout the one, five and nine PM patrols, making the one on console duty have the longest work hours of the day. Unless you were Sophia, who couldn’t be on console for the one-o-clock patrols because the Wards that went to Arcadia only had to be at the school until lunch, as they gave a ‘business internship’ that they had instead of afternoon classes and she had track practice after school.

I already knew that most Ward patrols only last about two hours and when I asked him why the patrols where four hours apart he gave me a flat ‘something to do with maximum visibility while keeping low work hours for minors’ and I left it at that.

Now Dean, Ruth and…Chris? Were sitting behind us in what I was beginning to realize was the relaxing area, with its comfy couches and chairs facing a large screen TV, in their civilian clothing. I hadn’t seen Sophia since she walked past us to get to her room earlier.

It was almost seven so Vista and Clockblocker were back in the PRT building and making their way back to Wards HQ after being debriefed by a PRT agent, and Sophia and Chris were set to go out to patrol at nine.

I leaned back in the not uncomfortable chair that I’d been sitting in for the past two hours and sighed as we finished console duty, hearing Riley do something similar beside me.

I saw Carlos smirk at us while he said, “yeah, it can be a lot to take in at first, but I can count on my hand how many times console has actually had to do anything without the Protectorate coming in to help. Once you get the gist of the rules and regulations its actually just a couple hours of doing homework while checking in with the patrol every once and a while.”

I had a question at the tip of my tongue when I heard that, but Riley beat me to it, asking “Do the Wards not get into many fights?” as she got up from her seat to walk over to the couch area.

Dean answered, stopping whatever conversation him and Chris had been having, Ruth was curled up on one of the chairs reading a book, which I decided I would ask her about later.

“The PRT and Protectorate try and keep us out of any dangerous cape fights if they can help it, although they do let us handle or help out with villains like Uber and Leet or taking on groups like the Undersiders. Villains with low threat ratings mostly.”

I started to make my way back to the couches, following Riley before Carlos grabbed my shoulder to stop me, asking with that same weird look on his face “Can I speak to you for a minute? In private?”

Well that’s not foreboding at all, but hopefully this will be a chance for me to ask about the looks that he’s been giving me. I looked over at the people seated on the couches and caught Dean giving Carlos a curious look as the latter walked away.

As I followed him into the hallway that leads to the Ward’s personal rooms and the Ward’s private gym. Yes, they have a private gym for ‘secret identity’ purposes although I don’t know if any of
Carlos stopped when we were out of earshot of the common room and turned to me in the middle of the entrances to a few of the personal rooms.

He turned and looked at me “There’s a few things that I’d just like to make clear, and a few questions that I haven’t had the chance to ask without Piggot or Armsmaster around.”

Well he was direct if nothing else, although being able to clear up whatever this is would be better than letting it simmer.

“Alright, shoot. We’ve got two hours until our next console duty.”

He seemed to hesitate, maybe not expecting that I would be willing to answer his questions that easily.

“I’m not here to cause any trouble” I said, “I’m here because I want to be part of the team.” I gave my best smile “No need to tiptoe around me, I promise.”

Carlos seemed to rally himself when I said that, “I guess that’s my first question then, why join the Wards? You were doing well enough as a vigilante, even before you teamed up with Riley. And I guess I can understand wanting to do this because almost getting killed by Lung would scare you into it, but you don’t seem to be that mentally affected by your fight with Lung.”

Well. I guess he wanted to get the heavy stuff out of the way quickly then.

“I joined the Wards because I believe that I’ve just about gotten to the end of what I can do as a vigilante. I felt that joining the Wards is the best way to help me take down more villains.” I gave him a hard look “And I knew from the outset that I could be hurt or even killed being a cape, that doesn’t mean that I want to die but that I’ve accepted that it’s a possibility. And I refuse to let fear stop me from doing what I want again.”

Carlos kept his eyes locked on mine as I said that, “Then let’s be clear, I don’t want any of the Wards being put in danger because you go off one night to try and take down Hookwolf or Lung. That’s not what the Wards are here for, we’re here to try and get training to control our powers and a semblance of normal teen life before we become adults. Then we get a choice to become heroes or try and be normal people.”

And when he said that I noticed something, something that he was probably trying to get at with this conversation.

“You want to know why I’m here even though I don’t have powers, don’t you?” That was probably it, he kept mentioning that the Wards were there to help powered kids. He probably didn’t like that some unpowered cape wannabe was here to shake up his status quo.

His eyes widened, probably in surprise that I brought that topic up, but said “I had a whole conversation with Piggot about why she believes you can be an asset. But yes, I want to know why you want to be a cape, because we’re here” and he gestured back to the common room where the rest of the Wards were “because we’re trying to figure out what we want to do with our lives now that we have powers.” He put his arms back to his side, letting them swing loosely “I want to know why you think that you have to fight villains even though you’re just a normal person.”

“Ha!” I laughed, I couldn’t help it “Why should it matter if I have powers or not?” I looked him in the eye, a sardonic smile on my face “You know how every kid goes through that phase where they want to be a hero? But then they grow up, they never got their powers, so they just have to sit
down and take all the shit some super powered assholes decide to give them.”

Maybe he didn’t mean to sound so…condescending about me not having to fight just because I
don’t have powers, but the fact that he thinks that I shouldn’t be trying to fight gangs because of
that is bullshit. The fact that he’s only asking because it messes with the status quo is bullshit.

I started this because the status quo itself was bullshit.

“You want to know why I became a fake cape, it’s because I refuse to sit and take all the shit the
villains cause this city” I took a step toward him, getting in his face like I did to Emma earlier
today, his eyes still wide as I continued my rant “I think that I have to fight villains because I lived
my entire life watching this city slowly decay with the Empire and the Merchants and the ABB
chipping away at it piece by piece while the heroes maintain their status quo of ‘trying their best’.”
And then, in a low hiss, “Because this city will be the death of my dad because for whatever
reason he loves this city and would never leave it even if it is slowly beating him down.” I could
feel tears start to form in my eyes as I brought up dad.

I took a deep breath.

Have to remember why I’m here. I’m going to stop their inaction, their status quo, no matter what.

In a steadier voice than I expected of myself I said, “I need to be a hero because I felt like
everyone else was dropping the ball, so here I am doing what I think every hero should be doing.”
I turned around to walk back to the common area “Sorry that I don’t have the prerequisite
superpower to meet your ‘hero’ criteria.” And then I walked away.

“Taylor that’s not what I-“

He was interrupted by a door opening, and as I walked out of earshot I heard Sophia say, “Way to
go fearless leader, you really fucked the dog on that one.”

I didn’t turn around, I just kept walking after hearing him say something to Sophia, knowing that
I’d probably have to apologize to him for blowing up like that eventually.

But later, right now I was still angry over the fact that he might think that I need superpowers to be
a hero.

Shit I probably should have stayed and let him explain.

Whatever, we can talk once I’ve calmed down.

As I walked back into the common room everyone looked up, Dean in particular looked
concerned as soon as he saw me.

He cautiously asked, “Anything important happen?”

“Carlos and I just had a disagreement” was what I said in the calmest voice I could muster “Don’t
worry, we’ll probably figure it out later” I said before Riley could ask any questions, and I could
tell by the look on her face that she wanted to.

“I just need a bit to cool off before that happens” I said as I sat down in one of the empty recliners.

I glanced up to see Carlos walk back in a few minutes later, concern and unease written on his
face, whether or not that was a side effect of talking with Sophia or our talk could be anyone’s
guess. But I would probably guess on it being a bit of both.
The conversation that had restarted after I’d gotten back had stopped when he stepped in front of the chair I was currently sitting in.

“I know that now might not be a good time, but I would like to continue our talk later, if that’s okay with you.”

I looked up from the part of the floor I’d been glaring at for the past few minutes to meet his eyes. They seemed sincere and not even a little angry about how I had just treated him.

It reminded me a little bit of a kicked puppy.

I sighed, “Yeah, maybe in a couple days, when my heads on better.”

Carlos sighed in relief “Good, well let’s enjoy our break until Sophia and Chris have to go on patrol.”

Then he sat down, and small talk and jokes ensued, Vista and Clockblocker finished their debriefing soon after and the rest of the day passed without incident.

It wasn’t the best day, but I have definitely had worse.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter done!

This one’s ending was a lot different than I had originally planned, but I liked the parallels and differences between this and last chapter so this stayed. And don’t worry, Carlos and Taylor will come to some kind of understanding soon.

See you all next week to see how Taylor spends her spring break before her first day at Arcadia!
Taylor's first days of Spring Break

Chapter Summary

Taylor spends her first days of spring break with friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 12th, 2011 (Saturday)

--A day after console duty—

I had just arrived at the Market when someone loudly yelled “HEY TAYLOR!!” directly into my right ear.

Knowing exactly who it was I quickly got over my surprise and ringing eardrum to turn and grab the offending individual and put them in a head lock.

I struggled to suppress a grin, “Oh look, a little gremlin decided to try and make me deaf in one ear. Again.” Was my deadpan remark as the girl struggled against my grip.

Said girl had a large smile on her face, even as she squirmed in vain to get out of the headlock.

“I told you I’m not a gremlin” was what she said as she playfully wacked my arm in an exaggerated tapping out motion.

Once I let her go, Aisha jumped away before turning toward me, a toothy smile still plastered on.

“Tay! I prefer the term imp, it sounds so much cuter than ‘gremlin’” and she used her fingers to put air quotes around gremlin.

Then her eyes softened uncharacteristically as she looked me up and down, as if looking for anything out of place.

“How are you holding up Tay? It’s not like you to suddenly stop coming to the gym all week like that.” Was what she said as she walked around me, that soft, very un-Aisha like gaze still on me.

“I told you, that big cape fight on Saturday between Lung and the Protectorate made my dad really paranoid about me going around town.” The lies came easily, having hid behind them for about a year now “He didn’t want me running into any ABB thugs that might have been riled up after that fight.”

Aisha stayed quiet for a moment, looking like she was choosing her next words carefully. Another thing that I rarely saw from Aisha.

“It wasn’t just the Protectorate that fought Lung though” then regular Aisha was back, cocky grin and all as she said “that badass Camo Girl and her sidekick fought him to a standstill until the Protectorate got there” then she started walking further into the Market with me following behind “but I read on PHO that CG got hurt pretty bad too” and although I couldn’t see her face, I could hear how strained her voice was.
I lengthened my strides to catch up with her, because even though puberty was beginning to hit her like a truck, I still had over half a foot on the girl.

“T’m sure Camo Girl is fine, the PRT would have said something if she was badly hurt in a fight against Lung of all people.” I bumped her with my elbow, “don’t tell me you’ve secretly been a Camo Girl fan all this time, I never would have guessed.”

Aisha snorted sarcastically “Please, heroes are so overrated, I’m more of a fan of misunderstood villains” then she pulled me into a side hug as we kept walking “why would I be worried? It would be a waste of time to worry about her, she’s too mysterious to be taken out by an overrated villain like Lung anyway.”

I knew enough about Aisha that she would never actually wear her heart on her sleeve when it came to things like this, so I felt all warm and fuzzy that she was so worried about my cape persona.

The moment was ruined when she painfully pinched my side while she was still had her arm around my side.

I yelped and before I could retaliate she dashed off, yelling over her shoulder “Race you to the theater! I don’t wanna be late to the movie because you’re a slow poke!”

I sighed. Aisha was certainly a whirlwind of a person.

I dashed off after her, already plotting my revenge for when I caught her.

As we walked out the movie theater, Aisha loudly proclaimed with her arms in the air “What a shit movie!” for the whole world to hear with a smile on her face.

“It was incredibly bad, but why are you so happy about that?” a smirk on my face despite wasting the past two hours of my life on a poorly written, badly directed film.

“Because complaining about a bad movie is so much more fun than talking about how good a movie was.” She pointed back at the theatre “And I’m going to be complaining about that movie for a long time and you’re gonna have to put up with it since you saw it with me!” A shit eating grin on her face.

“Aisha” I said, a deadpan look on my face “you complain about everything, regardless of how good or bad it is.”

She crossed her arms with a petulant pout saying “Fine, Ms. ‘I look angry all the time so that people don’t talk to me’, I’ll talk to other people about how terrible a movie it was and then we’ll be best friends and you’ll be over there sulking about how alone you are.”

I laugh and walk over to her pinching her cheeks as I walk by “it’s adorable that you think I would sulk because you made some new friends. My weekends would be so much freer if you did.” I kept walking past her calling behind me “Now come on, Brian asked me, through tears mind you, that I force you to get some appropriate and non-trashy clothing for this spring.” I grinned at the chagrinned look on her face “and you know how much I hate clothes shopping so I’m gonna make this as painful for you as it is for me.”

“Oh c’mon!” Another pout finding its way on her face, “You say you don’t want to make friends through mutually bad experiences, but what do you call this then?”
“I feel that a lot of the favors I do for friends end up being mutually bad experiences.” I smiled at her, pulling her to my side in a one-armed hug “And I call these bad experiences the Aisha Laborn effect.” I adopted my own impish smile to mimic the one she gives Brian and I all the time “You should know by now that you bring it upon yourself.”

She smiled back, reciprocating the hug as we continued walking in the Market “Alright, alright, where to first?”

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March 14th, 2011 (Monday)
--two days after spending the day with Aisha--

“You do realize I just finished Panacea’s ‘convalescence’ time, right?” Was my only, slightly incredulous remark to Armsmaster.

He stood in the middle of the Ward’s common room, clad in his iconic blue armor. It was weird seeing him all dressed out while we all sat around in civilian clothing.

The other Wards seemed surprised to see him when he first walked in, announced only by the mask alarm. No email or announcement giving any forewarning to his visit.

“I’m well aware Ms. Hebert, but I would rather let the Wards learn firsthand as soon as possible.” The way he held himself, ramrod straight with a dominating presence, certainly lead to an image of someone you do not say no to. “So, I will see all of you in the gym in five minutes, wearing appropriate clothing for close quarters sparring.” One sweeping look at all of us followed as he began marching toward the Wards personal gym, the rest of the Wards scrambling out of their seats, except for Chris, Carlos and Sophia who were on console duty and out on patrol for the next half hour respectively. We all made our way to our rooms to change.

I followed behind them, thinking about what exactly Armsmaster was going to want me to do. ‘Close quarters sparring’ most likely means that the ‘teaching the Wards CQC’ part of Piggot’s terms was being used, although I hoped he didn’t expect that I had actually figured out a way to teach the Wards how to fight so soon after joining.

I got to my room and started pulling out a pair of leggings and a tank top, what I usually wore whenever I worked out and sparred at the Laborn’s gym, pulling off my socks and walking barefoot out of my room and toward the gym.

Stuck in my own head, I hadn’t realized that I walked alone to the gym until I walked down the stairs and toward a large padded area in the corner of the basketball court sized gym.

How much space did they devote to the Wards?

Armsmaster was in front of an open locker, taking out padded gloves and face protectors and placing them on a nearby table.

He turned his head toward me as I got closer to him.

“Ms. Hebert, good. I wished to speak with you before we began.” He gestured to the locker, which I now saw was filled with gloves, shin guards, boxing mitts and anything else that might be needed for martial arts training. “Go ahead and begin any preparations you might need. I want you to face each Ward at least once today, or at least until I am needed elsewhere.”

I grabbed a roll of hand wraps and began wrapping my fists with practiced ease “I know that I
agreed to try and teach them all how to throw a punch, but I didn’t expect you to want me to start so soon.”

“That’s because I don’t expect you to start teaching them anything yet. Piggot considers this a kind of team building exercise as well as a way to show the Wards that even without powers you are not defenseless.”

From somewhere behind us Dennis said, “Trust me Armsmaster, I know that she can kick my ass twelve ways to Tuesday without breaking a sweat, you don’t have to convince me of anything.”

As I turned around I noticed that the rest of the Wards must have decided to walk here as a group. Should I have waited for them? Did I miss some nonverbal cue that should have told me that?

I looked at the Wards that would be participating in Armsmaster’s weird team building exercise.

Dennis and Dean were leading the group. Dennis looking a bit nervous despite his attempted lighthearted comment and Dean looked more curious than anything. Ruth was standing right behind them looking a bit apprehensive. And all three of them were pointedly keeping their eyes either level with mine or higher as they walked up.

I was tempted to try and find what was so interesting on the ceiling before I saw Riley bouncing up and down next to Missy toward the back of the group. They seemed to be at least friendly with one another and I was happy to see that.

All of them wearing some variation of athletic shorts and t-shirts or tank tops. And although none of them were out of shape, only Dean looked like he had the muscle definition of someone who regularly worked out. Dennis and Ruth looked…skinny? Like running was probably the only exercise they did if they did it at all. And Missy and Riley both looked like prepubescent teens.

I had already thought that Carlos and Sophia were the only ones that could hold their own in a brawl without their powers, I guess now I get to see what the other Wards are made of.

Armsmaster spoke up as they finally made it to the padded area, “Alright Wards, inside this locker are hand wraps, padded gloves and face guards, Ms. Hebert and I will assist those who need direction in wrapping their wrists and hands. Once that is done, Ms. Hebert will fight each of you individually to see how you hold up in a fight.” Dean moved to the hand wrap laden table and began handing out the wraps, faltering slightly as he heard confirmation that I would be fighting everyone “As you no doubt heard, going by Dennis’s comment, this is being done to demonstrate Ms. Hebert’s combat effectiveness, as well as giving her a good look at where you all stand from a close quarters combat perspective.”

Missy spoke up as she received her hand wraps, beginning to loop them around her wrist, correctly, I observed “Why does she need to have a good look at how we fight?” but the glint of understanding I saw in her eyes made me think she already had an idea.

“Because one of the concessions made between her and Piggot was that she would at least attempt to train you all in some form of self-defense.”

Some of them looked confused when they heard that. Dean was the one to ask “Why not just hire someone to train us then? Instead of having another Ward do it.”

I saw Armsmaster straighten slightly as he turned his head to face Dean “Because we thought you would all be more receptive of this training if it was done by a peer.”

I still thought it was because paying for training like that might give the pretty much nonexistent
Youth Guard a foot in the door in Brockton Bay. How Piggot has been able to keep them out for so long absolutely baffled me, especially after all the paperwork regarding their involvement I had to sign to join the Wards.

But Piggot and Armsmaster were sticking to the ‘teaching your peers will be a great team building exercise’ bit, even if both sides probably agreed it was bullshit.

Dennis raised his hand, looking between Armsmaster and me as if waiting to be called on by a teacher. I was caught between laughing and frowning at the action, because I wasn’t sure if he was being serious or not.

He held his hand up for about five seconds before Armsmaster growled out “Do you have a question Dennis?”

“So, we have to fight her?”

“You will be sparring with Ms. Hebert, yes.”

“Like the punchy, throwy kind of fighting?”

“If each of you decide to attempt to punch and throw each other, yes.”

“And I’m assuming we’re doing this without using our powers, right?”

To the group as a whole he answered, “I wish for Ms. Hebert to see how well each of you can fight in a close quarters situation so that she can begin a personalized teaching plan for each of you” then he looked back at Dennis “so no powers today, yes.”

Dennis stood for a second, looking toward the ceiling as if deep in thought before saying “Nope” promptly turning around and starting the walk back to the entrance of the gym.

Armsmaster’s voice rang out after him “This is not a choice Dennis, this is an official order from the director and myself.”

Dennis stopped walking after his fifth step before turning around and walking back toward the group, talking as he walked, pointing a finger at Armsmaster.

“If I die from this, I’m writing you out of my will.”

Ruth was the first to comment on this, not even looking up from wrapping her fists when she said, “Aren’t you overreacting a bit to this?”

Dennis’s finger moved from Armsmaster to Ruth before he said “You know exactly what Taylor can do. It was all well and good when I was behind her as she beat up thugs” then he used both of his hands to gesture to himself “but I would never wish that kind of punishment on myself, not in a million years.”

And I felt kind of put out by that, “You do remember that I’m standing right here, right?”

“Oh, I am well aware, and though woe is me, I already know my fate” then her dramatically waved a hand in my direction “I’ve already seen my own death, how much worse could it get?”

I raised an eyebrow at that, faintly amused at his antics “is that a challenge Dennis?”

I saw him and Ruth pale slightly when I said that, but Dean, ever the gallant gentleman, walked between us, hands wrapped up and padded MMA gloves already on.
“I’ll go first if you don’t mind” he walked to the center of the matted area “I have wanted to see what made the others…intimidated when they met you.” Was said good naturedly, as if I hadn’t terrified his teammates in the past few months.

But I had no reason to deny him the first fight, having finished wrapping my fists awhile ago I put on my own pair of gloves and tossed him a face guard, putting my hair in a pony tail before donning my own.

Dean got into a normal boxing stance after head padded up his face, saying “I hope you go easy on me.”

I tried to give him a nice smile for being such a good sport, but it must not have looked very reassuring since his eyes widened slightly when I did it.

“I wouldn’t want to rough you up too badly, Glory Girl would never forgive me” was all I said before I got into a ready stance about five feet from him, waiting for Armsmaster to start us off.

“Are both sides ready?” Dean and I both nodded, and I stepped forward to tap gloves, he obliged, and I stepped back again.

“Ready, begin!”

The final match ended with me planting my knee into the back of a prone Missy who tapped out as I twisted her arm.

She continued to lay on the ground a few seconds after I released and before rallying and standing up again.

