A Finely Honed Blade

by ensou

Summary

What would you do if you could see death? If you'd touched emptiness itself, had it invade your soul, infest your mind, and whisper in your ear, telling you how to kill anything? How would you handle knowing you could never not see, never not comprehend the end of everything?

Because for Taylor, that's reality, and there are no easy answers.
Dissociation 1.1

Chapter Notes

Notice: This is Worm. Mixed with Kara no Kyoukai. With all of the implications thereof. If you've read or seen them, you're probably good. For the rest of you, there are graphic descriptions of violence, including death, dismemberment, rape, etc.

There will be trigger warnings at appropriate points for the extremely intense chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April 2011

If you've ever stared up at a seven-foot tall man who is looking down at you with promises of assured pain in his eyes while you have nothing except the effective equivalent of a butterknife in your hand, you might have some idea of what I was feeling.

If not, I can tell you:

Terror.

…

You know, there's something about the human mind to be said for the fight-or-flight response. It's quite a handy evolutionary adaptation. Unfortunately, it seems that thanks to the amazingly advanced and improved cognition that the giant mass of grey matter between our ears gives us, we have a tendency to also freeze up and simply shut down instead of reacting like we should.

For example, the thoughts running through my mind were approximately something like this:

ohgodohogodohgodIdon’twannadieWhatwasIthinking?

…Not very coherent.

“I’m going to kill you, you fucker!!”

…Yes. Thank you, Lung. As if I hadn’t already figured out that that’s what was going to happen.

There’s also something to be said about the difference between seeing a picture or video, and true experience. For example, there are more than a few pictures of Lung all dragon-ed up online. There’s a couple videos too. However, unless you’re actually there, the little details just slip past you. Like the fact that Lung is heavy, even while still human-shaped. His muscles must get a lot denser before they even start bulking up, because each time he took a step, I could feel it. I could see the asphalt spider-webbing around every step he took towards me, and I could feel the slight impact shudders that just made it harder to stand than it already was.

It was around this time that I raised my feeble excuse for a weapon in front of my face.

I know I should have tried to run. To get away. To escape. But my hind-brain was also screaming
at me not to turn around, not to turn my back to this monster. Because if I did, it would be over before I had a chance to blink, and I’d be just a bloody smear on the street.

My hand shook, the tip of the cheap knife held in reverse grip shaking even more thanks to the angular movement.

And then Lung laughed, even as he kept moving towards where I was rooted to the ground.

“You think that puny thing will do you any good here?” He managed to sound amused even while continuing to slowly grow in size.

I knew this was probably going to end very, very badly for squishy little me. Lung had fought Leviathan to a standstill! A fucking Endbringer! So… there was really no doubt what was going to happen. The question at this point was whether I was going to lie down and take it, letting him kill me without a fight, or at least attempt to do something.

I literally had nothing to lose.

I took a breath, letting it out slowly, keeping my eyes on him even as he continued to cross the twenty-foot gap between us. And just like that, the knife-point stilled.

He must have noticed, because his eyes narrowed slightly, even while gaining a sense of… recognition? respect?

Well, great. At least if I was going to die, I would know that the guy who killed me respected me in some way.

…And then he was in front of me, right arm cocked back in an obvious telegraphed move, that even I could read.

I swallowed, preparing myself for the imminent disorientation… and Looked.

Red lines crisscrossed over his body, like ever-shifting jagged wounds that would never, could never close. Small, large, curved, straight: they all stood out to me like fluorescent neon, practically whispering to me here, this is where it needs to be.

His fist accelerated, and I ducked, allowing my body to follow its instincts while dragging my knife’s edge across one of the lines on the underside of his forearm. Rolling forward into a crouch, I scrambled forward and away from him before spinning around, my knife held back up in its ready position. There was no time to let myself think about what I was doing. The moments it would take to consciously react to him would be the last ones I experienced. So I relaxed, trusting myself and the small fighting sense and muscle memory that I had seemed to gain to try and get me through this as much as it could.

Lung growled, turning to face me.

This time, he gave me no warning, crossing the distance almost instantly and whipping his left hand across to backhand me. I ducked again, feeling the air pressure of his movement as it whistled only inches above my head. If that had hit me, the force of it would have made my head explode like an overripe watermelon.

Shit.

Wasting no time, I pressed forward, my knife sinking into his thigh before I moved sideways and
to my right, the blade pulled with me along the axis of the bright red line I had impaled with only token resistance.

Lung roared in pain as I rushed to get to a safe distance again, and he looked down at the wound. He paused, as if realizing something was wrong, and then looked up to face me, his eyes narrowing dangerously as silver scales crept across his skin.

But why was he so surprised by the cuts I had given him? They were just bleed–

Holy fuck. Regeneration. Lung was supposed to be able to heal as he fought and grew, but the wounds I’d given him weren’t closing at all.

_Uh-oh._

“I’M GONNA FUCKING KILL YOU, BITCH!!”

Before I had just been a nuisance. Now I was a threat to be taken seriously. This was bad.

…And why did I feel like I was forgetting something important?

Lung rushed me again, reaching out with his right arm to grab me, but I rotated around his hand and jumped, flipping my knife around and bringing it down in a two-handed motion with all of my weight behind it. If the red lines didn’t cut like butter the blade would’ve shattered, as the place I was cutting had already been covered in scales. As it was, the knife nearly wasn’t long enough to actually slice through his entire upper arm, but with the red lines little things like that didn’t seem to matter if you were actually trying.

I moved to place my foot so that I could kick off of his side and away, but then I saw how his eyes were looking at me.