I’d spent the last thirty minutes fighting everyone except Riley, who I already knew had no experience fighting without her powers.

Dean was a surprisingly skilled boxer but had obviously never been in a street fight before because his responses to me kicking him in the chest and grappling him were lackluster at best.

Ruth was surprisingly scrappy, and although she didn’t appear to have any kind of training she knew how to defend herself. Something I wanted to ask her about later, her skill spoke more of experience than anything.

Dennis looked like he had never thrown a punch in his life but considering that his power made any kind of close quarters encounter horribly one sided I wasn’t that surprised at his lack of skill.

And finally, there was Missy. She certainly had fire and determination down, but not having hit puberty yet didn’t work in her favor during a fist fight. Short limbs and baby fat did not add to combat effectiveness.

Compared to the other people in my Krav Maga class or Brian they weren’t very impressive, like at all, but I can probably teach them without a problem.

Integrating their powers into martial arts on the other hand would probably be a bit more difficult.

I was about to turn to Armsmaster and ask if we were done with this for the day but quick, loud footsteps coming from the gyms entrance distracted me.

Whoever was running into the gym yelled “There is no fucking way you fucking did this without
me fucking here!

And there was Sophia, in full costume, alternating between sprinting and floating in her breaker form to get to where we were gathered.

Slightly out of breath she stood before us, taking in the slightly bruised and battered appearance of the other Wards and asked, “I heard we were fighting Taylor, we still doing that?”

I made an executive decision right then, “Nope, just finished. I’m about to hit the shower.”

Armsmaster spoke next “I need to leave as well, and I intend to be present whenever Ms. Hebert is sparring.” I saw Sophia start to puff herself up, no doubt about to say something scathing “I have an opening on Wednesday around noon that will allow me to be present. You both may spar then.” And with that he walked out leaving behind a trembling Shadow Stalker as he made his way to wherever he was going.

It rankled me that he volunteered me to fight Sophia, but I did sign a bunch of paperwork saying that I would listen to him, so my right to complain was almost nonexistent. It’s still annoying though.

And it turned out that Sophia’s trembling was out of excitement as she turned toward me, a finger pointed at my chest, and said “I finally get my rematch Hebert, you better be ready.” And then she turned around and stocked off, most likely to change out of her costume.

I heard Dean speak up next, asking “Wait, when did you and Sophia fight?”

I rubbed the back of my head, not turning to face him, “yeah…we didn’t get along that well last year.”

Then I started walking toward the showers, Riley falling into step beside me. I think the other Wards started talking, but my attention was on her as she started regaling me on what she thought of my fights with the Wards. I offered a comment here and there but let her steer the conversation as we made our way out of the gym.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter done.

Sorry I didn't get to write a followup on the Carlos Taylor situation this chapter, it was getting too long for me to add it in this chapter, so it's been moved to next weeks.

I have decided that writing conversations with 4+ characters is difficult for me and I will have to work harder to ensure that each character has a chance to be a part of the scene, I'm not sure how happy I am with the pre and post fight scenes with all the Wards and Armsmaster.

But here it is anyway, I hope you guys enjoyed it and hit me with what I did right and wrong this chapter, I'd really appreciate it.

See you next week with another chapter!
March 16th, 2011 (Wednesday)

--Two days after fighting the Wards--

There were only two people in the common room as I walked in, Ruth, who was on console duty, and Carlos, who was sitting in one of the comfy chairs reading a book.

Ruth said “Hey Taylor” from her seat at the computer terminal.

“Hey Ruth, who’s here right now?”

“Me, you, Riley and Carlos are the only people at HQ right now, but I think they scheduled Riley’s power testing for today, so she’s probably in the labs. Clockblocker and Vista are on patrol though, don’t know where anyone else is.” Was her reply, never turning from the monitor.

That seemed as good an ending to any kind of conversation, she must take console duty very seriously. I turned to the only other occupant of the room, Carlos.

Well, I guess I won’t get a better chance than this.

I walked over to where he was sitting, still engrossed in his book, and tapped him on his shoulder, startling him out of his own world judging by the way that he jumped.

“Wha-! Oh, hey Taylor, I didn’t hear you come in.” He said, a smiling growing on his face because that’s just the kind of nice guy that he is.

I heard Ruth say something over the coms as I said, “We need to finish that conversation, is now a good time for you?”

A more serious look overtook his face as he bent the corner of the page he was on to mark it, which I had to physically restrain myself from commenting on. Is it really so hard to find a book mark?

Before I let that thought show on my face he stood up and said “Yeah, follow me” and he started walking to the Ward’s residence hallway after he put his book on the coffee table.

As we walked out of the room though, I heard Ruth half-whisper half-shout into the mike “They’re leaving the room Clock, I’m not gonna follow and listen in on them while I’m supposed to be on console.”

I didn’t hear what else was said after that as Carlos and I made our way to a door with a shield spray painted on it. Carlos swung the door open and held it for me.
I walked in, nonplussed that we would be having this talk in his room.

I stopped in the middle to take it in. It was the same, ten by ten square room that mine was, but Aegis had obviously added his own personal touches to it. It had the same twin bed, nightstand, desk and wardrobe that mine had as well. But the filled bookcase, comfy looking desk chair and various posters gave the room character that my bare walls and bookshelfless room to shame.

I’d have to make my room more homey soon, Carlos’s seemed infinitely more comfortable than mine.

But we weren’t here to give me decorating ideas for my room.

I heard Carlos close the door and turned to face him an apology on my lips but before I could he said, “I’d like say that I’m sorry.”

I shut my mouth, audibly clicking my teeth.

“Um, what?”

“I said I would like to say sorry” and he did have an apologetic look on his face, “thinking back on our conversation, I don’t think I was very welcoming, so it’s understandable that you would get angry at me for what I said.”

“Nonono, I should be the one apologizing.” I said waving my hands in front of me “I shouldn’t have blown up on you like that, you have a right to ask me why I fight gangs as a cape. We’re teammates now and I can’t blame you for wanting to know.”

He raised his arms placatingly, “That may be, but you have a deeply personal reason for doing what you do, even ignoring the fact you do it without powers. It was insensitive of me to ask about it so bluntly without taking how you would feel about it into consideration.” Carlos lowered his arms, his eyes looking at me soulfully “Looking back I completely understand why you would be angry about someone you only met a few days before asking something so close to home.”

I was a bit at a loss for words. Why couldn’t he see that I was in the wrong here? There was no good reason for me exploding at him like I did.

But I recognized that stubborn look in his eye. I’ve seen that same look during arguments with Aisha and Shadow Stalker, a look that showed they wouldn’t back down from this.

“Alright fine” I sighed “We can agree to disagree on this.” And I saw him cross his arms and open his mouth to no doubt reiterate his point, but I wasn’t about to waste more time arguing about this. “I understand that you think you should have been more sensitive to my…personal motivations, but I think you will find me equally immovable in my belief that I’m a big girl and should be able to answer completely reasonable questions” and I tried my hardest to emphasize reasonable “without flying off the handle like I did. I understand why you asked those questions, I would be worried as well if some unknown factor came into a fixture of my life, with no idea what that person’s intentions were.”

He looked ready to say something, but then he sighed and put his arms back to his side, hopefully giving this argument up.

“Alright fine, agree to disagree then” he held out his hand “we’re good then?”

I took it, nodded my head and we shook “We’re good.”
We both sighed in relief as we released each other’s hand.

I started the conversation back up, asking “Is there anything else you want to ask?” then adding quickly “I promise not to blow up on you again.”

Carlos looked to the side, thinking.

“Just one thing I want to know right now, do you have any intention of putting the Wards in danger while you’re here? I know now that the reason you became a cape was to fight the gangs in the Bay, but like I said before, that’s not the only reason that we’re here. We’re kids, still trying to figure out what we want to do with our lives. Even if most of us want to throw ourselves against the villains and gangs, it’s my responsibility to ensure that they, I mean we, all stay safe.”

His gaze bore into mine as he continued “So even though you said that you accept that you could die, I don’t want you putting any of them in excessive danger if you try to continue your war. I’m not telling you to stop, that’s Piggot and Armsmaster’s responsibility not mine, but I don’t want any of the other Wards getting dragged into it.”

I noted that he didn’t include himself when telling me to keep the Wards out of danger, but instead of commenting on it I said, “I have no intention of putting the Wards into any excessive danger through my own actions. I didn’t join up so that I could put a bunch of kids in danger anyway, at least not with intention of adding any more dangers than they already encounter.”

He raised an eyebrow as I finished, “That was weirdly specific wording.”

“Saying that I will never put them in danger would be a lie, I won’t try and stop them from fighting villains, but I won’t go out of my way to take unnecessary risks when it could put the other Wards in danger.”

“And when you’re not with any of ‘my Wards’?”

I tried to keep myself from smirking “That wasn’t part of your original question.”

Carlos narrowed his eyes slightly “And if I’m asking now?”

“I’d tell you that I’ll try my best to stay safe but make no promises. My lack of powers makes anything I do as a Ward a risk.” Seeing that he was about to say something I raised a hand to stop him “I don’t plan on doing anything suicidal like fighting Lung again, but any decision I make out there” and I pointed to the windowless wall, knowing that he knows my meaning “that doesn’t involve running away from a fight will always put me in relatively more danger than what you guys encounter.”

He looked me up and down before closing his eyes and sighing, “You’re still being weirdly nitpicky with your wording, but I guess I can accept that” Carlos opened his eyes again, looking at me pleadingly “But remember that you’re on a team now, it’s not just you and Riley anymore. We’ll always be there with you.”

I snorted, there’s no way I could keep suppressing my smirk if he was gonna hit me with such a cheesy line “We’ll always be there with you”? Which Earth aleph movie did you steal that one from?”

Carlos took the joke with a smile, probably as ready as I was to divert from such heavy topics.

“Hey! Just because it’s from a movie doesn’t mean that it can’t be used in real life.”

“Suuuure, but it won’t stop me from telling the rest of the Wards that you’re using cheesy movie quotes during our ‘private talks’.” And I made sure to use air quotes when I said that.
“You say that like you already talk to them about our ‘private talks’” and look at him, using air quotes to mimic me, how mature.

I smiled, all teeth “I certainly don’t, but Riley’s been telling me that they’ve all been speculating about what you said to me that made me so angry last Friday. And let me tell you” I let out a low whistle, “Dennis has quite the imagination.”

He sighed again, a weariness overtaking him as he said, “Of course they’re talking about it, I don’t suppose you’re willing to share what they said are you.” He sounded a bit hopeful, using those big ol’ eyes to try and get me to pity him.

It wasn’t going to work, but kudos to him for trying.

“Nope, I had to ply my source with promises of candy and ice cream before she told me, you’re gonna have to find someone else to tell you…unless” and I pointed a finger at him “you help me with something I have planned for Sophia today.”

He seemed to perk up at that, asking “What did you have in mind? I know you’re gonna fight her today, do you want me to help you cheat in the fight?” And he seemed mildly disapproving as he said that last part.

“No, but Armstmaster wants me to try and teach you guys stuff and there’s something that I’ve wanted to get through Shadow Stalker’s head since I met her, but never had a good chance to drive it home. So, I want your help to try and do it.”

Raising an eyebrow, Carlos asked “What exactly are you trying to do.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a maybe, tell me what you intend to do first.”

“That’s a yes. Now, the first step is…”

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Two hours came and went after my talk with Carlos, and now all the Wards, sans Riley who was apparently still in power testing, plus Armstmaster were back to the matted area of the gym sitting on benches pulled from the weightlifting area.

At Armstmaster’s order, Carlos, Chris and Sophia were in workout clothing since they were the only ones that didn’t participate last time.

Sophia was already stretching and warming up for the fight when I turned to Armstmaster and said, “I’ll go against Chris first.”

The yelped “What!” from Sophia and Chris was summarily ignored as Armstmaster, still fully decked out in his armor turned his helmeted head to look at me appraisingly.

“…Very well, Chris will be your first opponent today.”

I glanced at Sophia and pointedly smirked at her before dragging the Tinker to the table so that I could help him wrap his hands and put his face guard on.

Once that was done we walked to the center where we squared off, both of us adopting a boxing stance, mine loose and relaxed, his tense and tight.
We tapped gloves and at Armstmaster’s yelled “Begin!” I lunged at Chris and sent a few probing jabs at him.

I hit him several times in the ribs before he frantically jumped backwards to create some distance between us.

…I had been aiming for his arms which he had moved out of the way, leaving his ribs wide open.

I took a step forward and sent another probing jab his way, but he had moved his guard so close to his face that he barely saw it coming and took a hit to the chest, recoiling again and backing up further.

This is ridiculous.

“Chris, get over here.” And when I saw him hesitate I added “Now.”

He didn’t quite scramble up to me, standing ramrod straight once he got close enough.

“Put up your hands again.”

He did.

I moved behind him, grabbing him by the wrists and lowering his hands so they were below his chin and not up to his eyes, with his terrible reflexes he needed them to be between his face and chest or else he was gonna be peeing blood after I was done with him.

“There, keep your hands lower than you had them or I’m just gonna keep hitting your ribs until you can’t breathe.” I stepped back in front of him looking at his legs, I tapped his foot with mine until he widened his stance a bit as well. “Good, now that you have a proper stance-“

“For fucks sake, you’re supposed to be fighting him, no teaching him how to stand upright!” Was Sophia’s…encouraging input from behind me.

I smiled at that, knowing that only Armstmaster and Chris could see it. Looks like my plan was working.

I sighed dramatically, saying “She’s right, we’re done here Chris” when I saw the embarrassed look on his face I added “Don’t worry, we’ll have plenty of time for you to work on how to properly take a hit, but that’s not what we’re doing today.” I put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed reassuringly.

Chris didn’t look very reassured as he walked away, but I wasn’t about to let that bother me. I had other things to do.

Sophia was about to walk onto the mats, protective gear already on before I turned to Armstmaster again and asked, “Carlos is next right?” Hearing another angry groan from Sophia.

Armstmaster appeared to look between Sophia and I before saying, “If you want to, then yes. You and Carlos may begin next.”

I saw Carlos walk up to the table set up with wrist wraps, gloves and head gear, and slowly start the process of wrapping his hands. Just like we talked about.

From the corner of my eye I saw Sophia angrily stalk back to the bench she was sitting on and pointedly not pouting as she waited for Carlos and me to start.
Which took another few minutes as Carlos took his time, wrapping and then rewrapping his hands until he was satisfied by the results. And although I never turned to look at her, the angry tapping of someone’s foot made me think that Sophia’s patience was beginning to run thin.

Good.

Carlos joined me in the center of the matted area and we squared up against each other, tapping gloves and getting into fighting stances.

I put brought my fists up to either side of my chin, left foot forward and it looked like Carlos was mimicking me.

That’s fine, let’s see if he can use it properly.

At Armsmaster’s “Begin!” I started the same way I did with Chris, lunging forward and sending a few probing jabs to test out his defenses.

Carlos held up a lot better than Chris, and that’s not just because he’s got almost half a foot and over fifty pounds on the Tinker. Carlos had faster and better reactions to my first hits, blocking them all with his arm.

Then I telegraphed a front kick to his chest and the brute easily slid out of the way. I guess being able to tank almost any hit didn’t kill his ability to dodge.

I then started strafing around him, quickly jabbing and kicking at his defenses to look for an opening. He took a step toward me, punching for my chest but I sidestepped it and popped him in the jaw for his troubles.

Carlos took a step back in response and hunkered down, taking a more defensive stance as I continued to circle him, probing for weakness with fists and feet.

Exactly like we talked about.

Carlos and I continued this back and forth for about fifteen minutes, me tapping him with jabs and quick kicks, never really getting a good hit in and Carlos trying for a hit only to get popped in the face or the ribs for trying.

I could hear the furious tap tap tapping of Sophia’s foot as the other Wards had gotten bored and started talking to one another instead of actually watching the fight.

Time to wrap this up then.

I continued circling Carlos as he pivoted on his left foot to keep me in front of him. When he finally decided to take a step forward to try for another hit was when I struck.

Kicking the foot he had used to step forward with my own knocked it to my right, throwing him off balance, he then threw a wild punch to try and keep me away but I ducked under it, grabbing his arm and twisting myself until we were hip to hip, where I then threw his grabbed arm over my shoulder and pulled him over my back. Successfully performing a shoulder throw that sent him back first into the ground.

Before he could scramble off the ground I stomped down on his chest, something that would have knocked the wind out of a normal person but only cause Carlos to grunt under the force of the blow.
He moved to grab the foot that was planted on his chest, but I quickly jumped off the ground with all my might, taking to the air directly above him. I brought my legs to my chest as I reached the apex of my jump, floating over his head for a second before gravity overtook me and began bringing me down.

Using the force that gravity was lending me I stomped down with both feet, each foot landing on either side of his head with an audible ‘thump’ that echoed around the gym before Carlos could even twitch.

His eyes widened as he looked up at my face from between my legs, it was only after I remembered that I was wearing leggings that I quickly stepped away from a somewhat embarrassing position.

It was then that I noticed that I couldn’t hear the rest of the Wards talking anymore and when I turned to face them I saw all of them, sans Sophia, staring wide-eyed and open mouthed at the fact that I had quickly ended a fight that seemed to have no end in sight with vicious efficiency.

But worst of all was the fact that Sophia no longer looked annoyed and impatient but had an excited smile on her face. Damn it, after spending all that time winding her up too.

I saw Carlos stand up from the corner of my eye.

“Yeah, I’m gonna go ahead and say that one goes to you Taylor, thanks for not bashing my face in by the way.” He had a good-natured tone as he said it, so I hoped there were no hard feelings for me manhandling him like that.

“No problem, I’d been wanting to try and use that on someone for awhile now, but never had a chance.”

I saw him smile as he walked toward the benches that the rest of the Wards were sitting on, stopping Sophia to whisper something to her as she made her way to the mats.

Well now, isn’t that interesting.

Whatever he said seemed to ruin Sophia’s mood again, her trademark ‘I’ll rip your legs off and beat you with them face’ look back on, so I had to thank him for that later.

“You ready Sophia?” Was all I said as I put my glove out for her to tap.

“I’ve been ready, you’re the one that’s been running away from this all week” was her volatile reply as she slapped my glove.

I took the same stance I had when I fought Carlos, but Sophia had her fists in front of her face, hunched over and leaning forward, telling the whole world that she was about to rocket forward as soon as the match started.

“Begin!”

And just like that Sophia was lunging at me like she was shot out of a cannon.

It was almost too easy to sidestep and trip her.

She took the fall with grace, ducking into a roll as she hit the ground and getting back to her feet instantly, turning around to lunge at me again with a wide haymaker that I ducked under and slammed a padded fist into her ribs.
As I stepped back she cursed, turning to me with a more defensive stance, now cautious of my counterattacks.

“That the best you got Stalker? I’ve seen you do much better.”

“Shut up!” was her growled response as stepped forward and went for a high kick.

Stepping out of the kicks range was easy as I continued to calmly speak to her “Do you want to know why I saved this fight for last Sophia?”

“No, I don’t!” was said as she started throwing punches at me, but they were angry, predictable things that I ducked or knocked away with ease.

“Because Armsmaster wants me to help teach the Wards how to fight, and somehow complement their powersets with some close quarters experience.” I took a step back and to the side to get out of her range “So these spars were to help give me an idea of how they all fight, except you of course, we both know that I’m well acquainted with how you fight.”

I lashed my foot out to preemptively stop the second high kick she tried to throw at my chest, hitting her knee with my bare foot, she hissed as she took a step back from the blow.

“So, I’m going to use this opportunity to try and get something through your head, you need to COOL” I threw a punch at her that she blocked with her arm “YOUR” I tried to hit her with a kick that she blocked as well “TITS!” I threw another punch, this time at her face, that she ducked under.

She stumbled back after the flurry of blows, a look of confusion on her face that turned into anger “WHAT!?” was her eloquent retort.

“You need to learn that losing your temper will only cost you” I spread my arms out to gesture around us “you haven’t hit me once this fight because you’re pissed that I’ve been avoiding it, and it’s making you hilariously predictable.”

Sophia dropped her fists, incredulous that I was bringing this up during a fight I suppose “Really? you’re bringing this up now?”

“Yes, I’m bringing this up now! The only time you really listen to me is when we fight, otherwise you just say ‘we can talk about this later’.”

“I don’t say that!”

“Yes, you do, every time I tried to bring it up when we worked together you would just float away, saying you needed to get home or that you had something else to do. You have problems with controlling your anger Sophia!”

“I have perfect control of my anger!”

“And I’m sure the PRT took you at your word when they caught you shoving a crossbow bolt up some thug’s ass. Oh, wait they didn’t, and that’s why you’re a Ward now. Because you think it’s okay to lash out with your anger.”

“I don’t have to stand here and listen to your bullshit.”

“That’s right walk away instead of facing your problems, like you always do!”

Dennis decided now was the perfect time to speak up saying, “I never thought I’d see a couple of
teenage girls argue like an old married couple.” Probably a little louder than he intended.

Sophia and I, both of us wound up from our argument, turned to him in unison, yelling “What did you just say!?!?”

Chapter End Notes

And then Dennis died.

Not sure how I really feel about this chapter, but I addressed Taylor and Carlos's disagreement/argument and got Taylor to confront Sophia about her anger issues. How effective that second one was will be seen at a later date.

Next chapter is Taylor's first day at Arcadia, so we finally get to see the Dallon sisters again after so long. I can't wait!

See you all next week with another chapter.
March 21st, 2011 (Monday)

--Five days after arguing with Sophia--

After taking two different bus lines from her house, in baggy jeans and a large zip up hoodie I finally stood in front of the imposing gates that lead into Arcadia High. The tall, almost decorative bar fence that surrounded the school only adding to a sense of foreboding that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Why was entering a high school more intimidating than taking down a house full of Merchants?

Probably because I can’t just knock out my problems here, at least not without being incredibly sneaky.

As I gathered myself and finally walked through the gates, going along the current of bodies created by other students, I did what I always did back at Winslow, focus on my destination and ignore everyone else as if they aren’t there.

Arcadia is divided into two long, four story buildings that are connected by a much shorter crosspiece. The southside has the cafeteria, gym and the offices, with about one third of the total classrooms as well, while the northside was longer, holding the auditorium and the rest of the school’s classrooms.

It was with this knowledge that I entered the southern building, heading to the offices to talk with the principle and get my class schedule.

After greeting the secretary and telling her I was one of the new transfers, supposedly there were around six other kids getting transferred in with me by the PRT, I was ushered into the principal’s office.

“Taylor Hebert, I would like to personally welcome you to Arcadia High” said Principal… Howell, at least that’s what the little name plate on her desk said, so I’m inclined to believe it. She then opened a drawer and pulled a manila folder out of it, handing it to me across her desk “here is your class schedule, as well as a map of the school’s buildings and individual floors to help you navigate for the first few days here. You will only be required to stay on campus until lunch period, after that you will be able to leave the school for your ‘internship’, but you may also feel free to use any of the schools many facilities if you should choose to.”

That threw me off a bit “Wouldn’t it be suspicious if I don’t go straight to my ‘internship’?”

“Not particularly, you may claim to have a study hall or free period after lunch if any teacher should question you. Just don’t draw too much attention to yourself and you should be able to use any of the computer labs or gym equipment without too much trouble.” Principal Howell then leaned forward on her desk, her hands splayed out as she got closer to me “I know what you do at your ‘internship’ Ms. Hebert, please be aware I am the only member of the faculty that has specific knowledge about that particular information, I would prefer to keep it that way so please be sure to not make either of our jobs harder by drawing too much attention to yourself.”

I smiled at her, full of confidence “Don’t worry, I’m very good at staying out of trouble.”
As it turns out, a normal day at Arcadia is a lot less exciting than a normal day at Winslow. Less wannabe gang members measuring their metaphorical dicks and less bitchy teenagers gossiping about superfluous events about their friends and enemies.

All that means is that my morning classes passed by without a hitch, I was introduced as a transfer student, a couple people sitting near me asked normal questions about me, but otherwise absolutely nothing interesting happened. I was a bit surprised that they didn’t put me in a class with Chris, the only other sophomore in the Wards though.

My thoughts as I entered the cafeteria and got into the lunch line was that this was everything that I could have asked for.

I just wanted to bask in the normalness and monotony, so much better than having to glare at Nazis and ABB kids as they had a stand off in the hallway or moving through a crush of rubberneckers as some kids were fighting each other on my way to class while the teachers fled or just ignored the situation.

That high I was riding came crashing down as I walked out of the lunch line, a tray of food in hand and saw a few guys making a nuisance of themselves toward a table full of girls.

I say that because it’s a trio of well-groomed white boys talking down to a table filled with culturally diverse young women with an air of arrogance and pretension that Nazis exude like bad cologne.

I diverted my course toward them and I thought, maybe I’m wrong, maybe Arcadia really was a safe haven compared to the shitshow that is Winslow.

“I’m just saying Ruth, just because the faculty make you help the foreign exchange students doesn’t mean you have to eat lunch with them.” And although that sentence doesn’t seem so bad, a little insensitive since he said it in front of who I assume the exchange students are, the disdainful tone he had when he said ‘them’ made my Nazi senses tingle.

Also, Ruth? I couldn’t see part of the table because the three stooges where blocking it. Was it really Ruth they were harassing? She’s been giving me the impression of a no bullshit kind of girl, why would she put up with these guys?

I stopped right behind the three guys as I heard Ruth speak up, saying “And I’ve told you that I like to spend my lunch with them because I enjoy their company. I…appreciate your concern but I’m fine sitting where I am.” And it was impressive how her tone was able to sound so annoyed without seeming to be rude.

I saw one guy, the leader probably since he was standing in front of the other two raised a finger and looked like he was gonna continue pushing before I decided to step in.

“Excuse me, can I get through here?”

All three of them turned around to face me, probably wondering who would dare interrupt their annoyance of a table full of girls. Once they saw me, more specifically that I was white, their annoyed frowns turned into friendly smiles.

The leader spoke first, “Of course, sorry to get in your way.” But instead of moving he just kept talking “I don’t think I know you, are you one of the new transfers?” He stuck out his hand for me to shake “My name’s—“
“You’re right, I am a new transfer. And I would like to sit down so that I can eat” I smiled at him, as pleasant as I could make it “It’s been a long day so far and I’m starving. So, if you could just move so that I can sit down” I stared pointedly at an empty seat across from Ruth, next to a girl of some Asian decent “I would very much like to start eating.”

The boy’s friendly smile seemed to falter at my interruption and blunt dismissal, but he soldiered on saying, “If you want a table to sit at, we have a table that you could join us at, I’m sure my friends would be happy to meet you.” And he gestured to a table a little ways away that was full of white kids, and I saw that one of them had part of a tattoo peaking out of his sleeve.

Yeah, that’s proof enough for me that they were Empire kids.

As if to cement my conclusion he leaned in close to me, whispering “You probably want to sit with the right kind of people on your first day.”

And I laughed at that “HA! I guess you’re right.” Then I sidestepped and walked in between two of them, bumping both of their shoulders as I passed effortlessly and walked to the table Ruth was sitting at.

“Is it alright if I sit here?” was all I asked the table at large, their wide eyes at my previous actions quickly replaced by nods and yesses.

“Thanks!” and as I placed my tray and sat down I looked back towards the trio of boys, they were standing there looking at me, dumbfounded. I just stared at them with a not-nice smile on my face until they turned around and went back to their table.

Once that was done I turned back to the girls I was now sitting with to find all of them looking at me.

I tried to put on a nicer smile and waved, introducing myself “Hey, I’m Taylor. I just transferred in today and it’s good to…meet…you.” Except they didn’t say anything, they just kept looking at me and then each other. Now that I got a good look at them, two eastern Asian, one Indian and an African girl sat at the table, and if the Nazi kid was to be believed they were all foreign exchange students. So maybe they didn’t understand me?

Before I could say anything, Ruth spoke up “It’s nice to meet you as well Taylor” then she gestured toward the other people at the table “don’t mind them, they’re not used to people interrupting that douchebag when he gets like that.”

“Do you usually just sit here and take it?”

Ruth shrugs noncommittally “They usually leave once I get a bit forceful with my refusal, but they haven’t tried anything since about a month ago. And they always give up once the supervising teachers make it to the cafeteria.”

“Why not stand up to them?” I personally knew how just letting bullies like that do what they want ended.

“They’re not worth it, plus they have friends that could make things more difficult for my friends.”

Said friends seemed to deflate when she said that, one of them saying “You know you don’t have to do this for us-“

“We’ve been over this” said Ruth a bit forcefully “I like you all more than I could ever even tolerate any of them” she gestured to the table full of not-so-discreet Nazi’s.
I decided to speak up, trying to change the subject “So what’s it like at Arcadia? It’s only my first day, but it’s already twenty times better than Winslow.”

“You’re from Winslow? What was that like?” asked one of them.

And lunch continued with questions about Arcadia and Winslow, I tried to keep my answers PG, thrown around until the bell rung signaling the end of lunch and telling me it was time to go back to HQ.

I waved goodbye to my new…friends? Could I call them that after only one lunch of talking?

They asked me to come back and sit with them tomorrow, so I guess they wanted to be friends.

And even though I’d probably only see them at lunch since they were all freshman, it was still good to find people I could be friendly with at school, especially after giving the entirety of Winslow the cold shoulder for the past year.

It was only after getting into the nondescript PRT van a few blocks away from Arcadia that I realized this was the first time I’d ever actually enjoyed a day of high school.

March 24th, 2011 (Thursday)

--Fourth day at Arcadia--

Today was the first day that I didn’t have to go straight to PRT HQ after lunch, so I decided to spend some time wandering around Arcadia, going to places that my classes usually didn’t take me.

It was when I was walking through the courtyard between the two buildings that I looked up at the cloudy sky and saw a flash of something brown on the north building’s roof.

…Well…nobody has specifically told me that the roofs were off limits, so it shouldn’t be a problem if I go up there and investigate. Plus, if someone was up there then it was my duty as a Ward to make sure they didn’t do something stupid.

It was with those flimsy justifications that I made my way into the north building to find a way onto the roof.

It was actually pretty difficult finding a roof access point, but after a lot of searching and violently jiggling a locked door I found a small room with a ladder that lead up to the roof.

With hopes that I could still catch whoever or whatever I saw earlier I opened the hatch that lead to the gravel covered roof.

Popping my head up I looked around, meeting eyes with a girl sitting about fifteen feet away, leaning back against the four-foot wall that surrounded the roof, a cigarette dangling out of her mouth as we stared at each other.

She looked familiar, mousy face, frizzy hair and a splash of freckles around her nose and below her eyes.

Wait.
That’s Amy Dallon aka Panacea.

After successfully avoiding her and Glory Girl all week to try and not draw attention to myself I’m the idiot that followed one of them onto a rooftop.

“Well, it looks like I’m interrupting your personal time, so I’ll just leave you alone. Bye.” And before I could start descending the ladder she called out.

“How did you even find the way up here?” Quizzically, like it was hard to jiggle that cheap door knob until its lock gave up…although maybe it’s not normal for students here to break into rooms with nondescript doors looking for ways to get to the roof.

Shit, maybe some of Winslow rubbed off on me, now that’s a scary thought.

“Uh…” like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You know what, I don’t want to know.”

“Can you really talk when you had to find and get past the locked door as well?”

She turned slightly pink at that “I’m a tinker, simple locks like that can’t really stop me.”

And now we’re back to vague answers.

“Are you just gonna stay on the ladder or what? It’s weird just talking to a head sticking out of the ground.”

“I just came up here because I saw something move up here and my curiosity got the better of me. Now that it’s sated, I’ll just leave you” and then I gestured vaguely at her “to your smoke break or whatever you were doing.”

As I moved to go back down the ladder I heard her yell “Wait!”

“Um, yes?”

She seemed torn about something, indecision clouding her face “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure?” Holding myself up on this ladder was beginning to get annoying.

“You’re a transfer student, right?” then she kind of floundered “How are you liking Arcadia so far?”

“Well, that’s two questions for you, but yes I am a transfer student, and it seems great so far. A lot less gang violence here than back at Winslow.” Was it mean to hope that mentioning gang violence would discourage her from asking anymore questions?

“Oh, uh…that’s good.”

Then we were back to staring at each other.

She looked like she wanted to say more but was holding herself back.

“Alright” I sighed, deciding that I might as well figure out what she wanted to say I hauled myself onto the roof from the open hatch, then walked over and sat beside her, leaning against the short wall as well.
“Now what is the most famous medical tinker doing on the roof of her high school, smoking cancer sticks?” Was that too harsh?

Amy’s face relaxed slightly at me not leaving but pinched when I brought up her cigarettes. Maybe a little harsh.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t be another one of those people that tell me ‘those’ll kill you y’know’.”

I smiled at the change in attitude, sarcastic suited her more than meek and floundering “Oh yes, because I definitely have the right to tell a bio-tinker about what she’s doing to her body. I’m sure you have no idea what cigarettes do to you.”

She snorted at that, taking a drag of her cigarette then blowing the smoke to her side, away from me “Do you want to know why I smoke?”

I looked at her, wondering where the anti-social girl that Ruth and her friends described to me when talking about the Dallon sisters. They told me that the only person she ever willingly talks to is her sister Victoria, and she seems to be trying really hard to talk to me.

Why would she try to get me into a conversation? As awkwardly as the attempt was, it was still an attempt.

A voice in the back of my head told me ‘probably because she recognizes you’ which would be not good.

It wouldn’t be surprising, as a bio-tinker she could probably recognize my musculature, or the pores on my skin, or some other kind of bullshit thing her powers could use to identify me.

Because powers could be bullshit like that.

But I pushed back those thoughts, looking back at her as she waited for my response.

“Alright, feel free to enlighten me” was said with my best smirk.

Amy looked at her lit cigarette “I smoke because it calms me down.” She took another drag finishing it off “I can feel the smoke going into my lungs, filling up all my alveoli, the oxygen being separated and taken into my bloodstream with the nicotine” smoke trailed out of her mouth as she spoke “I feel the drug get into my system, spread throughout my body, helping me focus even more on my deconstruction and analysis of my body’s processes.” She flicked away the cigarette butt “then I exhale, feeling the carbon dioxide mix with the smoke as it is forced out of my lungs, leaving traces of tar.” Then she pulled out her lighter, a cheap plastic one you can get for a dollar and started lighting it on and off.

“So, it’s meditative?” I thought about it, and I guess that would be kind of relaxing, especially for someone that knows the human body like this girl.

She stared into the flame made by her lighter “Yeah, when the day starts becoming too much for me I just get away and smoke a cigarette.” Then she smirked “there’s probably a healthier way to calm down, but who can say no to Panacea when she goes into a gas station and asks for a pack of cigarettes?”

But I latched onto that first part, still looking at her “does school become too much for you for a lot?”

Amy let the fire go out and put the lighter back in her pocket “only when Vicky drags me to the
cafeteria for lunch.” She looked down at the gravel “I don’t do crowds well.”

“So, Panacea’s biggest weakness is mobs of teenagers, I think I can sympathize with that.”

She let out a bark of laughter at that “Please, I saw you confront those guys in the middle of the cafeteria on Monday, you aren’t the kind of person to be concerned with crowds.”

I blushed a bit at that, I hadn’t thought that had been so noticeable, but for Amy to have seen it, that probably means that a lot of people had watched that short…conversation go down.

So much for not drawing attention to myself.

“I didn’t think people really watched that happen.” Looking away from her as I said it, trying to downplay it.

“There are actually quite a few rumors going around about you too.” And I could hear the tease in her voice.

I covered my face with my hands, feeling my face heat up a bit and suppressing a groan “are you sure they’re about me? I don’t think I’ve been here long enough for rumors to be about me.” What kind of rumors could have started about me before being here for even a week?

A couple seconds passed in silence before I took my face out of my hands to look at Amy again, and she had that floundering, hesitant look on her face again.

I broke the silence first, saying “Sorry, I don’t think I ever introduced myself properly to you. I’m Taylor Hebert, if those rumors didn’t come with my name” and I reached out with my right hand to shake.

Her eyes widened as she saw my hand before taking it “Amy Dallon, or Panacea as you probably know me.” Without letting go of my hand she twisted it slightly so that my palm was facing upward “look, I’ve been trying to work up the courage to ask but this is really the only proof I need” and she pointed at the long scar on my palm.

The scar that I gained the night Aisha almost got kidnapped so long ago. It was fading after a year but still easily seen under the sun’s light.

Why would that be…shit, she’s performed surgery on me and saw my hands without my gloves on.

I tensed up, snatching my hand away, and made to stand up and leave before Amy started to frantically wave her hands in front of her saying “This isn’t a threat or anything! It’s just that…I’ve well…wanted to talk to you since that night but I didn’t know when I’d be able to and then you transferred here and I recognized your eyes but I didn’t know how to approach you because you’re either sitting with your friends or blazing through the halls to get to your next class so I haven’t had the chance to approach you but then you just popped up in my secret smoking spot and I didn’t know what to say and now we’re here and you think I outed you and I kind of did but I promise I haven’t told anyone else and-“ I slapped my hand over her mouth, her face getting redder and redder as she spoke either from air deprivation or embarrassment.

“Breathe Amy” was all I said as she turned redder while taking a deep breath.

As she let it out she said “Sorry, I just want you to know that I won’t tell anyone. Really, even if New Wave doesn’t have secret identities, I know we’re really not supposed to bring this kind of stuff up.” And she sounded really genuine and sincere when she said it.
I took a deep breath to calm down.

“Alright, I believe you” then another thing that she said registered “but why would you want to talk to me?”

She gathered herself “Well I-” and then the class bell rung out through the school signifying the end of one class and the passing period beginning “damnit” was all Amy said, deflating at the sound.

Now she just looked sad and defeated, turning in on herself and looking even smaller than she actually was.

I stood up and held my hand out to her in an offer to help her up, she took it and when she was on her feet I noticed just how short she was, the top of her head barely coming up to my chin.

Shaking off that distracting thought I took out my personal cell phone and started making a new contact “What’s your number Amy?”

I heard a choking sound and looked up from my phone to see Amy looking at me incredulously with a pink blush starting to spread on her face.

“What? If you do want to talk it would be easier for us to text each other and set up an actual meeting time” then I gestured around the roof “unless you want to wait for the next time I catch a glimpse of you on the roof and decide to follow you up here?”

With a growl she snatched the phone out of my hand and started typing on it.

“Fine, there” she handed my phone back to me “now let’s go before I’m late to my next class, my study hall just ended and now I have to go to my calculus class.”

She made her way over to the hatch and began climbing down the ladder.

As I stood next to it waiting to climb down I asked, “Why are they making a tinker take a math class?”

The only answer I got was a scoff as I made my way down and saw Amy standing in the small room with her arms crossed.

“Why haven’t you left yet? I thought you didn’t want to be late to your class?”

“I have to wait for no one to be in the hall so that no one sees me leave a room that students aren’t allowed in” was what she said pointedly to me.

I shrugged my shoulders “Fair enough” and I moved to lean on one of the walls of the barren room, the ladder the only real thing of note.

I saw Amy shuffle her feet as she waited, again looking like she wanted to say something.

“Is there anything else you wanted to talk about while we wait?”

“Oh, nothing…just that…can I see your hand again?”

Well not a terrible request, I held out my scarred hand to her “Sure, can I ask why?”

As she took it she spoke “Scars are interesting, I like to try and figure out what made them if I have the chance.” Amy held my hand palm up, lightly tracing her fingers over it while mumbling to herself “dull blade…high pressure…” she rubbed the tips of her fingers across the scar that
went all the way across my hand for a few minutes, mumbling and tracing all the while before looking up at me, an annoyed look on her face “You had better have been in a desperate situation to warrant grabbing the blade of a knife as tightly as you did to get an injury like this.”

And I was baffled that she was able to figure that out by just looking at a year-old scar before I remembered, powers are bullshit.

“Well, yes it was-” but then the class bell interrupted my defense.

Amy frowned at that, pointing a finger at me and saying “You’re telling me that story later” before abruptly turning around and walking out the door.

It was as I was walking back to my locker for my backpack that that entire situation really registered in my mind.

Panacea had wanted to talk with me since I spoke with her after fighting Lung, she also knows my civilian identity and I just asked for and received her number so that we could meet up and talk more.

What happened to my life that caused those series of events to occur?

Those kinds of thoughts only stopped once I got out of Arcadia’s gates and its faraday cage and heard my Camo Girl phone vibrate in my backpack.

My vigilante phone, not my PRT phone.

I started digging through my backpack as I made my way to the PRT pickup point.

Once I fished it out I smiled as I read the text.

“i got lctn of 2 of em, and wil hav SM lctn by tmro look frwd 2 it XD”

My Contact had some good news for me, looks like I’m gonna have a busy weekend.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed it!

No action this chapter sorry, but I did get Taylor into a small kerfuffle with Nazi boy 1, 2 and 3 who may return in a later chapter.

I want Amy and Taylor to hurry up and be friends, but they are both so awkward that I couldn't fit in some real bonding this chapter. I'm just gonna have to wait until next time Amy shows up.

I also want to give Ruth some more screen time as well, so I'll need to work on that too.

I'm also pushing back my update schedule a day because of life things so updates here will be on Sundays.
Chapter Summary

A normal talk between two Tinkers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

< Armsmaster >

March 25th, 2011 (Friday)

--One day after Taylor received a message from her Contact--

Walking back into my lab after a patrol always leaves me with mixed feelings.

This is because being able to come straight back after a patrol means that said patrol was an uneventful outing, so I wasted the past few hours only showing that the PRT is still looking after the same territory. Something that any other Protectorate cape could have done while I could have been Tinkering. The only good thing about those patrols was that people saw that I was still watching the city.

But now that I’m back to my lab, I can continue on my most recent projects with minimal interruptions.

As I walk in, the motion sensors begin to turn all the lights on and wake up my computer station. As soon as my armor is off and on its stand, I begin pulling up and beginning to edit the schematics for a new halberd design, I still needed to finish compressing the many components for the nanothorn, but my train of thought was derailed when the phone app on my computer began ringing.

‘Dragon’ was on the caller ID and I answered as a matter of habit, we’ve both been busy for the past month and haven’t had a good chance to talk.

“Hello Dragon”

“Good evening Colin, I’m not interrupting anything am I?” Came Dragon’s faint accent over the speakers of my computer.

“I was about to start working on my nanothorn project, but I can still talk. Thanks again for letting me use your alloy and ballistic gel processes, Camo Girl’s costume will be greatly improved now that I can use yours instead of having to resort to more common materials.”