And then Lung exploded.

I was thrown away from him like I weighed nothing, tossed easily fifteen feet and nearly into one of the brick walls on the side of the street. I almost didn’t manage to get my feet under me so that I could roll and not die from having my neck snapped on impact. Still, I felt something in my left ankle give way, and almost fell down, barely catching myself. I prayed I hadn’t just broken it.

Gasping for breath, I looked over at the eight-foot tall scaled man in the middle of the street. The entire thing looked like a scene out of hell. The black tar at his feet was sagging, heat waves rolling off of the visible corona of red flame that Lung had covered himself in.

_Right. Pyrokinesis. That’s what I was forgetting._

The arm that I’d amputated lay on the ground, while the blood that was coming out of his brachial artery turned to steam almost the instant it hit the air.

“YOU MOTHERFUCKER!!!”

The next thing I knew, he was in front of me, and I couldn’t stop myself from shutting my eyes in preparation for what was going to happen next.

_Dad, I… I’m sorry._ I wish we’d talked more. Not drifted apart after mom’s death like we had. I hoped he’d forgive me for all of this, for leaving him alone.

I waited, waited for the blow I knew was coming. The blow that was going to kill me, just like Lung had promised.
I opened my eyes. My arms were held in front of me, fully extended, steadying the knife that I held like a lifeline.

The knife that was buried up to the hilt in Lung’s scaled chest.

I released my grip in shock as he began to fall, legs folding underneath him before he toppled forwards, head colliding with the sidewalk I stood on with a gigantic thud. His eyes were glazed over, not looking at anything, and the blood that had been evaporating into the air was now sluggishly spreading out beneath him.

*He’s… dead?* I thought, my mind hazy from the sudden unexpectedness of this turn of events. *…I killed him.*

I’d killed him. I recognized it, registered it, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel anything other than relief that it was *I* who was still alive, and not him. I started laughing, the adrenaline high I was feeling and endorphins in my system making me lightheaded and giddy.

*I’m alive!*

I collapsed next to him, sitting down and just staring at the cooling silver-scaled humanoid body next to me.

It was only then that I started feeling the pain in my hands, and I looked down at them. It turns out that when your hands end up in fire, they get burned. Huh.

My skin was blistering all over, some areas peeling away and bleeding freely. It looked like it should hurt a lot worse than it did. …That was probably not a good thing. Nerve damage is never good.

There was a noise at the end of the street and my head snapped up towards it without thinking. My body was tensing and still on edge, ready to act at any sign of threat. Three huge shapes melted out of the shadows, figures resolving themselves into pairs on top of the large creatures. Two girls and two guys, though one was completely covered and I could only tell because he was so tall.

“H-holy shit.” The words came from one of the girls, a blonde dressed in a skintight outfit of purple and black. She was staring at where I sat, or more accurately the body on my left, and sounded both awed and slightly terrified at the same time, which was probably a sane reaction all things considered.

“He’s dead.” Her voice wavered, as if trying to come to terms with some cosmic impossibility that she could have never foreseen.

“She… she killed Lung.”
For those of you who’ve never read/seen Kara no Kyōkai, Taylor’s power in here is the ability to see “death” (or more accurately, the metaphysical flaws that represent the conceptual death of some thing the wielder considers “alive”) as lines and interact with them such as through slicing them with a knife. The interactions are irrevocable and absolute, meaning if she kills something through them it stays dead. Panacea couldn’t regrow that limb sort of dead. It could be cauterized and replaced with a prosthetic but not regrown, as the concept of having that limb no longer exists for that person/body.

Taylor (if she were to be accurately labeled by the PRT right now) is a Striker 8, Mover 1, Thinker 2, Brute 1. Shiki Ryōgi would be Striker 12, Mover 6, Thinker 4, Brute 2, Trump 12, Bullshit 17. Seriously. I based this on the Versus Wiki. Taylor has the potential to get to Shiki’s level, maybe even further with the amount of conflict she gets into and the way she pushes herself. We’ll have to see.

I’ve gotten a couple comments about people being glad to see this done as a crossover. Wellll. Oddly enough there are other Worm/Nasu crossovers. I didn’t know about them either until I posted the first chapter of this on SV back in March. If you’re interested they’re all on SpaceBattles:

- **Matter of Perception** by Olive - Another KnK MEoDP!Taylor fic. Status: Dead
- **Remaining Sense of Pain** by Alan Spencer - Mystic Eyes of Distortion (Asagami Fujino)!Taylor. Status: Hiatus or Dead
- **Imperfect Delusion** by illhousen - Canon-compliant post-epilogue oneshot with our favorite puppet lady. Also on fanfiction.net
- **We Form in Crystals** by Souffle - Taylor-as-ORT (Type Mercury) or, Magical Girl Eldritch ORT-chan. Status: Updated in February, assumed to still be alive. Also on Sufficient Velocity
- **The Bluest Eyes** by Gorgoneion - Yet another MEoDP!Taylor fic. Status: Dead - Hidden really well. Stumbled across it in my research. Only two chapters, unfortunately: 0.1 and 1.1, post #'s 14775990 and 14778177
- **Tranquil Abyss** by Arafell - Avenger!Taylor. Status: Dead
January 2011

It’s said that when we’re pushed to our limits, broken, crushed, to the point where we can’t fight back, that’s when we find out who we really are, what defines us. And if we survive, we can come out stronger for it.

For me, that moment was the moment I died.

I died surrounded by nothing. No friends. No family. Nothing except for the cold metal walls that pressed against me from all sides and the disgusting rotted waste beneath me. It smelled like death warmed over underneath the sharp tang of rust and hydrochloric acid, all thanks to the fermented blood and my late contribution of the contents of my stomach.

The maggots certainly liked it.


[Destination]

(Agreement)

I saw a vision. Two things large beyond imagination traveled in an empty void, particles trailing them like a contrail, twinkling like the dust and shards of diamond left over from a jeweler’s cutting. They were somehow both there and not there at the same time. The didn’t just move forwards, but sideways, folding and rotating inwards on themselves only to expose other organs and tissues, even as they spiraled apart from each other.

[Hive]

They spoke, and somehow I understood.

(Agreement), the other replied

The creatures came to an understanding, using their language without words or phrases but instead pure concepts, agreeing where their helical dance would take them, converging on a blue marble that grew as they got closer.

[Danger]

(Confident)

Something was wrong, and the number of just-as-incomprehensibly-large-yet-smaller pieces falling off of them increased. My view shifted so that the blue sphere was at my back. One of the pieces, the shards, the fragments, descended towards me.

<Integra–>

And then there was nothing.
A veritable sea of nothing, yet also everything. Limitless possibility and infinite existence. A place where time was meaningless, but encompassed all instants.

「」

If the creatures I had seen were incomprehensible, then this was impossible to even consider. But I still somehow perceived it:

A vortex. A maelstrom. The rotation of Totality; a collection of *everything*, revolving into a compressed central point.

The universal singularity.

It drew me in. But instead of falling into, I fell *through*, like water through sand. And at the moment that I was *in*, before I was *through*, I *saw*.

I saw Nothing, and was changed for it.

<--tion>
<Failure>
>Error>

<Revival>

<Integration>
<Success>
Yeah, I know the previous chapter was the ever-annoying locker scene and that yes, it was pretty stereotypical. This is my first Worm story, and as much as I hate pandering to tropes, the small things in that chapter are massively important and have a much greater impact on the story than is obvious at first glance. I was very deliberate in choosing the tone and thoughts I did, and I’ll be curious what you guys think of the changes that butterfly out because of it (besides the obvious ones) once they make themselves known.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

April 2011

I suppose I should explain exactly how it is that I ended up going toe-to-toe with (arguably) one of the world’s strongest capes.

… I would also like to preface this by saying that it totally wasn’t my fault. At all. Nope. Nuh-uh.

See, it turns out that a side effect of seeing wounds in the fabric of reality 24/7 is that it makes nightmares worse, not better. I can usually ignore it all, just… not focus on them so that they sort of fade from my perception even though I know they’re still there. But sometimes, it gets really, really hard.

Tonight was one of those nights. The really bad nights. The ones where I wake up shivering, drenched in cold sweat, my pajamas clinging to my body, and the first thing I notice is everything around me falling apart, without even opening my eyes.

sliced apart, separation along oblique transverse plane, velocity 4.905 m/s

I found out the first week that I don’t actually need my eyesight to see any of it. The cracks are still there in the darkness. I can never not see them. Just ignore them. It took some research, but the best description I have is that it’s like some warped, unholy version of synesthesia, except that whatever my visual perception is crossed over with isn’t something that normal people have.

It isn’t something that anybody should have.

When I was growing up, Alexandria was my favorite cape. Not Eidolon, and his seemingly-unlimited plethora of powers that let him adapt to any situation. Not Legend, who did things with lasers that make absolutely no fucking sense. It was Alexandria, the woman who stood at the top, indomitable.

And so, obviously, I wished I could be like her if I ever got powers. I’d be able to fly, to weather anything thrown at me, to be strong enough to fight whatever I had to. My powers would be freeing, they would let me be better.

But no. It just wasn’t in the cards, I guess.

Instead, I got saddled with this… thing that forces me to see every single flaw around me, and
haunts even my dreams. A living nightmare. A lucid dream that I can never wake up from. Because if I don’t pay attention, if I don’t focus on not focusing, seeing would become seeing. And if it got too far, everything would begin falling apart, as if separated perfectly along their lines by steel wire.

There is nothing more disturbing than watching your father’s heart fall out of his suddenly-bisected chest into three pieces, still beating, while the rest of his body slowly slid apart, revealing perfect cross-sections of bone and chest and brain-in-skull and—

Stop.

Most of the time, it doesn’t happen anymore. I’ve gotten to the point where I can control my focus and all the falling-apart stuff doesn’t show itself as often. Most of the time. Waking up emotionally distressed is one of those times where I fail.

It’s worse in places with lots of things. More things means more cracks. More cracks means more places for things to… break down. Go to pieces.

My room has lots of things. Bookshelves crumble, beds collapse, desks fall apart, etcetera etcetera. And that’s not even counting the small things like the books themselves or the pictures and their frames. Outside, on the other hand, doesn’t have lots of things. At worst, I can see a tree fall, a hydrant split apart, or a car separate along random axes and reveal its six-cylinder engine.

It also helps when it’s the dead of night, and there are rarely any people.

I’m not stupid, though. It’s Brockton Bay. Home of three seriously fucked-up gangs. I have my pepper-spray and my pocket-knife. ’Course, that wouldn’t really do me much good against a gun, but I figure that if somebody’s able to get close enough that I’m worrying about the gun even when their eyes are full of capsaicin, then I’m pretty much done for anyways.

Although after tonight, I might have to reevaluate the whole “not stupid” thing. Because not paying attention to where you’re walking, wandering into the Docks, ending up in the middle of ABB territory, and then getting into a deathmatch with Lung is pretty high up there in the list of possible fuckups.