“That’s actually one of the reasons I called today, I’ve been curious as to how her and Bones’s presence have been received by everyone.”

I frowned in thought “If you’re asking about the Wards, after the initial shock of learning about Camo Girl’s power they seemed to have accepted her and Bones, it’s been much smoother than when Shadow Stalker joined.” I frowned more deeply at the memory of Shadow Stalker’s unwillingness to even speak with the other Wards during her first few weeks.
“I remember you mentioning that Clockblocker, Psyche and Kid Win were…a bit intimidated during their first interactions with Camo Girl.”

I grunted “Psyche and Clockblocker seem to be coming around, although Kid Win talks to me as if their spar together was traumatizing, which I have trouble understanding.” I finished editing my schematic and got up to get the nanothorn’s processor from a workbench across the room, returning to my desk and turning on my plasma cutter’s power source and grabbing a screwdriver. Right now, it was the size of a football, I needed to make it smaller before I could effectively add it to a halberd.

“Do you mean those sparring sessions that you're using as a baseline for you combat predicting software?”

I stopped unscrewing a component “That was not the sole purpose of the exercise, the Director wants Camo Girl to try and train the Wards in basic self-defense.” I went back to dismantling “It would be a waste to not use the opportunity for research material on how to react to combatants trained in hand to hand combat.”

Saying this caused something like a huff to come from Dragon, but it might have just been static or a loud breath.

“Well I do appreciate that you’re letting me assist you in its development I found the videos to be quite enlightening.”

After putting down my screwdriver I recalled blurring the faces of the Wards before sending the videos to Dragon before picking up the plasma cutter.

“I will always take your assistance when I can get it Dragon, are you done tracking down that new Slaughterhouse?” The fact that groups of villains kept donning the name to maintain King’s Slaughterhouse legacy still baffles and infuriates me, and only one of the many reasons she’s been so busy recently.

“They’ve all been taken in and are in the process of being sentenced to the birdcage.” And I could hear the undercurrent of anger in her tone.

The villains’ sentence is no doubt being expedited by the fact that they attacked city hall as their first action after taking the Slaughterhouse name.

But there is no need to bring that up, Dragon no doubt already felt guilty of not being ordered to intervene until the body count rose to over thirty people.

Distract her “It’s good to speak to you again, I know how you don’t like to be distracted when you get to personally track down villains.”

“…yes, distractions.” Then silence for a moment “I must say though, watching Camo Girl fight the Wards just seems to show the differences in experience. Although that might be unfair as only Aegis and Shadow Stalker have had the need for any close combat skills during their time as capes. Do you mind if I borrow your monitors?”

“Feel free, I’m not using it currently.”

In my peripherals is saw Dragon take control of two monitors and bring up all seven videos along of the Wards fights along with one extra video window as well, when I finished cutting a component I focused on this extra window, it was Uber and Leet’s Mortal Kombat video.
“What are you showing me Dragon?” It wouldn’t be like her to bring up all these videos to have me watch them without purpose.

“I remember you mentioning in an e-mail that you had a hard time getting a read on what Camo Girl is thinking whenever you speak with her. On a related note, have you watched these fights in detail yet Colin?”

“Not yet, I’m still fine tuning the analysis portion of my prediction software. Why do you ask?”

“I was curious to see if you noticed the differences in how Camo Girl approaches fighting different individuals.”

After thinking for a moment “I don’t believe that anything in particular has stuck out to me, what have you noticed?”

In lieu of answering me, Dragon started seven of the eight videos. The first fight from the Mortal Kombat video, where Camo Girl was forced to take on a Merchant thug as the first ‘stage’ of the tournament, and every Ward fight except Sophia’s.

“Notice how she starts each fight by probing their defenses.” And it was true, I had noticed how Taylor had started each fight with a Ward by circling them while testing their defenses with some punches and kicks, but I hadn’t noticed that that’s how she started the first fight of the Tournament.

“Yes, she was trying to get a feel for how the Wards would react to getting in a fist fight, except for Shadow Stalker who I’m under the impression she has already fought before that day.”

“But why would she start fighting the Merchant like that?” Looking at the rest of her fights during the tournament she pulled up three more videos on my third monitor and playing them “she is remarkably less cautious during her bouts directly after that, with the ABB and Empire members, only becoming cautious again after Uber manages to counter her first few strikes and grapples. I think it’s because she was still figuring out her situation during that first fight.”

I only responded after watching the videos “I see that, but you mentioned my inability to read her. Why?”

“Because you mentioned that her face and voice usually remain almost unnaturally passive and calm during interactions with yourself and the other Wards, unless she is very passionate about the subject.” She played the argument between Camo Girl and Shadow Stalker “other than this instance she seems to have her emotions under her complete control, uncommon for a girl her age.”

Except for when she had that argument with Carlos.

But instead of saying that I asked, “So what are you getting at Dragon?”

“I hypothesize that she merely internalizes her emotions until she has what she believes to be a proper outlet for them.” Then she played Camo Girl’s brutal takedowns of the ABB and Empire members again as well as her quick fight with Dennis, where she slammed him into the ground after he said something aggravating to her, although the exact wording escaped me now. “I’m assuming that her more reckless fighting style in the tournament was due to her frustration and anger at being forced to participate while Clockblocker was pushing her buttons, as he…has a history of doing.”

That sounded like a different Ward’s mindset, “Shadow Stalker has shown similar actions when she worked as a vigilante.”
“…yes, but Camo Girl most likely represses most of her emotional responses, not just her anger and frustration.”

I gave myself a moment to ponder that idea, “It would explain why Gallant has a hard time ‘seeing’ her emotions…”

“I feel like the mental suppression can be attributed as a branch of her power, whatever it may be.” But there was something in her tone that I couldn’t place.

“Ah, well” I hesitated, “I suppose that could be possible” but it did make me curious as to how Camo Girl might have picked up that skill.

“I realize that the specifics of her powers are being kept under lock and key, but who in the PRT and Protectorate are in the know regarding what her powers are? I only ask because my personal security clearance only allowed me access to a vague analysis of her abilities.”

It’s a shame that I can’t directly tell her that Camo Girl doesn’t have any parahuman ability to speak of, but Piggot was adamant about that only those that they couldn’t afford to hide it from should be told, and I am still unsure about her true intentions regarding Camo Girl.

“The Director has only informed the four Founders and Chief Director Costa-Brown of Camo Girl’s powers at present, although I believe she intends to tell the other Directors soon. Otherwise any PRT or Protectorate cape will get the normal field report when looking up her powers, with the excuse of inconclusive power testing for why there are little specific details about it. The Director wishes to remain tight lipped about it.” For whatever reason.

“And have any of them commented on it? Forgive me if I’m asking too many questions, but I’m curious as to what kind of power Camo Girl might have to warrant such secrecy.”

Seeing that we appeared to be done watching the videos I picked up the plasma cutter and got back to work.

“I’ve only spoken to Hero recently, but he seemed to be excited to have her after learning about her powers. He wants to see what she does during her time in the Wards but that was only mentioned in passing. I’ve shared no correspondence with the others, so I can’t say that I know their thoughts on the matter.”

After a noncommittal hum from Dragon we lapsed into a comfortable silence as I continued to take apart the nanothorn’s processor.

It was only after I had finished doing that and began organizing the pieces that Dragon spoke again, “And what are your teammates’ opinions on the two new Wards? I’d imagine they would be happy that two young capes are now under their wing instead of fighting alone in the streets.”

“You’d be correct, Miss Militia in particular appreciated that both of them decided to join, although she was less enthused about some of the agreements we made with Camo Girl regarding what they would do before her and Bones publicly joined.”

“Agreements?”

Damn, another thing I’m not allowed to tell her. I shouldn’t have brought it up.

“Yes, Camo Girl had some…stipulations that needed to be met before she and Bones would consider joining, and she was persuasive enough to get the Director to agree to some, but not all of them. Although only Protectorate and designated PRT agents are cleared for that information.”
“I see…”

Once I finished organizing the parts I brought my full attention to the conversation.

“Dragon, this is an unusual amount of questions regarding the recruitment of two Wards. Is there a reason for that?”

A moment, then “…I’m that transparent huh?”

“The fact that I noticed should be answer enough.”

A sigh, then “Forgive me, but as an outside observer, this is a most unusual situation. Two young vigilantes, one with over a year of successful, solo experience, decide to join the Wards after an inopportune run-in with the city’s most dangerous villain, but only agree to join if their own terms are met seems fortuitous at best but incredibly suspicious at worst.”

I can understand those kind of misgivings, “I agree, which is why I have been closely monitoring any kind of communication that either of them have been participating in since they finished signing papers.”

An exasperated sigh this time, “So you’ve bugged them?”

“It’s all been within my rights as leader of Protectorate Branch ENE. But either way, Bones only uses her phone to text Camo Girl and now Vista and Clockblocker, while Camo Girl only communicates with Bones and this supposed contact that she’s refused to tell us anything specific about. Something about how they ‘don’t like to be noticed by the wrong people’.”

“Well I’m glad that they don’t appear to be a spy for any of the gangs then, but I still have another reason to be curious about this situation.”

“And that is?”

“The fact that you requested the formula for the new ballistic gel I told you I had finished a couple of months ago and the composition of a specific alloy that I use for my mechs, both as ‘personal favors’ so that you could use them to make Camo Girl’s new costume.”

I opened my mouth to defend my actions, but she interrupted me.

“That’s not something you would do for anyone, let alone a supposedly normal Ward, especially since you appear to be outfitting her for combat even though the PRT almost exclusively uses primary Thinkers in on base support roles. The entire situation surrounding Camo Girl is unprecedented, and although I know I will not be told directly the reasons for it, I still wish to try and figure out why that is.”

I thought about that for a moment “I have no reason to stop you from asking questions I suppose, does this mean that you already have a theory about what…precisely Camo Girl’s power is?” Maybe Dragon could figure out what’s going through Piggot’s mind right now.

“I have a few guesses based on the observations I’ve made so far; If you don’t mind, could I bounce my ideas off of you?”

“I’ll try and answer what I can.” Just two Tinkers bouncing ideas off each other.

But before Dragon could ask her first question there was a knock at the door of my lab. Strange, I wasn’t expecting anyone, and if something important had happened I would have
received a message on my computer.

When I opened the door to see who it was I believe the phrase ‘speak of the devil’ was very applicable to the situation. Camo Girl, fully in her costume, balaclava and all, was standing in front of me with a military bearing that, mixed with her height, would lead most people to assume that she was much older than she truly was.

“Camo Girl, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Good evening Armsmaster, I’ve come to take my gun back.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure how I feel about this chapter, it was one of the hardest ones I had to write (because writing Armsmaster was more difficult than I expected) and I didn't really like it as I wrote it. As I edited it though it really grew on me, but whether or not that's because it is a good chapter or just Stockholm syndrome will probably be decided by you all.

That being said, I am looking forward to next chapter, although I have no idea if it's gonna be a two parter or not, because I'm really bad at estimating how long a chapter will be before I actually write it. But unless it's over 7-8k words I'll probably just post it as a single chapter.

Stay tuned and I'll see you all next week!
CG encounters M, BB and HW

Chapter Summary

Meeting new people is fun right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 26th, 2011 (Saturday)

-One day after Armsmaster’s talk with Dragon-

“I can’t believe he didn’t give me back my gun.”

“I know it sucks, but didn’t you say that the PRT were all about making the Wards as unscary as possible?” was Riley’s, no, Bones’ easy reply.

I glared at my cell phone, hoping that she felt it even if she was a mile or two away.

“Yes, but you’re supposed to side with me on these things, and besides, we’re still not technically Wards yet, so I was hoping that fact would get me some leniency and get me my gun back.” I didn’t pout, because that was childish, I was just disappointed in Armsmaster.

“Didn’t you steal that gun from a Merchant?” and I could hear the smirk through the phone.

I let put an exasperated sigh “What happened to that sweet little girl I saved from muggers in an alley? She never sassed me. She was just happy to be there, fighting crime. Not nitpicking about how I try and procure firearms.” I heard her giggle and smiled “is this because you’ve been hanging out with Clockblocker? I’m gonna have words with him later about being a bad influence on you.”

I glanced over the edge of the rooftop I was on to look at the run-down office building across the street for any activity. Mush was in there somewhere.

“Where’s this attitude when we’re hanging with the Wards? You should complain and be sarcastic around them, they might be less intimidated by you if you weren’t always all ‘I eat people who annoy me for breakfast’ all the time.”

I was a little offended by that “I’m not like that all the time.”

“Clock keeps telling me about how sweet you act at the hospital, but you’re always glaring at someone whenever you’re at HQ.”

“That’s not even true” I huffed “I only glare at Stalker, I try and keep my face perfectly neutral whenever I’m talking to anyone else.”

“I think Clock mentioned something about a ‘resting bitch face’” A beat “But he also told me not to tell you that so…”

“That’s it, you’re not allowed to hang out with Clock anymore.”
“C’mon CG, Clock doesn’t have a lot of friends, if I didn’t hang out with him he’d just get bonely.”

Aaaand that’s where I drew the line. If Clockblocker put the idea of puns in her head he is so dead when I get back to HQ.

Suppressing my groan, I quickly changed the subject, “Alright Bones, let’s review the plan for tonight.”

Under her breath I heard her say “…was that one no good? Darn.” Then she took a deep breath. “Your Contact gave you the locations of Squealer, Mush and Skidmark and they are currently all staying at separate safe houses throughout their territory. The plan for tonight is to apprehend all three, pretty much destroying the gang since they won’t have any capes left.”

Good, she remembered. “This will be your first time working solo Bones, you sure that you’re up for it?”

She blew a raspberry into her phone, “Only solo until the PRT decide it’s too dangerous, the van is barely a block away from Squealer’s workshop.” With Assault and Battery, along with some PRT officers, waiting for any sign of trouble that they think Bones might not be able to handle.

I looked two blocks down the road, to the alley where my own little support van was parked. Miss Militia and Aegis on call for any kind of excessive trouble.

“Yeah…we both knew a completely solo operation would be a tough sell, you still have the earpiece, right?” I felt through my pocket to touch my own.

“Yeppers, I’ll turn it on and check in once we finish our call.”

“Good, remember that we’ll both be on separate channels until we finish, then we’ll rendezvous near Skidmark’s place when we’re done.”

“Yeah! Right after I take out Squealer and her cars I’ll be right there. You better not keep me waiting!”

Then I heard the telltale click that told me she hung up. At least she was excited, and at least Battery was there to help out if she got into trouble, I’m still on the fence about Assault’s dependability. But either way, Bones is against Squealer, not Lung, and has the element of surprise as well.

She’ll be fine.

I took deep breath.

Back to what I need to do now.

I pulled the earpiece out of my pocket, turned it on and lifted my balaclava so that I could put it in my ear.

“This is Camo Girl, checking in.”

“This is Miss Militia, I assume this means that you’re done talking to Bones?”

I’d been introduced to Miss Militia right before we left HQ tonight, and she did not seem to be a fan of Bones and I starting out alone tonight. But Piggot’s orders are absolute to the cape so her complaints weren’t voiced, just heavily expressed through her eyes, which is actually pretty
I thought it would be more awkward to meet the hero I pretty much based my look on, but she hasn’t addressed that fact yet and I’m certainly not going to bring it up to her myself.

“That’s correct, she should be starting soon.” I looked at the office building one more time, noting the windows with faint lights showing in the darkness before I started making my way down the fire escape to get back to street level. “I’m heading to the building now, and just like we agreed I’ll leave my mike on for the duration of the op.”

I heard Aegis try and suppress a snort over the radio at me calling it an op, but I ignored him. Calling it an op sounds so much better than ‘breaking into an old office building to try and beat up a garbage man’, but maybe Bones is wearing off on me, she’d be all for calling this an op… actually she’d probably be fine with either now that I thought about it.

“Good, if you think that you need assistance, use the codeword ‘short sword’ and Aegis will be in the building in less than a minute.”

I was looking down the street to make sure there was no one else around before crossing toward the office building.

As I approached the front entrance I walked through the broken glass door, being careful to avoid any glass on the floor, and began making my way through the building. I heard a crash from the floor above me and began following a couple signs to a staircase.

I exited the staircase through a doorway and heard some yelling at the other end of the hallway, and I carefully quickened my pace to find out what was happening.

I pulled out one of my extendable batons as I got closer, the yelling had subsided, but I began to hear the sounds of a fight.

It was only when I was within about fifteen feet of where I believed the commotion was that the wall in front of me exploded outwards and a large pile of something hit the opposite wall of the hallway and crumpled onto the floor.

I jumped back in reaction to the explosive entrance of…a pile of trash? A man, short, with scrawny limbs and an unattractive beer belly staggered out of the pile of trash that was now on the floor. Stumbling and swaying like he’d just been hit by a truck.

The sound of crumbling drywall directed my attention back to the hole in the wall where I saw said truck.

An absolute mountain of a man was stepping through the hole, covered head to toe in a skin tight blue bodysuit that showed off what looked like photoshopped muscles, except this was real life and this six-and-a-half-foot giant had biceps bigger than my thighs and the most defined six pack I had ever seen. He apparently also had some kind of diamond theme going on as well, as there was light blue diamond print on parts of his costume and a large crystal on the forehead area of his mask.

His muscles had to be some power bullshittery or I’d eat my jacket. This guy was more ripped than Brian, and Brian was either working out or throwing people out of clubs as a bouncer all day every day.

Buff Blue stared at who I assumed was Mush, who was still trying to get his feet under him, for a moment before noticing me standing in the hallway as well.
“Camo Girl?” Was asked in an oddly flat, questioning tone.

“…That’s me.” And then I looked back at Mush to see him almost recovered from being thrown through a wall “You want to take care of this first?”

I ignored whatever question Miss Militia asked over the radio to direct my attention back to the villain.

Mush must have noticed that both of us had turned our attention to him, because he jumped slightly before falling back into the trash pile, where these weirdly organic…tentacles? Veins? Spread throughout the trash and detritus he used to make his body.

Before I could take my first step toward the trash man, Buff Blue had already dashed forward, arm already winding up for an amateurish haymaker. Said haymaker had enough force behind it to send Mush through another wall and out of the hallway.

“Not just a blue bitch, but the camo bitch too?” A pillar of junk burst through the wall and sent Buff Blue flying back into the room the two had originally came from as the rest of Mush sloughed back into the hallway, looking to be over seven feet tall, bigger than he had been. He’d probably absorbed the wall and whatever else had been in the room he just got bashed into, and he turned to look at me, asking “I thought Lung killed your ass a couple weeks ago?”

I probably should have had something witty to say in response to that, but instead of that I extended the baton in my hand, then lunged for the area of the trash that I had heard Mush’s voice come from. Because maybe I can knock him out if I hit him in the face hard enough? Even if it has to go through his trash barrier.

The hit must have done something, because the stream of curses that followed my baton hitting him probably wasn’t faked. But I could have gone without getting sent flying by the retaliatory garbage arm punch. Luckily his arm was squishier than not, so it didn’t hurt that much.

The wall I was currently flying toward probably wouldn’t be as soft though, so I braced myself for impact but was instead caught in the arms of Buff Blue before I could make another hole in the wall.

What a nice guy.

I spoke up as he put me back down, “We need to stop him from getting any bigger.”

“Sounds logical.” Which might have sounded sarcastic if it wasn’t for the flat monotone he spoke in.

Mush had just tried to lunge at us, and Blue charged as well to meet the Merchant cape halfway. Instead of trying to punch Mush through another wall, like I thought he would have, Blue started to rip the larger pieces of trash off of Mush, starting with broken chairs and ceiling tiles that were currently making up the villain’s torso. Mush began to thrash at the cape, but his hits just seemed to slide off of the larger cape.

Miss Militia’s voice cut through the noise to say, “Camo Girl, if you do not respond soon we are coming in to help. What is happening?”

I responded without taking my eyes away from the brutal mangling that Buff Blue was putting Mush through “A cape in a blue bodysuit was already engaging Mush when I got here, and he is currently physically tearing the trash off of Mush.” Another moment of me watching Mush get ripped apart “And the guy’s doing it really easily, probably a Brute.”
Mush, after losing about half his trash, probably decided that he wasn’t gonna win this fight and covered Blue in the rest of his trash before making a break for it. Unfortunately for Mush he chose to run in my direction, I must have been forgotten in the wake of the Blue Mountain that was just manhandling him, so I tackled him to the ground and got him into a choke hold, tightening my grip around his neck as he struggled to get away from me. But he left all his trash with blue, and I was easily stronger than the scrawny druggy.

I’d been holding my breath as I tightened the choke hold, but when he finally stopped squirming and fell unconscious in my arms I took a deep breathe and relaxed. Or I would have if I didn’t immediately want to vomit from how badly Mush smelled.

I threw him off me as quickly as I could to get away from the smell of unwashed man and rotting…something, scrambling further down the hallway on all fours back towards Blue who was making his way to me after getting out of the trash pile.

He held a hand out to help me off the ground as he said, “Your help is appreciated, ripping off his armor was indeed the best course of action.”

As I took his hand and got up, Miss Militia spoke up through my earpiece again “Camo Girl, what’s happening now?”

I looked up to meet Blue’s eyes and gestured towards the downed villain “Well, Mush is knocked out. Do you want to wait outside with me until the PRT come to pick him up?” I turned to walk toward Mush, reaching into one of my pockets for some zip-ties before turning back to him “Oh right” I stuck out my hand “I’m Camo Girl, but you already knew that. Can I get your name?”