I mean, yeah, I have the excuse that I was more focused on getting myself to calm down, and I had by the time I ran into Lung, but still.

Whatever. It’s not like I can do anything about it now.

Drawing myself out of my thoughts, I shifted my head from the blonde on the giant red meat-monster thing to look back down at Lung. A cooling, dead Lung.

…There was probably a good joke in there somewhere. If there was, it more than likely involved me being part of the punchline.

I don’t know if I just have some of the worst luck in the world or what, but the chances of all of this happening, me running into Lung when he already seemed agitated and more importantly alone, had to be astronomical. And yet I defied standard logic and managed to get myself caught up in it anyways.

Once he’d seen me, I’d known that I was fucked. A white girl, by herself, in the middle of the night, deep in ABB territory, in front of a pre-pissed-off Lung? Yeah. You get the idea. Worse, for some reason he seemed to think that I was deliberately there to face him or something. Which is why he’d gone from ‘boiling pressure-cooker’ to ‘exploding dragon of doom’ in 0.6 seconds.
Looking at the people on the quadrupedal monsters, I was starting to think that maybe he hadn’t been wrong, that there was a good reason he had been as angry as he was, but I was just the wrong person.

“Wait… what?”

I looked up at the words, the sound having broken my reverie. The voice this time came from the shorter of the two guys. He was dressed in a very ren-faire costume, skintight leggings and everything, with a simple silver crown on his head. “She fucking did what!?”

“She killed Lung,” the purple girl answered, like that was all that needed to be said. And then she shook her head, as if clearing it, and dropped off of the side of the creature-thing to land on her feet with a solid ‘thump’. The ren-faire boy clambered off after her, following behind as she walked towards where I still sat on the gritty cement sidewalk.

I kept my eyes on them, but let my left hand creep towards where my knife was still embedded up to the hilt in Lung’s chest, trying to avoid wincing from the pain I could feel from my burnt hands. The other two people got off their mounts and followed at a distance, the gigantic creatures seeming to gravitate towards the one I assumed was controlling them.

The blonde girl must have seen my hand drifting, because at ten feet away, she stopped, raising her hands in a placating gesture. “Hey, easy, we’re not going to do anything to you, we just wanted to see what was going on.” I was still wary, but allowed my muscles to relax slightly. It helped that I really didn’t want to move. My muscles were making their displeasure with my attempt to push them too far known. “I’m really sorry about all of this. Nobody else was supposed to get dragged into it.”

It? What was she talking about about?

She smirked, but then it melted off of her face into a grimace. “This was between us and Lung. He was aiming for us because we hit one of his casinos. We were trying to figure out how to deal with him, but it looks like we didn’t need to bother, huh? …Thanks for that, by the way.”

I didn’t really know what to say, so I stayed quiet, trying to see where she was going with all of this.

Except she didn’t continue, instead she glanced over at the guy in the black outfit and gave him an incomprehensible look.

“Oh. Yeah, thanks.” He didn’t say anything else, instead just staring at Lung and all of the blood that had leaked out of his stump of a right arm. It was easy to tell where he was looking, even with the skull-mask motorcycle helmet, just because the faceplate was facing exactly towards the body. I guess if I were in his place I’d be staring too.

The blonde rolled her eyes and looked back at me. “Ignore Grue. I’m Tattletale. That’s Regent,” she pointed over at the boy with the crown who was poking the giant dismembered arm in the middle of the road with his foot, “and behind me is Bitch. Or Hellhound if you want to be PC.”

The girl who was being referred to growled from her place next to one of the big creatures, her arm on its head. I got the sense that she didn’t really like the second name.

The thin boy (Regent) turned around and walked over to Tattletale, looking down at me. “So who’re you supposed to be? You got a name?”

I opened my mouth, but Tattletale cut me off. “Of course she doesn’t. Can’t you see the way she’s
dressed?” What was wrong with the way I was dressed? It was just my normal clothes: jeans, a t-shirt and a dark-colored hoodie.

“Hey, I was just curious,” he defended.

Tattletale sighed. “Either way, you should probably get those looked at,” she noted, looking pointedly at my hands. “Go to a hospital or something.”

I followed her line of sight. Were they really that bad? …Well they *looked* pretty bad, and I probably shouldn’t be trusting my sense of pain right now. But how the hell was I supposed to explain burns like this to my Dad? ‘Hey Dad, I got into a fight with an eight-foot dragon-man and got my hands burnt so badly they’re numb. But don’t worry, I totally got him back for it.’

The girl’s face shifted to an expression of… sympathy? And then her head twisted to the right, looking down the street. “Damn. We’ve gotta go.”

Her eyes returned to me, flickering down to my hands and back up. “…Fuck,” she muttered, as if resigning herself to something. “Alright. C’mon. We’re not leaving you here to deal with them yourself just for saving us. Will you let us take you somewhere, at least?”

I thought about it.

I could either take them up on their offer, which seemed to be in good faith, and go wherever they took me, or I could try walking home, bleeding, with my possibly-broken ankle, despite not knowing where the hell I was.

…Yeaaahh, no. I’m not *that* dumb.

I slowly nodded. “Okay,” I agreed. The girl grinned slightly, showing teeth, and crossed the ten feet between us, moving behind me.

“No, I’m going to help you up, okay?”

Not waiting for me to respond, she grabbed my right upper arm and helped me stand up, letting me take my own weight once I was balanced. I winced from the pain that shot through my leg, but Tattletale helped me walk forward, not letting go of my arm as she led me towards the giant creatures. “Regent, grab her knife. Grue, stop staring at the dead man and help me get her up on Brutus.”

‘Regent’ dutifully followed her order, simply walking over to Lung, rolling him over with his foot, and pulling my knife out from between his chest with a wet sucking sound before wiping the blade off on the tattered remnants of Lung’s pants. That seemed to shock Grue out of his trance, and he strode quickly over to where we were next to one of the giant things. Tattletale climbed up first and held out a hand for me. I reached for it, but unlike what I expected she grabbed my wrist, Grue lift-slash-pushing me up as I moved to be in front of her.

“What’re we taking her?” he asked. It was the first time I’d heard him speak, and all it did was make me wonder what he was like underneath the mask. His voice was deep and smooth, and I struggled to come up with a face that might match what it sounded like.

“Home.” Grue stopped mid-stride, having been walking back towards one of the other beasts. “It’s not like we can take her to her house like this, it’ll be easier if we drive her home.” She sighed, sounding exasperated. “And yes, by we I mean you. If it really bothers you that much you can keep your costume on. But we really need to go. *Now*.”

He stood there for a moment, before his helmet jerked up then down mechanically. “Fine.”
Grue turned around and continued over to the creature where Regent was standing, both of them getting on while Bitch mounted her own creature. Tattletale reached around my waist and gripped some of the bony protrusions that stuck out of the red muscular flesh, holding me in place. Bitch whistled, and the animals beneath us began moving away from where we’d been in bounds, turning a corner at the end of the road and then picking up speed.

I heard the distant sound of a motorcycle engine behind us, but it quickly faded at the speed we were going.

I’d like to say that I could remember everything about what it was like. But the reality of it was I was more focused on not falling off than anything else. The lights and sounds were a blur, and the ride was jerky due to the creature’s gait. I think we were moving North, out of the south end and more into the heart of the Docks, but I couldn’t really tell.

Before I knew it, we were slowing down in front of an old factory made of red brick. It was huge, at least half a block long, and two or three stories as well, with a large, rusty metal door at one end.

Once we’d stopped, Tattletale hopped off and then held out a hand. I tried to get off as gracefully as possible, but… I’m not exactly the most graceful person in the first place, even without injuries. So instead of merely stepping off, I more half-slid-half-fell into Tattletale’s arms, yelping in surprise as she actually caught me and managed to get me on my feet without falling over herself.

When I looked over at her, her grin was even larger than the last time I’d seen her face. I flushed in embarrassment and looked away. Turning my attention elsewhere, anywhere else, I saw Regent walking towards a small door set in the building’s side. He opened it and strode in, the door closing behind him soundlessly. The creatures around us were shrinking, the red muscle and bony plates disappearing. Bitch whistled, and I guess there was something different than the one she’d done before, because all of the now mini-monsters bounded over to her, where she started looking them over.

Something grabbed my wrist, and I jerked my head back around to find Tattletale holding it. “C’mon, over this way.” I took a painful step forward, and hissed. It felt like it was swelling up. I heard a muttered “Tch”, and then she’d put my arm over her shoulder, supporting me as I stumbled alongside her to wherever she was leading.

Honestly, it wasn’t exactly like I had a fucking choice.

She brought me over to a largish shed I hadn’t noticed early that had one of those metal doors that slid upwards and halted. “Hey, Grue, can you get the door?”

A grunt came from behind us, and then the leather-clad figure walked around Tattletale towards the lock at the base of the door, pulling a key from a pocket somewhere. He popped the lock off, and then lifted the door silently, against all odds. I’d expected it to screech a little, based on the rust on the outside of it, but I guess that was the point, hiding that there was anything there.

A generic blue sedan sat just inside, and Tattletale walked me over to the passenger side door before I got a chance to really look at it. It was a bit tricky getting in, but it was managed and I was finally sitting on the cheap beige pleather seat.

“Alright. A couple things. First: You didn’t meet us. We were never at the south Docks, and you want to hide what happened from whoever you’re going home to. So, two: Stay at home or play sick or something tomorrow so they don’t find out about tonight. Third: tomorrow night, Brockton General, six o’clock. If you go there then, you’ll get treated, okay? Take a cab or something, you
can do that, right?” I didn’t have a chance to respond before she continued. “No, of course not.”

She bit her lip, and then unzipped a pocket I hadn’t even seen on her suit and pulled out a few bills, taking one and putting the rest back. “Here, use this for the fare. Least we can do. Seriously. You don’t know just what you saved us from.” She held out the money, and then winced and put it in my jacket pocket for me. “Put some ice on your hands and ankle as soon as you get home. In ziplock bags or something. Try and keep it there overnight if you can.”

I nodded, accepting her advice.

“And, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about getting you into this. Really,” Tattletale grinned. “But it was nice meeting you, even considering the circumstances.”

The door on the other side of the car closed, and I looked over to see Grue, still in costume, sticking a key in the ignition and turning the engine on. My own door closed, courtesy of Tattletale, and she walked out of the garage to stand at the side as we pulled out.

Grue pulled onto the road without a word, and I looked out of the mirror on my right only to see Tattletale disappear into the factory.

The trip home was done in silence.

I don’t think there’s ever been a more awkward car ride in the history of car rides. I didn’t try to say anything to Grue other than how to get over to my house when he had asked, and I got the feeling that he was even avoiding looking over at me.

Like I said. Awkward.

We pulled up in front of my house, and I expected to have to try and painfully fumble my way out of the car on my own, but surprisingly Grue got out and came over to open the door for me, helping me stand up by pulling me out by my wrist.