His body language showed surprise “Sorry, this is the first time that I’ve met a friendly cape. I’m not sure what the proper manners are for this kind of thing.” He took my hand in one of his pan sized ones “I’m going by Browbeat, it is a pleasure to work with you.”

Miss Militia decided to give me some info on the new cape, saying “Browbeat has been seen taking on Empire and Merchant forces over the past few weeks. He recently won a fight against Victor and Othala. A probable hero vigilante, but we don’t have anything solid on his loyalties so be careful.”

I gave him another once over before turning back toward Mush, zip-ties in hand.

As I tied up the unconscious trash cape I decided to keep the conversation going, “What do you mean by what you just said? With the advice and ‘ripping off his armor was the best course of action’?”

His voice sounded nonplussed as I strung Mush’s legs together “I assumed that when you said ‘we need to stop him from getting bigger’ you meant that making him smaller would be the preferred alternative” a beat “I find it much easier to fight when pursuing a reasonable and effective endeavor. I appreciated the advice as I thought I would just have to find a way through his defenses, as opposed to ripping them away, which proved much more effective.”

…Well he certainly knows how to take initiative I’ll give him that.

I stood back up from my stooped position over Mush and turned back to face Browbeat.

“What are you doing here anyway Browbeat?” I held up a hand to forestall his quick response “And if you’re here specifically for Mush, how did you know he was here?” If he beat Victor and Othala, he might just be looking for capes to beat.

He only responded after I put my hand down, “I asked a Merchant I found in an alleyway where I
“I wish to figure out my limitations” he held out his hand, opening and closing it as his forearm muscles grew and shrank at a greater rate than normal flexing would create. “I wish to know what exactly my powers are and find out what I want to do from there.” Browbeat looked back at me “Why are you here tonight?”

“I need Mush out of the picture” I looked up from Mush back to Browbeat “This isn’t exactly how I had tonight planned, but I can’t complain.” I hesitated, because I didn’t really want to ask, but Mush smelled really bad “Browbeat? Would you mind carrying Mush outside the building for me? I want the PRT to be able to pick him up from the front lawn.” Mentally crossing my fingers, hoping he would agree.

Now it was Browbeats turn to look at Mush, “I believe I can do that.” Then he stooped down to pick up Mush and threw the cape over his broad shoulders like a sack of potatoes.

I suppressed my sigh of relief, I really didn’t want to have to burn my jacket after tonight.

“Thank you, if you’d follow me.” And I started making my way toward the stairwell at the front of the building.

Browbeat spoke up as we reached the ground floor “I would rather be gone before the PRT get here though, I wish to-” But I held up my hand again to stop him mid-sentence, because as I walked through the doorway of the staircase I looked through the broken front door and saw the glint of a metal mask in an alley across the street.

A metal wolf mask that was being worn by a large, blonde man.

Shit. That’s Hookwolf.

I saw the man’s head twitch in my direction, luckily, I was only halfway out of the staircase’s doorway, so he most likely hasn’t seen Browbeat yet, and if what Miss Militia said about him beating Victor and Othala was true then Hookwolf would not be pleased to see him.

I spoke quietly, “Hookwolf is across the street in an alleyway, stay hidden or run away Browbeat. The Protectorate should be here soon, but I don’t like our odds in a straight fight.

“Hookwolf is across the street?”

“What are you going to do?” And he finally had some emotion in that question, as opposed to the
steady monotone he’s been maintaining ever since we started talking to each other.

“Distract him until people in his weight class get here.” And then I started calmly walking out of the building, leaving Browbeat in the staircase as I walked across broken glass and other detritus onto the front lawn of the building, Hookwolf deciding to meet me halfway as he stepped out of the alley.

“You weren’t the person I was expecting girly. But I’m not one to complain about unexpected meetings.” And I could hear the cocky grin on his face.

I stopped at the sidewalk, leaving the twenty-foot street between us.

“Aegis here, in position to attack whenever necessary.”

“I’ll be in position on a roof in seconds to provide cover fire.” I heard a slight strain in her voice “Velocity is already going to help at Squealer’s workshop. Armsmaster is on his way here but won’t be here for another three minutes at the earliest. Keep him talking for as long as you can, use the codeword if you feel that he is about to get violent and Aegis and I will jump in.”

Wait, what’s happening at Squealer’s shop that warrants another hero?

No, can’t get distracted right now, Hookwolf first, Bones later. She can take care of herself against the Merchants.

Back to Hookwolf, I hoped that I looked to be lost in thought, or maybe too scared to respond to him very quickly.

“I’m just as surprised to see you Hookwolf, what are you doing in Merchant territory?” I tried to sound confident and in control, but I was eerily reminded of the last time I spoke to a villain with a brute rating. I felt phantom aches and itches along my recently healed ribs.

“One of my boys called and told me he saw that big blue bastard wandering around the neighborhood, beating on Merchants” He stretched his arms out in a wide, theatrical manner “The boss told me to put the screws to him if I got the chance, so here I am” and twisted, screw shaped blades erupted from each of his palms “with screws in hand and no motherfucker to put ‘em in.”

I felt a shiver run down my spine at that, I didn’t know the extent of Browbeat’s powers, but the chances of him being able to fend of someone like Hookwolf were most likely slim to none.

“On the roof, on standby and ready to engage.”

I put my hands up in a calming motion “Sorry to tell you Hookwolf, but I haven’t seen anyone like that tonight. You wouldn’t happen to have seen Mush though?” I gestured behind me toward the building, not taking my eyes off the Nazi “I was supposed to meet him here and he rudely stood me up.”

A bark of laughter “No I can’t say I’ve seen any Merchant trash tonight” he gave me a once over “but I am surprised to see you out and about, I heard rumors that Lung took you out, or at least mangled you a bit.”

Glibly, I said, “I’m afraid the rumor of my death was an exaggeration.” There, quoting Mark Twain counted as a witty remark, right?

He laughed again before turning serious, “I heard a commotion coming from this building, if blue and Mush aren’t in there, then what was all that crashing about. You lying to me about something Girl?”
Damn it.

“I may have…thrown a few things when I realized Mush wasn’t in there.” I shrugged, hoping it looked as nonchalant as possible “But can you blame me? I’ve been waiting weeks to take him out, and the info I got was wrong so now I’m back to square one.”

C’mon, believe the lie.

His serious posture changed into something more relaxed while another laugh bubbled out of him. “Well aren’t you just a barrel of laughs.” He laughed some more at my nonplussed look “I’ve been hearing rumors about you for a year now, Kaiser seemed interested in your power for a bit, especially after you got that bone girl, but I personally didn’t know what to make of you.”

Hookwolf straightened up a bit, a less dangerous serious than before “But I can see the rage and hate in your eyes, and I’ve heard how you fight, you want to join the Empire? We can help you clean up Merchant trash and maybe even help you get some revenge for what Lung did to you.”

Even ignoring the fact that Hookwolf, known murderer and dog fighting entrepreneur, said he could see rage and hate in my eyes, he just tried to recruit me after I’d just spent the last year busting up drug dens for the police.

Honestly, I didn’t know whether to laugh or scream.

I heard Aegis’ incredulous voice on the radio “He’s trying to recruit you?”

That broke me out of my stupor, I doubt that laughing or yelling at Hookwolf would have ended well, best to be polite when turning down a living blender.

“I’ll have to decline, Nazis haven’t really been good to me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re one of them bleeding hearts?” He seemed exasperated “Or a Jew or something?”

“No…but let’s just say that me becoming a cape involved a Nazi with a knife and a dark alleyway.”

And he actually seemed put out by that, slouching his shoulders dramatically. “Well shit, I guess that would discourage recruitment.”

A beat.

I pointed down the sidewalk, “Well if that’s all, I’m just gonna head out then.”

Before I could turn I heard the sound of concrete being shattered “Now hold on there girly” I turned to face him, he had apparently stomped on the sidewalk to get my attention, creating a small crater at his feet. “I’m not done talking to you yet.”

I thought this had been going too easy. At least this is better than the whole Lung thing, but not having an excitable, super powered twelve-year-old probably helped to stop negotiations from breaking down earlier.

I paused mid step, then returned to my previous position, looking at Hookwolf across the street with my arms by my sides.

“Armsmaster is less than a minute away, keep him talking.”

“Alright” I gritted out “What do you want to talk about?”
He stretched his arms over his head, saying “I don’t like going to Kaiser empty handed after
taking time out of my day to investigate a dead end. Time is money, as the saying goes. So, if I
could tell him about your powers once I get back tonight, I could say that this outing was well
worth the time.” He started rotating his arms in circles now.

That sounds a bit foreboding.

“And why would I tell you about my powers after going almost a whole year without letting
anyone know?”

“You’re a good fighter, right? I punch you enough times I either get to see how your power works
first hand or hurt you enough that you just spill your guts to me.” He shrugged “No skin off my
nose either way since you don’t plan on joining the Empire.”

Well that would explain why he started stretching.

Wait, shit. He wants to get into a fist fight with me?

Thinking fast, I pulled one of my batons out of my pocket, looking at it thoughtfully.

“It’s times like these that I wish I had a short sword” I put it back in my pocket as I heard Aegis
reply ‘Roger’ in my ear. “I must warn you though” I saw Aegis flying full throttle at Hookwolf
from down the street, and Hookwolf’s eyes were still trained on me. Good. “I’ve been told that I
have a mean right hook.”

“Ha, I’m sure you do gir-” but he was interrupted by Aegis ramming into his face, fist first.

Aegis quickly retreated away from Hookwolf as blades exploded out of his body, then I saw Miss
Militia pop up from the roof of a random building and begin firing at him.

“Retreat Camo Girl, we’ll drive him off then meet you back at the van.”

Miss Militia didn’t have to tell me twice, my ribs and I would rather not have a repeat of the fight
with Lung.

I retreated back into the office building as I heard Armsmaster’s bike pull up and Hookwolf roar in
rage.

I motioned for Browbeat, who was still dutifully holding Mush’s unconscious body, to follow me
to a back entrance so that we could take the back alleys to the PRT van two blocks away.

“I appreciate you helping to take care of Hookwolf, but how did the Protectorate find us so
quickly?”

I half jogged out of the entrance and through the back alley “It’s a long story, do you want me to
take Mush so that you can go ahead and leave? You said that you didn’t want to meet any PRT,
so I can take him from here.”

I could here the fighting start heading down the street, the opposite direction of the van. Good.

I stopped in the middle of the alley to look at Browbeat and wait for his reply.

The fact that he was laying Mush onto the ground was answer enough.

“I would like to part here then. But is there any way that I may contact you after tonight, I would
like to meet with you soon to discuss some questions I have about being a parahuman.”
Oh buddy, you got the wrong girl if you want those kinds of questions answered, but I couldn’t find a reason to say no, “Sure, I can give you my number. Do you have a phone on you?”

“Yes” And he pulled a phone out from…somewhere on his skin-tight body suit.

I decided not to think too deeply about that.

I put my vigilante phone number in his contact list under CG and gave it back to him.

Browbeat thanked me and then headed off in the opposite direction.

I looked down at Mush’s body and sighed deeply.

“Well this day’s been a lot weirder than I thought it would be.”

I took a deep breath and braced myself as I threw Mush over my shoulders, he wasn’t heavy, but my eyes started watering due to the stench. Consciously breathing through my mouth, I started making my way to the van.

Now I just have to figure out what happened at Squealer’s place.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter done!

And we got to meet Browbeat and everyone’s favorite Nazi wolf/blender guy!

This was an interesting chapter to write but I’m undecided about how Hookwolf’s scene and character turned out.

And no more fighting Brutes for Taylor, she’s learned her lesson. Definitely.

Let me know what you guys thought of it, what I did well and what I can improve on.

Thanks for reading!
March 27th, 2011 (Sunday)

--One day after Merchant operation--

As I laid back on one of the couches in the Ward’s common room, I wondered why I had decided to plan the Merchant bust up the night before a day full of PRT and Protectorate meetings. Piggot, then some kind of PR meeting and finally a formal introduction to the Protectorate heroes with Riley.

I sighed, I could probably get the PR one rescheduled, but I doubt that would go over well, Piggot put them off until after I was done with the Merchants so I we could officially say I was done being a vigilante. But she only did that because I asked her to.

And now that was coming back to bite me in the ass.

I sighed again.

Missy seemed to have enough of my dramatics though, “Alright, I’ll bite. What’s got you sighing? I heard that last night ended pretty well, even with Hookwolf and Skidmark surprising both of you.”

Her and Riley were doing homework together on the couch opposite me, apparently, they had a few classes together in the middle school equivalent of Arcadia they went to.

“It was so awesome when Skidmark burst through the workshop in a monster truck!” Riley said excitedly, “even if he was supposed to be in a different part of the city, it was so cool!”

“They told me that one of the thugs near the workshop called Skidmark right when Riley burst through its front door and started skewering her vehicles.” I clarified for Missy, I was still a bit annoyed that Riley hadn’t taken the subtle approach to it and I’m sure Battery wasn’t too pleased as well. Apparently Assault had found it hilarious since Riley said that she heard him laughing on the radio all the way up until Skidmark burst in.

But Riley had the kind of power that could let her be more dramatic than practical, so I couldn’t fault her that much for it. I still plan on talking to her about it later though.

“Yeah! But he wasn’t that hard to take down.” Riley was vibrating in place, the same thing she always does when she can’t contain her excitement. “Once I found a way into the engine block on one of her vehicles all I had to do was fill it with spikes” she held out her hand and three bone spikes popped out of her palm, “and then it would stop working. All I had to do was make a large enough ‘vine’ that went all over her workshop and then I could break all of her vehicles at once.” And gave me that vicious grin that would have sent shivers down my spine if it weren’t attached to Riley, the girl that squealed whenever we saw a dog during our morning runs and wanted to be a hero with all of her being. “I also learned that putting the ‘vine’ in the floor or a wall makes it a lot harder to discover.”

I looked at her and smiled, “Yes Riley, you’re amazing and talented and the Protectorate was overreacting when they called Velocity in to help out, along with Battery and Assault jumping in because they assumed you couldn’t handle a surprise attack from Skidmark.
Her smile became much softer and she went back to her homework, “I’m glad that you still see it. None of the adults seem to think that.”

Saying that made Missy scoff, “You have no idea, I know that I can help out when we fight the more powerful villains in the city, but they always keep me away because it’s ‘too dangerous’” She frowned at the homework in her lap, “My age shouldn’t matter if I can make a real difference.”

I could sympathize with that, “Age is always going to be a problem, even if the Youth Guard doesn’t really have a foothold in the Bay, bureaucracy will stop anyone from being effective, even if it seems counterproductive especially for the Wards.” An alarm on my phone went off, I sighed again, “Not much else I can say that will make you feel better, sorry.” I got up from the couch and made for my room, I had a meeting with Piggot and needed to be in costume for it, not to mention the two meetings afterward.

I heard Missy sigh as I walked away, “Yeah, not many ways for kids to change the status quo.”

She was right, but a smart plan and a patient mind could go a long way to helping along some change.

I walked into the Director’s office quietly after being allowed in by her secretary, a small slip of a women with a soft face and severe eyes.

The Director was sitting at her desk, stacks of paper neatly placed in a semblance of order in front of her. She was looking at me with her hands folded on top of her desk.

“Good morning Director.”

“Good morning Camo Girl, I assume you got everything you wanted out of last night?”

The Director of the Parahuman Response Team east-North-East had a particular skill that made you question every decision you have ever made up to that point in your life and look for whatever you did wrong to put her in a sour mood.

The question wasn’t even spoken in a tone that would be considered overtly reprimanding, but something about her bearing, her facial features made me want to explain the reasons for all my actions up to this point.

I would never willingly let her know that’s what I thought of her though, so instead of spilling my guts I said, “It certainly wasn’t ideal, but it ended just as I had hoped. The Merchants have lost their leader and all of their capes. Now most of their thugs will scatter, the police will probably be able to catch some of them, but they’ll otherwise have to lay low or leave the city.” This should take care of a lot of the more rampant drug problems in the poorer parts of the city.

“You are correct, and we are currently working with BBPD to ensure that they don’t try anything foolish.” She took the top papers off one of the stacks on her desk, “I’ve already read the formal report from your debrief last night, but is there anything that you would like to discuss with me about what happened?”

She must have been fishing for something, she didn’t strike me as someone that asked meaningless questions. Director Piggot was too intelligent a woman to ask a question that didn’t have two or three hidden meanings.
“Hookwolf. And Browbeat I suppose since he was essentially the reason that Hookwolf showed up.” I folded my hands on my lap, mimicking the Director’s posture as best I could, “I assume you have something to say about that situation as a whole.”

The Director’s eyes returned to the paper, “You said that Browbeat was there to test the limits of his powers but refused to meet any PRT personal when given the choice.” She looked back up at me, “I’m curious as to why you didn’t try and push for him to even talk to a Protectorate hero considering that the Empire appears to be after him. Browbeat would be much safer with us than out there on his own, I’m sure that you of all people can understand that, all things considered.”

I thought about that before answering, “I could have tried to convince him yes, but I had other things on my mind at the time and did not think me trying to convince him of something like that would have even worked.” I gave her a nonplussed look, “My mind was already on the next step of the night and I gave him my contact information, so if he wants to meet I’ll be able to give him my full attention instead of worrying about taking down Skidmark.”

For a moment the Director just looked at me appraisingly before saying, “I can understand that, it’s easy to ignore your surroundings and only focus on the immediate future when as young as yourself, saying that” she put emphasis on her next words “I wish for you to let an agent know if Browbeat contacts you, especially if he wishes to actually meet you.”

The comment about my age stung but remembering the fact that she let me, a normal fifteen-year-old girl, into the Wards eased it a bit since she had to have some faith in my abilities to allow it. Although whether or not I go straight to an agent after being contacted is up in the air.

I wasn’t going to tell Piggot that though, so I nodded and said, “As soon as he contacts me.”

Piggot nodded before continuing, “Now, how do you think your handling of Hookwolf went?” She drew out a few more pieces of paper from the same pile she pulled my report out of.

“I think I did well, considering my last encounter with a dangerous brute.” Granted, Lung was a lot quicker on the trigger for fights since he didn’t answer to anyone, while Hookwolf reported back to Kaiser and wasn’t even in his own territory.

“Do you think there was any way you could have walked away from the encounter without allowing Hookwolf the chance to start a conflict?” Was asked in a calm, measured tone.

Which meant she probably already had an answer and I was supposed to figure it out.

Damn it.

I’d racked my brain when I got back home last night for a way I could have done it better, sure, but Piggot probably had my age plus change of experience in handling parahumans. I only had about a year of fighting thugs under my belt and only a handful of encounters with actual capes, so whatever answer she was expecting was probably much better than whatever I could think of.

Better give her the best I came up with anyway, “I probably could have gotten away with giving him some details of my ‘powers’ to bring back to Kaiser. But I don’t know if that would have left him satisfied or if he would still beat me within an inch of my life to make sure what I said was true.” I shrugged with forced nonchalance, trying not to imagine how any fight between Hookwolf and I would go. ‘Death by a thousand cuts’ comes to mind as well as an image of me sticking my fist and then the rest of my body in a blender, both of those left me bleeding out on the street.

I shook my head slightly to get the image out of my head. Gotta stay more optimistic.
I continued, “I don’t know enough about Hookwolf’s personality to know if there even was a path in our conversation that wouldn’t have lead to an escalation of violence."

The Director at me nodded again, “I can imagine how volunteering information might have forestalled a fight between you two. But even with limited information, is there anything else that you can think of that might have ended the confrontation nonviolently?”

Nothing realistic, because I doubt that ‘running away’ was the answer she was looking for. Plus, I don’t think I could easily outrun a wolf shaped blender anyway.

I shook my head, “Nothing, I purposefully avoided those kinds of confrontations when I was solo because they rarely end without conflict.” A beat, “Although my encounter with Lung is an outlier and should not be counted.”

“That’s because there usually isn’t a way out of a violent conflict when capes are involved. Ever.”

My eyes widened slightly, so that was her game here.

The Director continued, “You appear to have already come to this conclusion since you seemed to, understandably, avoid cape fights for the past year. Let me cement that idea in you mind.” And I felt the intensity of her stare as she willed her words into my head, “Parahumans, ninety-nine times out of one hundred, will go for the fight if they think they have even a slim chance of getting away afterwards. You need to always be prepared for a fight whenever you go out there as a Ward, because if you screw up it’s not just your head on the line if this whole ‘Camo Girl’ situation goes south.”

I opened my mouth to say…something to that, but the Director raised her hand to forestall my reply.

“My eyes widened slightly, so that was her game here.

“I don’t tell you this to discourage you.” She put her elbows on her desk and clasped her hands together in front of her face, looking at me over her knuckles, “I have great…respect for what you’ve been trying to accomplish for the past year, but with that respect now comes an expectation that you will try your hardest not to throw this opportunity away.” The Director took a deep breath and looked at the clock on her wall, “Saying that, I wish to have a personal meeting with you every week or so from now on. To see how you are doing and see if there is anything that can be done to help your progress as a Ward.”

Her gaze then became a hard, piercing glare, “Make no mistake Taylor. This is in no way permission to do as you please, you are still a Ward and I expect you to follow all their rules as long as you remain one. But your situation is as unique and unusual as anything the PRT has done up to this point.” I saw her lip twitch upward, so small and quick that most people would have missed it, “This is also the first time something like this was centered around an unpowered individual, so congratulations on that.”