He didn’t walk me any further, though.

I heard the sound of the door closing behind me as I hobbled to the front door, and then the driver’s side door as well, before he pulled away, driving off down the road.

He could’ve at least waited and made sure I got inside, right?

Getting the door open was a bit difficult, but I managed and slipped inside, closing it behind me as quietly as possible. Not turning on any lights, I went into the kitchen and made some bags of ice like Tattletale had suggested, shoving them into my jacket pockets before going up the stairs. I tried to not make any sounds, which was a bit hard with my ankle throbbing the way it was and feeling like I would collapse at any moment. Against all odds, I made it to my room without waking my dad up or any other incidents.

I gave up on getting my clothes off after the ridiculous effort and even greater amount of cursing removing my jacket and shirt off had involved, deciding it was a wash. Because fuck it, I’d just have to get them back on tomorrow, and I didn’t want to deal with that shit.

But wouldn’t you know it, lying under my covers, ice on my hands and ankle, staring up at the ceiling, I couldn’t regret going outside, even with everything it had led to. Even the slight persistent pressure in my head that I got from the cracks wasn’t there, silent for the first time in month.

I smiled despite myself, and fell asleep easier than I had in years.
Chapter End Notes

Taylor has a tendency to take Very Enthusiastic Walks.
January 2011

“I need a four hundred ccs of nitro and ventilation!”

“We’re losing her!”

A flat green line. A lack of punctuation, of the previously incessant beeping.

There was a flurry of activity, of haste and motion drowned out by a monotonous, seemingly
never-ending tone.

“Clear!”

A sharp jolt, and the girl’s back arched.

“No response! Increase to thirty-five hundred!”

An audibly harsh buzzing, the sound of a rising charge.

“Clear!”

Another burst, a second movement.

And finally, the flat sound of death was replaced by the steady pulse of life.

I woke up staring at a white ceiling, the sound of electronics and smell of rubbing alcohol
surrounding me.

Hospital, my mind supplied.

I turned my head towards the beeping on my left, seeing a heart/oxygen monitor, wires trailing
down towards me. An ethernet cable appeared from behind it, plugged into the wall further back. I
puzzled at why that was there.

An intravenous drip was next to the monitor with a number of bags, but I could only make out the
one that read “SODIUM CHLORIDE FOR IV INJECTION 0.9%”. Sodium chloride was salt…
so a saline solution, then.

I felt something weird down by my crotch and pulled up the sheet that was over me,
simultaneously lifting the blue dressing gown I was wearing–

Oh god. Is that a catheter?

I had a fucking catheter in me. With a tube trailing over the side of the bed and everything. I
barely managed to resist the urge to shudder and immediately let go of the cloth in my hands,
covering myself up again.

The door to the room at the far corner of the room on my left suddenly opened –thankfully taking
my attention away from the feeling of the goddamn fucking tube in my urethra— a young woman appearing. “Oh. Good, you’re awake.”

She stepped through the entrance, shutting the door behind her and walking to my side, picking up a clipboard of papers (charts) at the end of the bed on the way. A nametag was stitched onto the white uniform, a monogrammed “Alyson” inside the patch.

“Now, Ms… Hebert,” she began, actually managing to get my name right and glancing down at the charts, “You’re currently at Brockton General Hospital. It’s the eighteenth of January, and…” She looked at a clock on the wall. “…three nineteen in the morning. Do you know why you’re here?”

Brief flashes in my mind, darkness, walls closing in on me, and then nothing. I shook my head. She frowned. “Well, memory loss isn’t unexpected. Would you like to know everything?”

I nodded.

“You were locked in an enclosed space with biological waste for what we think was a period of at least seventy-two hours. An anonymous call was given to emergency services, and first responders found you on the floor of Winslow High at 1:41 A.M. on the tenth of January, unresponsive and surrounded by the toxic waste with a fever of 102.4 and low blood pressure. You suffered heart failure twice, once in the ambulance and a second time here, in the intensive care ward. You were exhibiting all the symptoms of toxic shock syndrome and when the diagnosis was confirmed you were ventilated and put on antibiotics, as well as undergoing renal replacement.”

She looked up from the clipboard and must have noticed my blank look. “All of your blood was filtered via dialysis.”

Oh.

“The infection had taken root in your lower leg muscles, and the sites were drained but you weren’t showing much signs of response to the antibiotics, and although you didn’t progress to organ failure, you were still catatonic. Panacea was here for healing last night, and resolved all complications, including your nearsighted vision according to these notes.”

For the first time I noticed that I wasn’t wearing my glasses, but I could still see perfectly. Better than I had been able to before, even.

_Huh. That was nice of her._

And then I started seeing the lines.

They appeared suddenly and without warning, reminding me of the lines you’d see in those plasma-ball globes or the pictures of lightning-strike scars I’d come across online. But instead of being bright blue or brownish color, they were red, practically fluorescent neon.

They were everywhere, the walls, the bed, the clock, the monitoring equipment. Everywhere, including Alyson.

As soon as I saw them on her, the lines began widening slowly, and then split. Her arm detached from her shoulder, white bone and red muscle plainly visible. Her jaw fell off, fingers separating as if cut from her hand by a knife.

“Taylor?”
I saw her tongue move to make the sounds without anything else around it. Her chest split diagonally, revealing yellow fat from her breasts and pinkish organs (liver, spleen, stomach, small intestine) that began tumbling out of her abdomen before they too were bisected along the lines.

I think I screamed.