My mind was spinning from the whirlwind of encouragement and subtle threats, and she was right to do it I suppose. The Director could get into a lot of trouble for what she was allowing me to do, but that’s why I waited a year to try anything like this with the PRT, she has a reason to believe I can do something if I’m given the chance.

There was one thought that I could tell her without lying “…Thank you, Director. For allowing me the chance to do this.” And it was the sincerest thing I’ve said to anyone outside of Riley in a long time and will probably be the most sincere thing I say to Piggot for a while.

She gave me another once over before nodding and saying, “I’m glad you can appreciate the situation.” She took another, seemingly random, piece of paper from the corner of her desk, “I’ve
looked over your schedule today.” Because of course she has, “And you’re scheduled to have a PR meeting with the PRT’s director of public image, Glenn Chambers in half an hour.” The Director looked back at me from the paper, “Do you want any advice on how to deal with him?” A barely concealed scowl on her face.

That got me sitting up straighter, which I thought would be impossible going by how tense I’ve been this whole time, “Very much so, the Wards have tried to help but it’s mostly just been them frowning and grimacing at remembering their own meetings with him.”

Another ghost of a smirk, either at the fact that the Wards tried to help or at their discomfort at talking about whoever this Chambers guy is.

The smirk was there and gone in an instant, then the vague scowl that the Director was so fond of was back on her face, “The first thing you need to know about Glenn Chambers is…”

My meeting with Glenn had me entering some random conference room in HQ, and as I walked through the door and set my eyes on the PRT’s head of Public Relations I could honestly say that I was at a loss for words. Piggot had mentioned that he had a ‘disconcerting style’ but I didn’t or couldn’t fully appreciate what that meant until seeing it with my own eyes.

Glenn Chambers looked clinically obese, which is not exactly uncommon for a guy that probably spends a lot of time behind a desk and that alone doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s bad at his job, Piggot being a case and point, although I’ve heard she has a medical condition. But it wasn’t just his weight that made my mind almost grind to a halt, it was the metaphorical travesty that was how he dressed. Ugly yellow pants, dirty gray loafers, a neon green button up shirt and gelled up fauxhawk that wouldn’t have looked good on some hipster twenty years his junior.

I wasn’t even personally invested in fashion in general, my dark hoodies and old jeans can attest to that, but Glenn just looked like a tornado went into a department store and he put on whatever was blown to him.

He stood as I got to where he was sitting at the table, “Ah, Camo Girl. A pleasure to finally meet you.” Although judging by the overly firm grasp and strained smile he made very apparent that he probably thought the opposite.

Well shit.

I fought off the urge to sigh, “It’s nice to meet you as well Mr. Chambers.” Piggot had said that he would probably not like me due to the limited information he was allowed to access on me, but I did not expect him to be so obvious about it.

“Good, with the pleasantries out of the way we can start.” He sat down roughly into his chair, dropping his smile before saying, “I won’t lie to you Camo Girl, you are one of the most…unique cases that I have ever taken” as I sat down across from him he leaned on the table towards me, “I want you to appreciate that for a moment, I work with capes everyday and you and your situation are special for me to label it a unique case.”

He probably wouldn’t give me a bigger hint than that he had cottoned on to my lack of powers, but I wasn’t about to affirm his beliefs outright, Piggot assured me that he didn’t have access to that information yet.

“I know the PRT doesn’t like putting pure Thinkers in the field, but I was very persistent in being able to patrol like I did as a vigilante. I’m hoping that my previous experience is enough to
convince people to break the mold on this kind of stuff.’” Which was a bald lie, I only ever went out as Camo Girl when I had a specific target for the night.

A fake smile appeared on his face, “Well if that’s understood then we can take a peek at what your costume is planned to look like.” Glenn pulled out a laptop and opened it up, typing in a password and clicking a few times before saying, “Normally I would have multiple costume concepts for you to look at, but since you’re already an established cape here, your options are limited regarding theme and overall looks.” He turned the laptop toward me, “Armsmaster and possibly Dragon already have a design for your costume that they sent to me.” And I think he was showing his feelings of annoyance on purpose at this point, nobody is this expressive unless they mean to be.

Veering my thoughts away from Glenn’s overexaggerated tone I looked down at the computer screen where I got a look at what was supposedly going to be my Ward costume.

What caught my eye first was the camouflage color scheme, which made sense since my army jacket became my trademark after my first month or two of activity. The second thing was that the head was completely covered by a slim, sleek looking motorcycle helmet that had a broad, heavily tinted visor covering where the eyes would be. The torso and arms were covered in circular metal…scales? Like the scale armor Romans would wear in documentaries and movies. The scales covered the torso hip all the way to the jaw in a flattering, form fitting way and the sleeves went all the way to the elbow where the armor transitioned into what looked like thick armor plating covering the forearms with the hands protected by plated gloves. The legs of the costume had segmented armor pieces protecting the thighs and knees with armored boots covering my feet and shins.

It actually looked pretty effective at protecting me, but it also looked… “How much is this supposed to weigh?” Even if I worked out more than your average Jane, I’m still a fifteen-year-old girl and that looked like a lot of metal. I doubt I’d be able to do more than walk in it without tiring myself out.

“Armsmaster has assured me that he is using a lightweight durable alloy, probably something tinker derived, that should let you maintain your mobility as if you’re wearing your original costume.” He gestured vaguely, “He assures me that he designed it so that the weight should be distributed in a way that will make it seem as if you’re just wearing slightly weighted clothing, which I doubt you would have a problem with if the rumors on PHO are true.”

That got my attention, “What kind of rumors about me are going around PHO?”

Glenn gave me a flat look, “When was the last time you were even on the website?”

“A month or two ago, my house doesn’t have a great computer, so I usually have to go to the library to check it.”

“And did you ever look at the threads that had you as the topic?”

I shrugged, “No, I only used PHO to keep up with the cape scene. To check if any new capes had been spotted in the Bay, areas of significant activity to avoid, things like that.” I would need to get back on it and check, Browbeat would have been a much more unpleasant surprise if he hadn’t been friendly.

Glenn gave me a pained look at that, “One of the few capes to not have an inflamed ego and you’re worse off because of it.”

Ouch, that stung a bit, mainly because he wasn’t being very clear why that makes it worse for me.
My eyes might have shown my confusion because Glenn continued, “You might have picked up at this point that I’m not that fond of you Camo Girl, no, Taylor.” I nodded, wondering why he switched to my real name. “I don’t like you because it’s my job to make sure the PRT and Protectorate are shown in the best light so that they can continue doing good with limited interference and you” he pointed a pudgy finger at me from across the table, “Are a political time bomb waiting to explode. The…limitations on your power should they be brought to light at the wrong time could very bad for the PRT, including, but not limited to marring this branch’s reputation.”

No bullshit then, that’s fine, great actually. Continuing to dance around it would have gotten tiresome, “Then what would you have me do Mr. Chambers?”

He settled back into his chair, looking at me like a particularly annoying and challenging puzzle, “I don’t know to be honest, like I said, this situation is unique. You have the possibility of starting something new, something dangerous in regard to people with your…powers. But I believe that the ends do not justify the means in this instance.” Glenn gave me a chagrinned look.

“But you also can’t directly stop what’s happening right now. So, what? What do you want to say? Because you’ve made it obvious that you don’t really approve of what I’m doing here.”

“I believe that you are dangerous but have the potential to do great things regarding parahuman-human relations.” He leveled a glare at me, “More so than what the PRT is already doing” Probably the PRT field officers, “But that could change as easily as the wind if you’re at the wrong place at the wrong time, so I want to ensure that you appreciate the gravity of your situation. There are going to be many powerful people with their eyes on you once more of your information comes to light, you must be prepared for that.”

Did he and Piggot get together before today to really emphasize that this situation is bigger than me and I can’t afford to screw it up.

“The scope of this has been emphasized to me already, but the repetition of it is noted” I said stiffly.

He still didn’t take his eyes off me, but he seemed to relax slightly when I said that, “Good, now are there any concerns about your costume that you would like me to address with Armsmaster? I can’t guarantee anything, but such is the curse of public image.”

Disregarding the conversational whiplash, I looked back at my costumes design again.

“Well, can I get some pockets or somewhere to store things? I usually carry around pepper spray and batons, but I don’t see anywhere that I could put them, also what specifically are the bulky forearm guards for?”

Glenn turned the laptop so that we could both see the screen, “Well I’ll see about adding some kind of storage to it, but Armsmaster told me in an email that the forearms are meant to…”

It was a short walk to my next meeting with the entirety of the Protectorate heroes, which was being held in a larger conference room in the same part of the building as my meeting with Glenn.

Unfortunately, I needed to head to Armsmaster’s PRT office/lab before heading to the meeting so that he, Riley and I would walk in at the same time. To make it easier to introduce us or something along those lines.
As I walked I took out my personal phone to check the time only to see that someone texted me during one of my meetings and considering that the amount of people that had my civilian phone number was three, I wasn’t that surprised to see that Amy had been the one to text me. She wanted to know if we could meet on the roof tomorrow around the same time I found her there last week.

As I responded in the affirmative I got to Armsmaster’s door and knocked after putting my phone in my pocket.

The door clicked open and Armsmaster brushed past me out of the lab/office, apparently ready to leave, Riley, in her smooth bone costume, walked behind him like an excited duckling.

“Camo Girl walk with me and we should be right on time to the Protectorate meeting.”

I waved at Bones as I fell into step with the Protectorate leader, “Hopefully this meeting goes better than the others that I’ve had today.” With only a little bit of my exasperation getting through.

“You met with the Director and Mr. Chambers correct?” He turned his head slightly to look at me as we walked, “My condolences, I’m sure they weren’t exactly encouraging during their meetings. But I’ll let you know that most people walk out of those ready to sleep for a few days.” He gave me a hint of a smile, “So judging by the fact that you don’t have a thousand-yard stare you’re doing better than most.”

I smiled at that, although my balaclava covered it, “That reminds me, Glenn showed me a mockup of what you are going to make my costume look like. We talked about it, but could you and I talk after this meeting about the usefulness of pockets in a costume?” I kept up my smile in the hopes that he would realize I was still thankful for what he’s already done, but really, I’m going to need some pockets.

I saw his lips twitch upwards, so no offense taken, woohoo.

“I should be able to spare a few minutes afterwards.”

Armsmaster stopped in front of the door before turning to Bones and me, “Are both of you ready to officially meet the Protectorate?” The two of us shared a look before turning our eyes back to Armsmaster and nodded, Bones a bit more vigorously than necessary. Armsmaster nodded himself, “Good then let’s not waste any time.” And he opened the door and walked in, Bones and I following behind.

Chapter End Notes

I present to you all the chapter that did NOT want to be written.

I had immense trouble with the Piggot and Glenn parts and they just didn't want to get done, but after two weeks of banging my head against the keyboard I have finally finished the chapter.

The next chapter is another Arcadia chapter and should come out next week as well as a side chapter that was a lot more fun to write than this chapter.

Thanks for reading!!
March 28th, 2011 (Monday)

--The morning after meeting Glenn--

I stared at the notification on my PRT phone as I got ready for my morning run. For whatever reason Glenn had sent me an email at three in the morning, so I entered my password and opened the new message.

Camo Girl,

It occurred to me that I might not have been very clear yesterday and wish to rectify that and also give you some homework because I’m feeling that generous.

As you know, everything that the PRT and Protectorate do is subject to public scrutiny. You are probably already aware of this, but you don’t appear to be aware of how it is applied to yourself, as shown by your complete ignorance of how the public currently sees Camo Girl as a Cape (at least on PHO). I want you to work on that.

So, here’s your homework, I want you to get on PHO and research what the general opinion on your cape persona is. If you require assistance for this Clockblocker would probably be of the most help, he’s the most active Ward on the website.

But that’s not all! I’ve heard that there are some odd rumors going around your last school about you from your time there. I want you to investigate your current standing at Arcadia, you shouldn’t spend all of high school giving your peers the cold shoulder. Psyche will probably be able to help you, I hear that she’s a hopeless gossip from the other Wards. I’m not necessarily telling you to change your civilian behavior, you seem to have found friends with Psyche and her group, I just think you would gain something by becoming more aware of what your fellow students think of you.

I expect a report on the findings regarding the public perception of both your civilian and cape personas to be in my inbox by next Monday.

With Love,

Glenn Chambers <3

I stood there and stared at my phone, pants half on, for what felt like an eternity as my brain tried to process what I just read.

Now, I am perfectly willing to admit that I’m almost completely ignorant about how the public perceives me as Camo Girl since my third or fourth month of being a vigilante, I just made sure to never do anything overtly villainous, which meant busting up drugs dens and turning Merchants over to the police gave me high praise in the first couple of months of my work as Camo Girl.

But I didn’t want to get stuck in my own head, so I started avoiding any threads on PHO that had me tagged in them, only looking at threads concerning the various capes in Brockton Bay, their powers and personalities, so that I would know what to expect just in case I ran into one. I’d gotten cocky once and ran into Mush and Skidmark for my troubles, I had to stay down to Earth

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and clear headed.

Besides, up until the past month, the only really public thing that happened to me was Uber and Leet’s tournament. And the times I got the Wards to take down Merchant Safehouses with me. And that time I ran into Glory Girl and Laserdream. But other than those times there shouldn’t have really been anyone even witnessing what I did and really seeing anything that I had to worry about.

…Right?

I quickly pulled up the internet browser app on my phone, got onto PHO and typed ‘Camo Girl’ into the search bar.

Over one thousand results. That can’t be right.

I changed the settings to only listing threads that had ‘Camo Girl’ in the title, not just mentioned. Even then, I doubted that any threads with my name in the title would be very active or large.

The top three results were ‘Camo Girl activity log and discussion’, ‘Camo Girl power analysis, examination and (civil) discussion’ and ‘Camo Girl: Alien or Android?’ and I didn’t even know where to begin with that last one.

I closed the app and put my phone on my nightstand so that I could finish getting ready for my run. I’ll just have to get Dennis to help me sift through PHO when I go to HQ today, it shouldn’t be too hard.

The main problem is the second half of Glenn’s…homework.

What does he mean by odd rumors about me? I never spoke to anyone when I was at Winslow, what kind of rumors could have been spread about the weird loner girl?

Now that I thought about it, teenagers are petty and insecure, so probably a lot.

And he said that Ruth’s the biggest gossip on the team, but she seems so serious and down to earth whenever I’ve spoken to her. Not at all like the vapid girls back at Winslow that stabbed each other in the back for the chance to start a new rumor.

I finished getting ready for my run and started walking downstairs.

Well, I guess I’ll be asking Ruth and her friends a few questions at lunch today.
paid attention to the people in the hallway and in my classes today, instead of ignoring them which had become a habit after the whole Winslow thing.

What I found out from that is that the general friendliness and interest in me from last week seems to have dried up. I don’t mean that anyone’s being antagonistic or anything, but whenever I met people’s eyes in the hallway they would sometimes quickly look away and start walking away from me, no matter where they were headed beforehand.

I got to the table, Ruth wasn’t there yet, but a few of the exchange students were already eating and talking. I gave them a ‘hi’ and received a few back, then I brought out my lunch and started mechanically eating it as I continued to think.

People in classrooms seemed to avoid me as well, not anything overt, but half the people in my classes didn’t look me in the eyes now, even when work sheets and packets were being passed between students.

But that’s not to say that everyone has been doing this stuff, I’ve only started noticing this stuff today, so it couldn’t have been more than twenty people out of this entire school that have been doing stuff like that.

That and most of the people who acted like this were guys. And looking at their behavior it appeared that they were scared of me or something.

I swallowed a bite of my sandwich, remembering how over half the Wards pretty much told me that they thought I was scary on the group chat last week, but that was just Camo Girl they were scared of, not Taylor Hebert.

Right?

I was broken from my train of thought by Ruth abruptly dropping her tray of cafeteria food and then sitting down opposite me.

“How’s your day been going?”

“Hey Ruth…Can I ask you a question?”

She raised an eyebrow at me as she opened a bottle of juice, “Sure.”

I guess figuring out if the student body was afraid of me also counts toward what Glenn wanted me to do as well, so I might as well dive in head first to this.

“Am I a scary person?”

Ruth froze as she was bringing her drink to her mouth, eyes wide as she stared at me, and I also noticed how the other conversations that were going on at the table had stopped as well.

That’s not very encouraging.

Ruth took another second before she unfroze, putting down her drink with a pained look on her face, “So you have heard the rumors then…”

Wait, “What rumors?”

Her pained look somehow deepened, “Rumors have been going around school today about your time at Winslow, and they’re not very…positive?”
“Why did you make that sound like a question?”

One of her friends spoke up, “Because hearing that you beat up a handful of ABB kids at your old
school to save a girl from them isn’t really a bad thing, but the fact that I can totally believe that
you did it is…scary.”

I gaped at her, “Who told you that? And what about me makes that even remotely believable?”

The girl blushed and looked away, Ruth picked up for her though, saying, “Some people are
saying that they have friends at Winslow and heard some interesting things from them, also,
Taylor” She gave me a flat look, “Whenever I see you walking in the hall you look like you’re on
your way to murder someone, you always have this angry scowl on your face between classes.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself but stopped, what could people from Winslow be saying
about me?

“What other kinds of rumors are going on about me?”

Ruth looked at her friends for some help, but they all suddenly found their lunches very
interesting.

With a vexed look, Ruth sighed and said, “Alright, so this is what I’ve heard so far today…”

What followed was an uncomfortable, and mostly wrong, recollection of my time at Winslow.
Stories about me beating up Empire and ABB thugs, rescuing innocent high schoolers from said
thugs and showing up various sports teams at their respective games.

Winslow didn’t even have a Lacrosse team; how could I have challenged the entire team to a
scrimmage? Weren’t there like seven people on the field at a time? That didn’t even remotely
make any sense.

Also, all of these rumors supposedly started today, how has Ruth already heard so many of them?

As I became more and more exasperated at what was being spread about me I saw something
flash in my eyes from somewhere across the cafeteria. When I looked at the source I saw that one
of the Nazi kids from last week was using a mirror to splash reflected light into my eyes and when
he noticed that I was looking he got his friends attention. Then I had a table full of Nazi wannabes
smirking at me, shit eating grins on their faces.

It took me a second to think of why they were doing that but then it hit me.

Those sons of bitches, they probably spoke to some of the Empire kids from Winslow sometime
last week and used that as a base to spread rumors about me.

I should probably talk to the Principal if these rumors get any more realistic, but most of them
were obviously lies.

At least my report to Glenn will be pretty easy now, got to look on the bright side.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I laid on the gravel covered roof, I had taken my black hoodie off to put as a cushion beneath my
head so that I could look at the clouds in relative comfort. It was also pretty sunny and warm
today, so it was a relief to take off my extra layers while I waited for Amy to get here.

I was trying to distract myself from my talk with Ruth at lunch, looking at clouds and deciding
what they looked like and not letting teenage drama affect me, I’d gotten pretty adept at that after Winslow. Then I heard the faint screech of the metal hatch opening up.

I lifted my head in time to see the back of Amy’s head, a shock of frizzy brown hair, pop up and begin to shift and twist to look around the roof. I’m not sure why Amy was looking around the roof, I doubt that anyone would be waiting up here to see her, other than me.

I raised my arm from the ground and waved, “Hey Doc, I’m over here.”

I saw the frizzy hair bounce slightly before turning towards me so that I could see her face. “Jesus! don’t surprise me like that” I saw her start staring at my uncovered arms before shaking her head as if to clear it, “you’re here early.”

I sat up and shrugged, “I don’t have a class to go to after lunch and I finished all of my coursework. So I came up here to distract myself.” From the fact that people seem to think I’m terrifying both in and out of costume, but there’s no reason to tell the hero that, she probably had better things to worry about.

Amy finished climbing onto the roof, stood on the gravel and looked everywhere but at me. “Are you looking for something Amy?”

She jumped slightly, again, and tore her eyes from the skyline before looking down at me, I still hadn’t fully gotten up from my cloud watching session.

“I don’t have a class to go to after lunch and I finished all of my coursework. So I came up here to distract myself.” From the fact that people seem to think I’m terrifying both in and out of costume, but there’s no reason to tell the hero that, she probably had better things to worry about.

Amy finished climbing onto the roof, stood on the gravel and looked everywhere but at me. “Are you looking for something Amy?”

She jumped slightly, again, and tore her eyes from the skyline before looking down at me, I still hadn’t fully gotten up from my cloud watching session.

“Nice tank top, and sorry, Vicky’s been on my case about smoking again and she knows that I like to come up here to burn one, so I’m afraid she might drop in at some point to catch me in the act.”

I looked down at my ratty black tank top, “Uh, thanks? And catch you in the act?” If Victoria already knew she was smoking why would that matter.

Amy grinned and walked to the short wall along the edge of the roof and sat down, leaning against the wall and rummaging through her pockets.

“Oh, she ‘knows’ that I’m smoking, but I keep denying it so now she’s trying her hardest to catch me in the act.”

I scooted backwards until I was sitting next to her against the wall, leaving my jacket in the middle of the roof, “Is this the part where your hero of a sister comes to save you from the enabling delinquent that you secretly meet with on the school roof, breaking all kinds of school rules in the process?” I smirked at Amy as she pulled out her cigarettes and lighter, “Because I’m pretty sure that scenario ends with me getting beat up by said girl that can bench-press a semitruck, which I would prefer to avoid.”

Amy snorted as she lit a cigarette, “Please, Vicky would probably think I’m trying to recruit some random girl into my ‘edgy smoking’ club. You’ll be fine.” She took a drag and then considerately blew out the smoke away from me. “Plus, she knows I use this to calm down, Vicky doesn’t really want to get in the way of that, even if she does disapprove.” Another drag and a chagrined look, “She doesn’t know what else to do, she just wants to let me know that she worries about me, and it’s sweet, but sometimes I just need to be left alone.”

The sheer openness of that statement kind of took me off guard, I also started to get up, “Shit, sorry. I don’t want to intrude if you want to use this as your alone time.”
She caught my wrist before I could really get off the ground, slamming my butt back onto the gravel.

A hand moved to her temple, “That came out wrong, I meant that sometimes I need some time away from Vicky. I love her to death, but sometimes I need to spend some time away from her.”

I shifted slightly to get more comfortable, she kind of slammed me into the gravel, “Oh, is that one of those sibling things?”

“…Yeah, but also I need to spend some time away from her aura. I’ve found that constant exposure doesn’t do well for our relationship. Also, going by how you just said that, you probably don’t have any siblings yourself, right?”

This conversation seemed to be going a mile a minute, what happens with ‘constant exposure’ to Glory Girl’s aura?

“I’m an only child, but I do have someone that I consider a little sister” I thought of Riley, she pretty much was a little sister to me in all but name at this point.

“I wish you luck with that, I’d hate to be the older sibling.”

“Yeah…” a beat, “What was that you said about her aura?”

She looked away from me and ground her cigarette into the floor, “I was hoping you hadn’t caught that.” Amy turned to face forward, still not looking at me, “Just an unintended consequence of her power, it’s not public knowledge so I’d prefer not to share it without her permission.”

“That’s fair.”

We sat there, in silence, for another few minutes. Amy lit another cigarette and I craned my neck to look at the clouds again.

I was the first to break the silence, thinking back to last week’s talk, “Needing to get away because people were just too much and you need to calm down, social anxiety can’t be a fun thing to have as a cape with no secret identity.”

Amy turned to say something, looked me up and down, met my eyes, turned red and shut her mouth without saying anything before looking away from me. All in about two seconds.

Shit, was that the wrong thing to say?

“Sorry, that probably wasn’t a cons-“

“It’s fine, that’s a normal conclusion to get to, and it’s not entirely wrong either.” She sighed, “It’s not that I’m scared of crowds per se, I just can’t handle them for very long.”

I raised an eyebrow as she finished saying that.

I saw Amy’s blush deepen when she noticed just what she said, “Alright, that sounds like normal anxiety, but it’s not like most people's, it has to do with my power and what it makes me think. It’s not like claustrophobia or fear of interacting with people per se, my power, bio-tinkering, just makes it not fun to see a sea of bodies moving around.”

I didn’t say anything because I was trying to piece together what she just told me. Luckily, she was just getting started.
Amy started gesticulating wildly, “It’s just that, my tinker specialty is bioengineering right? Everyone thinks that makes me the greatest surgeon alive, and some people know that I also work on some antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals as well, nothing that can be commercially produced mind you, just like any other tinker project, but that’s not it, that’s not the entirety of my specialty I haven’t even really touched…”

She trailed off, her eyes wide and the blood draining from her face as she stared at me, open mouthed. “I shouldn’t have said that, nobody knows about that, except maybe Vicky, but I’ve never told anyone about that.” I saw her swallow nothing as she turned into a bundle of nerves, “I need to go, sorry for bothering you, we should probably never talk to each other ever again, this was a mistake, why did I think friends were possible for a freak like me-”

I did the same thing I did whenever Riley started going off on a rant, so I quickly placed my hand over Amy’s mouth as soon as I noticed where her train of thought was leading her.

“Amy, I need you to do something for me.” I felt breathing rapidly and saw tears starting to gather in her eyes, but she had stopped rambling, so I’ll take small victories and baby steps to calming her down. “I’m going to take my hand away and when I do, you need to take a deep breath and count to ten. Can you do that for me?” She nodded, and I took my hand away.

“I need to-” and I put my hand back on her mouth.

“No speaking, no leaving until you’ve taken some time to breath. Okay?”

She nodded again, and I took my hand off of her again, more slowly just in case she tried saying something again.

This time she actually did what I asked and took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before releasing it and slowly returning her breathing to a normal pace.

I sat and waited for her to finish getting herself out of a panic attack.

I once again broke the silence once she was calmed down, “Feeling better?”

She kept her eyes on the ground in front of her, “Yeah, sorry you had to see that.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, it sounded like something you’ve been wanting to get off your chest.” I looked back up at the clouds in the sky, “I’m willing to listen if you want to talk about it.”

“It’s something that I haven’t told anyone about, I don’t think it’s something that I should ever tell someone about.” She shook her head morosely, “It’s nothing against you, I just…” Amy trailed off, probably unsure of what to say.

“So, you’re afraid to talk about a part of your power that makes you look…bad? Weird? Silly? You don’t want people to know this because it would…make them look at you in a different light?” I looked at her face to try and catch her eyes, but she kept resolutely staring at the ground.

“I can understand keeping secrets from everyone about stuff like that, I’ve pretty much been living a lie for the past year doing something similar.”

“No, it’s completely different.” She finally stopped looking at the ground and met my eyes, “You did what you did to become a hero and help people, I’m afraid of letting people know my secret because it could be linked to something evil, a villain, who was powerful and well known, and I don’t think I could handle people looking at me while silently judging me and comparing us. I don’t want people to think I could become a villain because of that, I just want to do good.”

That seems silly to me, Panacea is one of the foremost healing capes in the world, with her ability
to perform miraculous surgeries and creating cures for all kinds of diseases and maladies, I don’t think any sane person would ever compare her to a villain. But her face told me that she really was worried about that kind of stuff, the raw vulnerability had on her face as she stared at me made me want to reassure her at least.

“Well that’s bullshit.”

Fuck, that sounds really harsh, gotta tone it down.

“Sorry, that came out wrong. What I meant to say was that unless you’re the Simurgh in disguise, I don’t think there’s much you can do to make people think that ‘Panacea, super healer extraordinaire’ would ever turn villain.”

Amy broke eye contact and started looking, no, staring holes into my hands and deliberating on something for about half a minute before saying, “Alright, I’ll tell you, but!” Her gaze went back to my face, “If you ever tell anyone what I’m about to say I’ll make it so your hands think they’re feet.”

I quickly nodded to assure her I wouldn’t, while also furiously trying to figure out how she could even do that.

Amy nodded, probably satisfied with my understandable confusion and terror, “Good, now give me your hand.”

Still confused but also intrigued I put my scarred right hand in her awaiting palm, and she started tracing and probing my palm with her fingers.

After a moment she started talking, her eyes slightly glazed over as she continued her meticulous…massage? Examination? of my hand, “My power is generally known and accepted to be a type of bio-tinkering, where instead of wires and metal I only work with biology, which is only half correct, but all I ever do involving human bodies directly is doing surgeries, removing tumors, stitching up injuries at an Endbringer fight or setting broken bones, such as ribs, back into place, like when someone tries to fist fight a brute.” I ignored the jab, not even mentioning that it wasn’t a fist fight, I had a sword and shield made of bone, which looking back wasn’t much better anyway.

Amy’s hands had moved on from my palm, tracing my wrist my wrist and then started probing and feeling the muscles, tendons and bones in my forearm, “I also work with bacteria and chemicals to help make medicine, strictly helpful stuff and I’m careful not to make anything that could be turned into a weapon. I have people watching me whenever I work in a lab to ensure that, even though none of them would be able to tell if I did make something harmful anyway.” I closed my eyes and leaned my head back as she moved onto my upper arm, the careful meticulous ministrations slowly relaxing me like I was receiving some kind of massage, “But there’s another layer to my power, I can work with metals and wires, and sometimes I almost feel compelled to do so, my power gives me designs that would not just fix an injured person but improve them. The more people, the more bodies that I see, the more designs that fill my head and want to be built.”

I vaguely felt her hands move from my arm to my upper back, I felt myself lean forward and face away from her to make it easier for her to reach, she was pretty short, my eyes closed the entire time. Is this what getting a massage from a bio-tinker felt like? Is that even what she was trying to do? Whatever she was doing is almost putting me to sleep.

And improving people? I wonder what that entailed, because I felt that she was holding something else back, that was too vague, too few details to really figure out anything of value from what she’s saying. Only half formed thoughts came to mind as I felt tension bleed out of my body.
“That’s why groups of people make me uncomfortable, my power starts battering me with designs and urges to—”

“Oh my God!! I knew you’d be up here but to think it was to meet a secret girlfriend!? Amy I can’t believe this is what you’ve been hiding from me. I thought we were closer than that.” Came a faux-hurt voice in front of where Amy and I were sitting.

And just like that, the relaxed, sleepy state I was in shattered as I burst to my feet, the tension that had been ebbed away coming back full force as I stood up to face whoever just yelled.

Floating in front of us was none other than Victoria Dallon, Brockton Bay’s Glory Girl. The girl I met on a rooftop last year, who swooped in and saved me from getting mauled by Lung a few weeks ago after I texted her and asked for help. And she was currently floating a couple yards away, several feet above the roofs gravel floor, one hand over her mouth, not quite concealing the huge grin on her face, shaking with barely contained laughter.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I felt my face heat up in blushing, terrible embarrassment. Glory Girl just caught me on the roof of Arcadia, alone with her sister, as said sister gave me what probably looked like, and felt like, a massage. Sneaking off to be alone with Amy so that she could give me a massage and other girlfriendy things, at least in her eyes.

I fell back on my butt, sitting beside Amy once again. I didn’t even look at her, I just put my head in my hands and groaned, because what else could I have done, words to defend myself died on my tongue. A heady mix of awe and embarrassment overloading my brain.

I heard Amy groan beside me as well.

That was when the dam finally broke and I heard Victoria finally burst into laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Finally got this chapter up! I kept going back to rewrite parts of Amy's section because I was never fully satisfied with it, I just decided that I should just post it after editing it so much so let me know if her gushing out to Taylor doesn't seem that realistic with how their conversation flowed and their current relationship.

If anyone wants to suggest some responses/conspiracy theories that people on PHO would post feel free to share. I already have some ideas but I find PHO chapters to be better with more diverse voices and outlandish ideas.

Thanks for reading!
March 28th, 2011 (Monday)

--Approximately thirty seconds after Victoria got to the roof--

She was still laughing. There’s no way that this was that funny.

Worse was that I couldn’t bring myself to actually talk to her and break her out of her hysterics because the embarrassment (natural) and awe (courtesy of Glory Girl’s aura) that I currently felt was shorting out any instructions my brain tried to send to my mouth.

I heard Amy grit out, “Vicky. Aura.” From where she was sitting beside me.

And then suddenly, the awe was gone, and the embarrassment was quickly following it, allowing me to clear my head so I could look up and say something to Glory Girl about whatever the hell that was.

I raised my head out of my hands, something scathing on my tongue, but immediately flinched back when I saw Glory Girl’s remorseful face looking down on me, currently about two inches away from my own face.

All that accomplished was a surprised yelp and me slamming the back of my head into the low wall I had been leaning against.

“Oh shit, I’m so sorry” and she did sound remorseful but damn it, “I thought Amy was gonna be smoking alone up here and I was so surprised that she was with someone else and I never would have guessed she came up here to meet her secret girlfriend” I saw her look me up and down, her eyes flashing with some unknown emotion, her rambling now slowing down to a normal pace “and the fact that her secret girlfriend was Winslow’s own delinquent queen…” Victoria’s remorseful look replaced with something else.

Before I could respond to whatever look she was giving me now, Amy decided to speak up, “I was smoking!” Digging into her pocket and producing her cigarettes, “She is not my girlfriend!” She was sounding a bit frantic now, “And what do you mean by delinquent queen?” with her head switching between looking at Glory Girl and I from her seated position.

Glory Girl finally withdrew her face from my personal space and floated back up with a victorious grin on her face, “I knew it!” Which made me think the girlfriend claims were only meant to get a rise out of Amy, but the fact that she still assaulted me with her aura made me hesitate from truly believing that.

I shared a look with Amy, we both stood up and walked toward the center of the roof where Victoria was now floating as she said, “Congratulations detective Dallon, your investigation can conclude” nonplussed, “Now is there anything else that you would like to say to embarrass me in front of a girl that’s never met you before.”

And I technically had never met Glory Girl as a civilian, so it wasn’t really a lie.

Although the way Glory Girl’s smirk changed as she looked from her sister to me made me feel a bit uneasy, she looked me up and down before saying, “Black curly hair, check, tall as a tower,
check, glare that could kill” I narrowed my eyes at the fact that she apparently had enough information from the rumors to make a checklist of my features, “check, normally wears baggy clothes” she glanced at the ratty sweatshirt I’d left on the ground from my cloud watching session, “check.” Her eyes then took on a more predatory look as she started walking around me like a shark that found blood in the water.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that but was suddenly hit by a sense of déjà vu.

Amy spoke before I could pursue the feeling though, “What are you talking about Vicky? Delinquent Queen?” and when Vicky didn’t respond, just continued to circle me, so Amy slapped her sister’s shoulder, “And quit looking at her like that!”

Glory Girl dramatically rubbed where Amy had slapped her, which had sounded like it got through the brute’s force field, “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard anything about her! That’s practically the only thing people are talking about today.” She gave Amy a mock glare, “That’s literally all we talked about at lunch today.”

Amy opened and closed her mouth without saying anything, probably wracking her brain for how she could have missed the entire conversation.

Glory Girl turned back to my and stuck out her hand, “Well first impressions are kind of out the window now, but I’m Victoria Dallon if you hadn’t already guessed, but sorry to say I only know you by reputation” she gave me a sly look, “Anyway I can get a name to put with the rumors?”

I took her hand, “…Taylor Hebert and trust me, the rumors are false or ridiculously exaggerated.” I gave her a flat look as I felt her squeeze my hand just a bit too tightly, “Don’t get your hopes up that I’m dumb enough to start a fight with a known brute.”

I heard Amy cough and sent her a glare.

Victoria seemed to come to a decision, smiled and then asked, “You being the ice queen of Winslow?”

I’m suddenly even more thankful for asking Ruth about the rumors, I think this conversation would have been a lot more shocking if I wasn’t already aware of what’s been going around the school about me.

“I didn’t like anyone at Winslow, I had a bad first semester and it ruined any chance of me making friends there. Let’s leave it at that.”

Most people would have been discouraged and stopped the conversation there, but she barreled on, “So, the whole ‘you fighting a dozen ABB thugs to save a girl from being kidnapped and turned into a prostitute’ thing?”

“There were two ABB kids, I didn’t fight them, they were just talking to her as far as I knew.” I shrugged, remembering what I had told Ruth at lunch “They were standing in the doorway of my next class, so I asked them to move.” At least I think that was what that rumor was based on. I remember walking through two guys wearing ABB colors a few months ago on my way to class, and there might have been a girl there. “No idea why people would think that was me trying to fight them.”

“Beating the entire Lacrosse team by yourself?”

“Winslow doesn’t have a Lacrosse team.”

“Beating the guys basketball team?”
“I’ve never played basketball in my life, I’m not that sporty.”

I received a skeptical look from both of the Dallon sisters, both of them pointedly looking at my uncovered, defined arms and shoulders, then Victoria continued.

“Crashed a Hitler youth rally?”

I narrowed my eyes at her again, “You just made that one up.” Ruth would have mentioned that if it was being spread.

Victoria allowed herself to smile as I saw Amy look at her incredulously, “Are you done interrogating her now Vicky? I didn’t ask her up here for you to harass her like this.”

I saw the blonde smile at Amy like she had just given her the best Christmas present ever, “So you invited her up here to your den of secrecy? I’m definitely not gonna let that one go Ames, and no I’m not done yet.” Victoria turned her head back to me, “Beat the shit out of the black, up and coming track star last year?”

I suppressed a wince, the one rumor that was one hundred percent true, even if it was taken out of context.

Before Amy could either strangle her sister or die of embarrassment, her face switching between the two emotions, I answered, “Hypothetically, we might have hated each other’s guts at the time, and hypothetically, no matter how anybody else has tried to spin it, it wasn’t a race thing. She’s just a bitch, but we both resolved our differences after that” a beat, “hypothetically of course.”

Both of them just kind of stared at me for a moment, Amy was the first to shake herself out of it, “And I’m sure the Empire kids were over the moon about it anyway, even if it wasn’t a race thing for you.”

I tried to look thoughtful before answering, “They might have tried to recruit me a couple days after that, and I said no.” I did not want to mention that I turned them down several times to no effect, so a few of them found out the hard way that I always carry around pepper spray when they tried to corner me outside of school.

Ruth had said it would probably better not to mention that part.

Both of them looked like they suspected I was leaving something out, but I feel that I answered enough questions for Victoria to be satisfied, and if Amy was that curious she could ask me later.

“Any more questions?” I didn’t wait for either of them to answer before I started walking toward the hatch, “No? Cool, it was fun Amy, I’ll talk to you-” but an arm was suddenly around my neck and holding me in place as half of my vision was filled with blonde hair and a bright smile. Her arm had absolutely no give to it and I could feel it digging into my neck and shoulders.

“Hey, c’mon Tay” the pet name irked me, “we just met each other, and I’d love to get to know my sister’s special rooftop friend, especially if the rumors aren’t true.” She turned me back towards Amy and walked me back towards her, Amy’s face taking an apprehensive look as she looked between her sister and me.

She tried to put her foot down, “Vicky, if she wants to leave…”

“Don’t worry Ames, I’m just making sure I can trust her with you, normal big sister stuff” Victoria’s smile taking a dangerous edge, and I began to think that her previous questions were less about normal teenage curiosity about gossip and more about making sure that her sister’s new
friend wasn’t as dangerous as the rumors say.

It was in that moment of realization, she might have been scarier than Lung.

I took a deep breath.

With only a little bit of trepidation I said, “It’s fine Amy” I put my arm around Victoria’s neck as well, the rest of her body solid and not giving like normal skin and hair does, even when I to put some strength into it, “Alright Alexandria Junior, what do you want to talk about?”

I felt tension drain out of my body as I got into the PRT van after leaving the school grounds.

I pulled my backpack into my lap and took out my PRT phone as I felt the car start its journey to HQ, unlocking it and sending a text to Dean.

Camo Girl: Hey Gallant, your girlfriend caught me talking to Amy and interrogated me for an hour about the rumors going around the school. She has now heard what she calls my “tragic backstory” and wants to hang out soon. Any tips on how to get out of doing that?

I was about to put my phone back in my backpack, Dean was on patrol with Carlos for another thirty minutes, but my phone vibrated right before I could open my bag.

It was a message from Ruth.

Psyche: WAIT WHAT!!! When did this happen!?! And why were you talking with Amy in the first place?

I looked at the top of the screen, where the name of the person I sent the message to was supposed to be, but instead of ‘Gallant’ the name on top was ‘Ward Group Chat B******’.

I hadn’t double checked who I was sending the message to.

Smart phones were bullshit.

I suppressed a groan and quickly typed a new message.

Camo Girl: Meant to send that to Gallant, please disregard.

The responses were instantaneous, to my dismay.

Clockblocker: OMG wat? i need deets CG

Psyche: No, we’re talking as soon as you get to HQ

Kid Win: why are you so opposed to hangin out with her?

Bones: I wanna hang out with glory girl too!

Bones: Wait, who changed all the names back? :’(

Clockblocker: also wait, wat tragic backstory?

I didn’t respond and put my phone back into my bag.

Using ‘tragic backstory’ was a mistake, I should have just said my time at Winslow. Victoria, no,
she wanted me to call her Vicky now (‘A friend of my sister is a friend of mine, and all my friends
call me Vicky!’), was very adamant about showing me what real friends did with each other. She
was blowing it way out of proportion, I hadn’t even told her about Emma betraying me or the fact
that I was bullied.

Amy had apologized for Vicky’s behavior after said girl had left the rooftop, but I was still
processing the whole conversation at the time.

It turns out that Vicky the older sister was a hell of a lot more intimidating than Glory Girl the
hero. Who would have guessed?

I shot off a text to Amy on my personal phone and let her know that Vicky hadn’t scared me off
as her friend, the look on her face probably meant she could use some reassurance on that front.

She still had one class left, so she probably wouldn’t be able to respond for a while anyway.

Once that was done I put my phone back in my pocket and mentally prepared myself for what
was no doubt going to be another interrogation.

Joy.

Walking into the Ward’s common room felt like walking into an intervention, except with more
smirks and shit eating grins, as well as a very confused Vista on console.

Even Chris was pointing a grin at me, and I was still under the impression that I terrified him.

Everyone who had replied in the group chat was sitting in the leisure area, relaxing on couches
and comfy chairs, all had turned to face me as I walked in. Carlos and Dean were still out on
patrol and Sophia was still in school.

I suppressed a sigh, thoughts of asking for help on PHO went out the window as I stared back at
them.

Missy broke the silence, “I still don’t understand why this is such a big deal.”

“Tut tut young Vista” did Dennis really just say ‘tut tut’ out loud? “If you read Taylor’s text than
you should know that there are several things that could be considered ‘a big deal’ in that.”