Shutting my eyes tightly to block out the vision, I was rewarded with my mind replaying the scene over and over behind my eyelids. I could still sense the lines, feel them somehow. I knew exactly where they were, knew the very layout of the room solely by how they were placed and crawled across all surfaces and even through objects.

I heard noises around me, incoherent voices, and then there was a sudden rush of cold in the crook of my arm, spreading through my veins, and I slipped under once again.

“Any second now…” A masculine voice, right next to me. I felt a plastic mask over my face, a band reaching around my head to hold it in place

Opening my eyes, I turned my head in the direction of the voice and saw a man who had to be in his early thirties looking at me.

With red lines slashing across him.

I immediately twisted my head back to facing the ceiling, where the lines still were but nothing was falling apart.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to avoid looking at them, instead paying attention to the areas they didn’t cover.

“Taylor?”

I glanced over at the man, intentionally looking over his shoulder and not directly at him.

“Hello, I’m Doctor Michaels, the on-call infectious disease specialist, and I’ve been handling your case for the past week since your admittance.”

“Um… hi,” I rasped through the oxygen mask. Huh. Figures my voice would be weird, I hadn’t used it in over a week. Well, except for the completely-justified screaming.

“Now, I’m going to shine this light in your eyes, okay?” he asked, taking out a penlight from the front pocket on his white coat and showing it to me. I nodded. “Look straight ahead, please.”

I acquiesced, and he quickly waved the light in each eye.

“Good. Normal dilation, no signs of any residual effects from the sedative.” He clicked the penlight off and put it back in his pocket. “Do you remember any of what happened?”

Well, yeah. But I got the feeling that telling him I was suddenly seeing lines and people fucking falling apart would get me labeled as crazy pretty quickly.

So I lied and shook my head.

“You were awake for five minutes, speaking with one of the orderlies when you started screaming. You weren’t responding to anything so we administered a deep sedative to induce loss of consciousness. That was about twelve minutes ago.”
That short? I’d expected it to be longer if they actually knocked me out.

The doctor chuckled. “I know what you’re thinking. It’s not quite like movies and television make it out to be. Most clinical sedatives have a pretty short active duration, even the strong ones.”

I made a sound of understanding.

“Do you have any idea what might have caused that?”

I shook my head again. He frowned slightly, but then the expression disappeared.

“Well, do you remember what the orderly was telling you about? She reported that she’d been informing you of the circumstances of your hospitalization.” I nodded. “Good. Honestly, thanks to Panacea, you’re physically good to go. We want to keep you here another night just to make sure everything’s working properly and that there’s no more episodes like the one that just happened, okay?

“Since I won’t see you again, I’ll just tell you now: There is some aftercare you need to be aware of from Panacea’s healing. Eat more than you usually would, focusing on carbohydrates and proteins. She had to use a bit of your muscle mass to heal you, and you’ve been on intravenous nutrients since you arrived so you’re going to be pretty hungry anyways. You’ll get some food today, and that should help a little bit.”

“Alright,” I croaked.

He smiled, and I tried to ignore the line that cut across his mouth like a bright red scar.

I gave a weak smile in return, hoping he’d attribute it more to my state than anything else.

“Your father will be called in the morning to let him know you’re awake, unless you’d like us to call him now…?”

I shook my head. No need to wake him up in the middle of the night when there’s nothing life-threatening. I yawned. Now that I thought about it, I was feeling pretty tired too.

“Ah. That’s pretty normal. Your body’s just trying to conserve energy, at this point. Get some sleep. I’ll just let myself out. As I won’t see you again, I’ll just say it was a pleasure to finally get to talk to you.” He smiled warmly, and then turned around and walked to the door, opening it and then turning around. “Good night.”

I nodded, and he closed the door. Yawning again, I allowed my body to relax and closed my eyes, surrendering to my weariness easily.

When I woke, there was sunlight hitting the blinds and indirectly illuminating the room. I immediately noticed the presence of a figure in a chair by it. My father. His eyes were slightly glazed over like he was in deep thought, looking at the linoleum by the side of my bed.

“Dad?”

His head jerked up, and he smiled. “Hey, kiddo.”

I could hear the tiredness and slight strain of stress in his voice as he spoke to me. Trying to hide my reaction to the twisting bright lines on his body, I focused on his face and felt myself smile at the nickname.
“You gave me quite the scare, there, you know?” I didn’t, really, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. “Thank God for Panacea. They said you’re completely healed and everything thanks to her.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly, trying to ignore the lines and red slashes that flashed around me.

“Well, I’ve got a deck of cards and a book from your room here so you won’t get bored. I’ve got some clothes here for you too, for whenever they’ll let change into them. The doctors said they wanted to keep you here another night, something about you having some sort of episode?”

I grimaced. “I… I can’t remember.” I hated lying to my dad, but I didn’t want to explain or even think about what I’d seen. What I was seeing, trying to ignore.

“Well, the important thing is you seem alright,” he stated. “I brought some paperwork from work to do so I could keep you company, if you don’t mind your old man hanging around.”

I felt my chest warm up as I nodded.

The next twenty-four hours were a blur. Or a haze?

My dad sat with me for three hours while he worked and I read, just enjoying the company. I’d told him to go get dinner after that, and he’d conceded, going home.

The hospital food was weird, and before I’d eaten it there was a nurse and a doctor who came by, the first disconnecting the glucose drip and standing by while the second (thankfully a woman) removed the fucking catheter from my body.

That was not an experience I ever wanted to go through again. Because fuck. that.