Riley broke in next, “Like that you were talking to Amy before her sister interrogated you.”

“Or that you would willingly be interrogated by anyone without finding a way to rip their head
off.” The fact that Chris’s face was serious when he said that worried me.

Ruth spoke next, “And what did you mean by ‘tragic backstory’?!” The unasked question about
what the rumors didn’t cover about my time at Winslow unvoiced.

I was impressed that they asked the questions in such a quick and succinct way, but… “Hey Vista,
how long did they spend practicing asking all of that?”

All of them broke eye contact when I asked that and Missy grinned, “They started brainstorming
and rehearsing that about a minute after you didn’t respond in the group chat.

I looked back at the people sitting on the couches, “Why are you all so interested?”

They looked at each other then back at me, some kind of silent agreement going on between them.
The first one to speak was Ruth, “Honestly? I’m curious about the rumors and this ‘tragic backstory’ thing. You’ve been remarkably tight lipped about your time at Winslow and your…unique attitude toward Sophia just makes me more curious about it.” So much for going unasked.

But that’s as good a place to start as any, “The whole ‘tragic backstory’ thing was me quoting Vicky, I already said that. She called it that when I told her about how Winslow is as an institution, it’s shitty, and how I didn’t have any friends there.” I saw their faces change when I said that and quickly added, “I have friends outside of school, I just never really had any good experiences there, so I never really felt the need to try.” Although that wasn’t the whole truth, but I wasn’t about to parade my trust issues around just yet. “Which was fine because it gave me more time to focus on being Camo Girl.”

“Friend outside of school?” Dennis started wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, “Any secret boyfriends we should know about?”

I gave him a nonplussed look, “I work out with a guy that’s six four, he’s a good friend. Maybe I’ll introduce you to him sometime.”

That shut him up.

Chris piped up next, “I’m honestly surprised you got Panacea to talk to you, she’s…pretty much known for never talking to anyone except her sister. What did you do to get that conversation started?”

I opened my mouth but quickly shut it, I probably shouldn’t talk about how I broke the school rules and went up to the roof to meet Panacea while she was smoking cigarettes.

“…I met her in the hallway.” A perfectly believable lie.

The unimpressed looks that everyone in the room gave me told me it was not.

I suppressed a sigh and feeling petulant said, “Fine, it’s private so I’m not telling any of you.”

I saw Bones, who was sitting next to Ruth on a couch, widen her eyes in a pseudo hurt look.

I really did sigh this time, “Maybe later Riley.” She probably wouldn’t keep it a secret long, but I’ll just tell her not to talk about my brazen dismissal of school rules inside of HQ.

The speed at which Riley went from nearly crying to smiling brightly would have given a normal person emotional whiplash.

“And don’t think I didn’t see you wiggling your eyebrows again Dennis” I saw Dennis unconsciously straighten his posture when I said that.

“Me?” He put his hand on his heart, mock offended, “I would never do something so low class as that when a friend mentions private meetings. With an open cape. Who is known to speak to no one other than her sister and blows off any other attempts at conversation with glares and sneers.”

Then I saw Dennis, Chris and Ruth look between Riley and I, Ruth shrugged and said, “I think the saying ‘birds of a feather flock together’ can be applied here.” And the other two nodded sagely.

I honestly didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’m still surprised that you let Glory Girl interrogate you, I mean, I remember her posting on
PHO how you pretty much blew her off whenever you met last year.” I think this has been the most that I have heard Chris talk ever since I joined.

I waved my hand in the air flippantly, “Glory Girl is just a teenage cape that wants to beat up bad guys, Victoria Dallon is an older sister that wants to be sure her little sister isn’t being corrupted or hurt by ‘the Delinquent Queen of Winslow’, which can make her be a hell of a lot scarier than any cape.”

Dennis snapped as if he had an epiphany and said, “Like how meeting your SO’s parents can be scarier than staring down Hookwolf.”

I almost nodded in agreement before I fully registered what he just said, “I am not dating Amy!” And I beat down the blush I was feeling, this had nothing on what Glory Girls aura did to me.

Dennis spread his arms out nonchalantly, “Don’t worry Taylor, Ruth and me are bi and everyone else doesn’t care about that stuff” and then he gestured to a chair for me to sit and talk, “We’ll support you no matter who you choose to date.” And I would have taken that as a serious attempt to get me to talk about my feelings if not for the shit eating grin that was taking up half of his face.

Filing that tidbit of information away, I decided on a different tack to move the conversation away from my relationship, I mean friendship! With Amy.

“Missy? Are Carlos and Dean back from patrol yet?”

“Yeah, they got back in a few minutes ago and should be almost done with their debrief. Why?”

I looked at Dennis, donning a mysterious smile, “I think it’s time for some dynamic close quarters power training for Dennis, and Armsmaster told me he would prefer to have Aegis supervise any training I did on the mats with you all.” I saw the smug grin and color drain from Dennis’s face.

But then he rallied, “Wait, power training? I get to use my power as I fight you.”

I answered him with a smile still on my face, “Yep, you need to be able to take down an experienced fighter if they get close to you.”

“Pfft, this’ll be easy.” Although he still looked a little uneasy at my confidence.

Still smiling, I started walking towards my room before remembering something and stopping, “Also, Glenn wants me to get some help with learning about public perception on PHO, can anyone help me with that after I teach Dennis a lesson?”

All three girls in the room raised their hands, Dennis still looked uneasy and Chris just looked confused, “Why would Glenn make you…” but he trailed off, looking contemplative.

I guess it’s going to be a PHO viewing party then, I turned back towards the private rooms, saying a “Thanks!” over my shoulder as I went to get dressed for a workout.

When I got to my room I took out all three of my phones to charge them, but I noticed I had a new message on my burner phone. I flipped open the brick and saw a text from an unknown number.

-I would like to speak with you. Is 10 pm on Wednesday at 2218 Marsh Rd possible?-

Then a second message.

-This is the person you helped get away from a dangerous acquaintance last weekend. If this is not the person who did this please disregard this message.-
I barked out a surprised laugh at the awkwardness of the messages, I wonder what Browbeat wants to talk about. It looks like I'll have to talk to Piggot before I leave today.

I sent -I'll get back to you by tomorrow- then plugged my phone into a charger and began changing.

Can't get ahead of myself, got to keep my priorities straight, beating up Dennis first, then PHO, then Piggot, then I can work out the details of my meeting with Browbeat.

Chapter End Notes

Vicky won't let feelings happen without her express approval, because Amy deserves the best. Also, in Taylor's mind this training is called "How long can I beat up Dennis before he freezes me?" Which is longer than you'd think.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, Vista
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.
• Twenty posts per page
• Last ten messages in private message history.
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

Topic: New Vigilante in the Bay
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Feb 27th 2010:
So we all know that someone has been going around and taking down Merchant drug houses.
What we haven't known is who's been doing it because whoever it was only left unconscious
Merchant thugs in their wake (after calling the police to tell them the Merchants were ready for
pickup).
Well, now we have a face for who it was (figuratively that is), because he was seen being chased
around the Bay last night by Skidmark and Mush for (at least) two hours.
We can assume that the cape got away considering the Merchants only stopped causing trouble
after the Protectorate got involved (thank you Miss Militia and Velocity).
This new cape was wearing black cargo pants, combat boots, a camo army jacket and a scarf
wrapped around his face (edit: balaclava).
If anyone has any more info on him, name, powers and other stuff that he's done, please comment
below.

Edit: I apologize, the camo cape is a girl. Judging by their voice in this video.
Edit2: She has not come out and given a name, please stop trying to just label her whatever you
feel like.
Edit3: The mods have decided Camo Girl would be the best name to give the cape until they
officially give a name to the public, this thread has also been locked and all comments and
discussions about Camo Girl should be moved to the appropriate threads

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Lo A Quest
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
I saw someone wearing a camo jacket booking it near my neighborhood from my window, and it's
near the edge of merchant territory. didn't see mush or skidmark tho

bothad
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
the cape's a chick (link, sorry for shaky cam, i was supposed to be in bed), my parents were on the porch smoking last night when someone with a covered face and camo jacket ran by and warned them that skid/mush were chasing her and that they should get inside, then she booked it down the street.
she was fast, not like mover fast, but it might be a minor power or she's just really good at running

Lo A Quest
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
you sure the capes a girl? voice sounds wierd

Laser Augment
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
It makes sense for her to try and change her voice while in costume, you wouldn't want someone recognizing you because of your voice right? But there's definitely a feminine undertone to her voice, good vid @bothad

bookgirl95
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
She's probably a thinker, are there any other people who've caught her on video?

Aku-42
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
fuck ya! now we got 2 vigilates doing more work than prt and new wave put together. this new chick and shadow stalker should team up to end the gangs in bb

Laser Augment
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
Oh yes, two (probably teenage) girls are going to team up and take down Lung and Hookwolf.

Then they'll probably go kill Nilbog as well.

Think before you post idiot, there's no way they can do more than the Protectorate and New Wave. (I admire what they're trying to do but try and stay realistic here.

IMPlacable
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
she got a nice voice but it looks like she could use some help if the merchants are giving her
trouble :)

►Childrizzle
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
So anybody got a name for the Miss Militia knock-off?

►Lo A Quest
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
I was gonna say mister militia before the whole girl thing, maybe mini militia?

►bothad
Replied On Feb 27th 2010:
wouldnt work, the chick is tall. my dads like 6 foot and she was about the same height, miss militia is like 5' 4 or something

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 23, 24, 25

Topic: Camo Girl power analysis, examination and (civil) discussion
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)
White Fairy (Original Poster)
Posted On Mar 28th 2010:
Since Camo Girl's other thread was beginning to run rampant speculation (with help from the tin hats) regarding Camo Girl's possible powers, I decided to make this thread. Please try and give evidence or a logical (as far as powers go) explanation for what you think her powers are and be civil and courteous of other people.

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►WhedonRipperFan
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
I'm just saying that she acts like a bit of a bitch! That's like personality trait number 1 for any kind of thinker. I'm just pointing out that could point toward her being a thinker. This is literally a thread about discussing Camo Girl's powers, why are people picking up torches against me for pointing this out. :( 
Need_More_Frames
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
you guys are missing the forest for the trees.
camo girl is obviously an android developed by dragon and arsmaster. if anyone can make a fully
functional android it would be those two.

As for why, theyre trying to distract and gather information on the gangs. they started with
marchents for field testing because they dont have as much firepower as the other gangs.

Clockblocker (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
Hello all, just worked with Camo Girl for the first time today to help her stop the Merchants from
setting up shop near the Boardwalk (and boy did that get me in trouble) and heres all that sweet
sweet info you guys want.
Brute 3 (manhandles merchants like its going out of style) Mover 2 (I only saw flashes of green
and brown for the most part) Thinker 2 (at the least) Stranger 1 (probably) Trump 2 (just covering
my bases) and Scary 12

Lo A Quest
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
Hey Clockblocker!
Wow that's a lot of power classifications, and "Scary 12"? Can you explain???

Clockblocker (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
Sure, I can explain!

she terrifies me

Lo A Quest
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
What do you mean by that? What happened?

Vista (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
Clockblocker is exaggerating. She might have a Brute 1 rating judging by how she threw some of
the Merchants around, but that might be combat thinker/martial arts skills instead.

audri
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
OMG what if she's a master that cause fear in people, but then she gets stronger (higher brute
rating) the more people that are scared within her range?
uska12
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
That would be counter productive, assuming her range is like a bubble around her, scaring people would (half of the time) make them run away, therefore weakening her. That kind of power would only work if the emotion her power cause was like anger or something. It would make people want to stay their ground and fight, helping her maintain the boost the emotions give her.

IMPlacable
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
I got a vid of her using her powers! (seriously click the link!!) You'll never guess what kind of power she's been hiding this whole time!!!!

User received an infraction for this post: trolling does not add to the discussion.

Whackograve
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
OH FUCK YOU!!! Get that shit out of this thread!! YOURE NOT FUNNY!!!

Perfectgeneral
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
CamoGirl is a super soldier. She got injected with a special serum that makes you ripped, 'roid up and reinforces your body (Glory Girl said that she saw Camo Girl take of her jacket and said she was cut as hell). Then they trained her for a few months with special forces and unarmed combat specialists (Thats how she beats up and throws around thugs without breaking a sweat). Why? Because she made them do it. Her focus is silent rage. She channels it all into will power.

White Fairy (Original Poster)
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
Alright, the tinfoil hats are coming out in full force. Can someone make a Camo Girl conspiracy thread so all the crazies can go there and we can go back to a more realistic discussion of what the everloving fuck her powers actually are without the "Oh she's an alien sent to test humans" or "she's an android made by a tinker" people poping up every other reply. (Also, did you just copy that super serum thing from a comic book? This is real life man)

Need_More_Frames
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
I can see when MY IDEAS aren't appreciated so here is the new thread for the intellectuals that want to know who/what Camo Girl REALLY IS.

T_Am_Eye
Replied On Dec 10th 2010:
"Camo Girl: Alien or Android?"
meh, should be good for a few laughs
Topic: Camo Girl activity log and discussion
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay Discussion (Public Board)
Bagrat (Original Poster) (Veteran Member) (The Guy in the Know)
Posted On Mar 13th 2010:
I'm making an official thread for "Camo Girl" (using this name until further notice). This is a board for posting and discussing sightings and videos of Camo Girl.
Edit: Someone made a new thread for discussing her possible powers here, please use it instead of this thread
Edit2: Please stop assuming Camo Girl and Shadow Stalker are dating, they are both (most likely) teenagers and saying anything regarding it will result in an infraction (or ban)
Edit3: This thread now encompasses Bones's activities since they appear to have partnered up.
Also Bones is a kid keep your nastiness off the thread

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►Whackograve
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
What did I tell all of you! Last year she had a run in with Skidmark and Mush and she disapeared for a few weeks, but then she came back, kicking ass and taking names like nothing happened. If anything, she was doing it even better than before!
Now we're almost a month out from her fight with Lung, radio silence and all, SO CAMO GIRL AND BONES CAPTURE ALL THE MERCHANT CAPES AS THEIR RETURN TO THE SCENE!!

►Segev
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
I'm bringing it up again.
*deep breath* Camo Girl is clearly a front being put on by the PRT as they engage the gangs in a more proactive way. There's no way a single Cape could do all that on her own (even with the addition of bones); she'd HAVE to have backing. I bet it's actually a crack team of PRT officers but they all wear the same clothes to maintain the illusion.

Plus the PRT helped both of them out by the end of the night.

EDIT: YOU ALL KNOW IM RIGHT STOP BOOING ME!
Brockonite03 (Veteran Member)
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
This is your last warning. Thin hats should go back to the android or alien thread instead of derailing the topic here. This is about Camo Girl's (and now Bones's) activities. Not who can yell their conspiracy theories the loudest.

Bones (Verified Saw) (Verified Cape)
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
It was so much fun! Until the Protectorate came and rained on my parade like the party poopers they are. I had already captured Squealer, I could have totally beaten down Skidmark by myself.
also @bothad how’d you figure it out? ;)

White Fairy
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
Please don’t encourage the crazies Bones, it only makes them more unbearable when they think a cape believes them.
Also, what does "Verified Saw" mean?

Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
@Bones We received a call about sounds of a cape fight in the area and came to investigate. It is our responsibility to stop those fights from getting out of hand and minimizing collateral damage.
We are not "party poopers".

Lo A Quest
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
Didn't Camo Girl beat the shit out of Hookwolf last night too? Like I heard her and bones were both attacking the merchants at different places and she captured mush and then hookwolf showed up. He ended up running away or something.
I think the rumors of her being a brute might be real if that's true o_0

Reave (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
Protectorate forces intercepted Hookwolf after he confronted Camo Girl. She had called in the capture of Mush before seeing the Empire cape and was able to distract him long enough for the Protectorate members sent to retrieve Mush to get on site and help.

Lo A Quest
Replied On Mar 27th 2011:
@Reave sounds fake but ok

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Chapter End Notes

Not sure how I feel about this chapter, I wrote none of it in word (i used some online PHO thing) so the whole process felt different than when I write a normal chapter. But it got to a point that I thought would be a good place to stop so here you all go.

I'm going on vacation next weekend so if I don't have another chapter out by then it will probably be more than 2 weeks before the next chapter is done. Just a heads up.

Just in case it's hard to tell, first thread is about a month after Camo Girl starts going out, the second is after she gets Vista and Clockblocker to help her take on some Merchants (from the Wards chapter) and the last one is from the day after Camo Girl and Bones took out the Merchant's capes (about a day before this chapter)
March 30th, 2011 (Wednesday)

-Two days after talking with Amy and Vicky on the roof-

Wednesday meant family breakfast, and family breakfast meant omelets. It was something mom tried to start back when she was alive, but never something that really took off, with rushed mornings to make early classes and dad’s early days at the docks. So I decided to bring back the attempted tradition about a year ago, a month or two after Camo Girl’s first appearance, in an attempt to try and become a part of dad’s life again.

Even if it was slow going at first, even though it made me wake up earlier for my morning runs on Wednesdays and even though it barely helped soothe the guilt of sneaking out at least once a week to be Camo Girl. Because we normally missed each other in the mornings and I started spending all my evenings training, volunteering or looking for Merchants, so I decided that losing a bit of sleep and waking up early would be worth the chance for us to actually talk.

I started doing it because one of us had to take the first step, and dad was barely getting the dockworkers by, while being a vigilante made me feel like I was on cloud nine for the first time since mom died. Therefore, I had to, needed to make that first attempt to bring dad back from whatever hole mom’s death had put him in.

Because if I didn’t try, who would?

And I think it was actually beginning to help. The empty greetings and farewells in the mornings slowly started becoming deeper than surface level conversations while Dad and I prepped and cooked our omelets together.

It was nice.

Even if I never mentioned my lack of friends at school, even if I always steered the conversation away from Emma and why she never comes over anymore, I would talk to dad about what I was learning at school and what new move I learned at the dojo or with Brian at the gym. And dad would tell me about how some of the guys at work found ways to make their jobs fun, but drove home the fact they only did it when they were one hundred percent sure that it was safe to do so, because what kind of parent tells a story like that, and not end it with “but they were still professional enough to stay safe”.

But…

Well…

“So… how are things at the union?”

Dad looks up after taking a bite of his omelet, his face carefully blank as he chews, no doubt mirroring my own.

But I kept these things so separated from the rest of my life that I suppose it was doomed to fall apart eventually.
We still do family breakfasts on Wednesdays, but now it’s like we’re back to square one. Awkward silences followed by awkward questions followed by more awkward silences that eventually end in equally awkward answers. Rinse and repeat.

It’s my fault for that, but I never wanted him to know that I’m Camo Girl. Ever. Which I knew was a pipe dream because he would have to know about it if I joined the Wards.

Once my dad has finished chewing his bite he answers me, “About as well as it usually goes.” A beat, “The PRT called yesterday to ask permission about meeting some vigilante tonight.” His voice tinged with a bit of distaste at how he thought it was more of a formality than really asking permission.

I carefully hid my wince at that by taking another bite of my omelet.

“Yeah, a guy named Browbeat. He helped…well he pretty much took down Mush before I even found them a few nights ago.” Dad’s expression seemed to warm slightly when I said that Browbeat helped me, but only slightly.

“But why does it have to be you that meets him?” Is asked with more emotion than I’ve heard since I’ve joined the Wards.

“He didn’t want to meet anyone from the PRT or Protectorate on that night, and he texted me to ask if he could meet with me.” A look of concern flashed through Dad’s eyes, “I’ll also have Aegis and Kid Win waiting on a rooftop close by in case something goes wrong, but Browbeat didn’t seem like the kind of guy that would join again.” I thought back what Browbeat said that night, “I think he just wants advice about cape life, from someone not related to the Protectorate.”

I saw dad’s lip twitch slightly at the irony of that, but he quickly returned to his neutral look and I fought down a grimace. He was finally starting to enjoy life again before the Wards.

This is my fault.

Silence filled the room as we finished our breakfast.

We cleaned up the dishes and then dad made his way to the front door but stopped before he walked out of the kitchen.

“Taylor, I…I know that I can’t stop you from doing this. Not in a way that would be permanent.” This time I really did wince, but he wasn’t facing me and didn’t see it, “But can you promise me that you’ll try your best to stay safe?” I opened my mouth to say something…but nothing came out.

And then he walked out of the kitchen without another word, I heard the front door open, his old truck start and then he was driving down the street to work.

I closed my mouth with an audible clack, my mind whirling at what he asked, and what I could do to maybe fix what I’ve done to our relationship. The drift caused by mom dying was outside of either of our control, but I did this, it was my fault and I-

I took a deep breath.

I finished cleaning the kitchen and made my way to my room to get my backpack and finish preparing for the day. Those kinds of thoughts need to be shelved for later.

As I left the house for the bus stop I began thinking of just what could possibly go wrong tonight and what could be done to prevent any of those possibilities from happening.
Because even if I knew staying safe was an impossibility, I could still try my damnedest to make sure I stayed alive and ahead of the curve.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter because I wanted to write this so that I could have a better grasp on Taylor and Danny's relationship now, but I didn't think the tone would fit with the rest of the next chapter.

I've spent the past few weeks thinking about this story, where I want it to go and how I want to write it. I think I've found something I'm satisfied with.

Anyway, thanks for reading and your patience. I'm gonna try and get back on my weekly release schedule, but college is starting up next week so bear with me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!