After I’d eaten I’d called the orderly and asked if I could stand up, and they’d gotten a different nurse, who’d lowered the rail on the left of my bed and helped me stand up on shaky feet, hovering close by while I readjusted to being upright after so long.

Using muscles after being in a coma? Another thing I never wanted to deal with again. The next few days were not going to be fun.

I only really walked around my room, not feeling adventurous enough to venture out into the hallway, and the nurse had left once it was apparent I wasn’t about to fall over or collapse or something.

They told me it was okay to take a shower, just putting a water-proof seal over where the IV needle sat inside my elbow, and that I could change my underwear. I couldn’t get my shirt on because of the IV, and I figured they wanted to be able to see my legs tomorrow before I left.

The shower felt amazing, but when I stepped out I noticed I was a bit thinner in the mirror than I had been before.

Great. As if I need anything else to help cement my already-convincing impersonation of an underfed teenage boy.

Sighing, I pulled my clean underwear on and managed to maneuver into the new hospital gown the nurse had given me.

Yep. Underfed teenage boy.

I left the bathroom and climbed back into the bed, staring at the ceiling. It was the first chance I
really got to myself in silence, but it was tainted by the presence of the red cracks all around me, and eventually just allowed myself to fall asleep, once again exhausted.

When I woke my dad was already there, sitting in the same seat he’d been in the night before. He’d smiled when he saw me, and told me he’d just been waiting for me to wake up as the doctors had decided I was okay to be released.

Yet another, different person (a technician this time) had come in to remove my IV, only leaving an annoying red dot behind.

As I’d expected, my clothes hung looser on my body than they had before, and I gave up trying to comfort myself about it. All I could do now was what that doctor had told me: eat a lot to gain back the muscle mass.

My dad had stepped out of the room so that I could change, and when I was done I poked my head out of the main door to the room. He was sitting in a chair right outside of it, so I stepped out all the way, causing him to pick up his head to look at me.

We had to check out at one last place on the first floor, but it took less time than I expected, and within fifteen minutes we were out the door and in my dad’s car.

We were already halfway home (I’d been staring out the windows and trying not to look at the fucking lines on them) when he cleared his throat. “So, uh, the school offered to pay the hospital bill if we didn’t press charges or anything.”

I whipped my head around to look at him and blinked in shock.

He glanced over at me, his expression darkening. “I told them they could go fuck themselves.”

Whoa.

Holy shit. He must have been pissed.

“But… then how are we going to pay for the medical stuff?”

“The Dockworker’s Union has medical insurance that’ll cover some of it, and I’ve got a little bit saved up. If we really need to we can use some of your college funds. But I’m not going to just shut up and roll over to please them when my daughter almost died and was in a coma for a week.”

Yeah, I don’t know what they’d been expecting when they’d offered him that.

“The police actually decided to start an investigation over it, and I let them see your room,” he said calmly.

My journal. Oh fuck.

“They found that book of yours.”

Ice rushed through my veins. This was not a conversation I really wanted to have right now.

I noticed my dad’s knuckles whitening from his grip on the steering wheel. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about Emma?”

Struggling to form a coherent sentence, my mind raced to think of something, anything, but I came
up with nothing.

A few minutes passed, and then he sighed, grip loosening slightly. “Apparently once the police got involved some of your classmates actually stepped forward to give witness statements once they heard what happened. One boy in particular started it; Greg something-or-other.”

*Greg Veder!*?

Wow. Talk about unexpected.

“They tell me there’s a pretty good case if we want to press charges. Harassment and, uh… aggravated assault and battery, I think.” He looked over at me for a second.

Did I want that? Honestly, I just wanted them to leave me alone. But then I had the thought that if they didn’t get in trouble now, they’d never change and someone else would suffer because of it.

Dad seemed to see I was thinking about it, because he followed it up with, “We don’t have to decide now. It’d only be in juvenile court anyways.”

Oh. Okay.

“…But you’re not going back to that school.” Wait, *what?* “I already pulled you out and sent in an application to Arcadia. They pretty much accepted you immediately when they heard what’d happened.”

My thoughts ground to a halt, and it took a bit before I started processing what he’d just said.

Arcadia. Not Winslow.

I was going to Arcadia.

*Oh my fucking god, no more Winslow.*

I pinched myself.

Nope. Nothing. This wasn’t a dream.

*No more Sophia, no more Emma, no more Madison.*

It felt like all my problems had just gone “poof” in a cloud of smoke. …I looked down at my flat chest. Well, okay, maybe not all my problems. But certainly most of them.

“You’ve got a month off before they said you had to go back,” he added.

A month? I was supposed to be perfectly healthy now (save for the annoying weight I’d lost that I’d have to get back), and I was going to Arcadia. Why the fuck would I want to wait a month?

I might be able to wait a few days, or until next week, but I felt that if I was home all the time I’d get cabin fever. No, my high school career had been ruined enough already. Sophomore and Junior years were supposed to be the most important ones for colleges, so I needed the grades if I wanted a scholarship anywhere. Especially if now we were going to be using some of my college money for the hospital.

I shook my head. “Next week. I want to go next week.”

Dad looked over at me in surprise. “Next week? That soon?” I nodded. “Well, okay. If it’s what you want.”
We pulled into the driveway of our house. I hadn’t even noticed us getting that close. I opened the
door to get out, but noticed Dad hadn’t even turned off the car, so I turned and looked at him.

“I’ve got to get back to work, kiddo,” he said, answering my unasked question.

Oh.

I didn’t let the slight dejection I felt show, instead closing the car door and watching my dad put
the car in reverse and pull out of the driveway before driving off in the direction of the docks.

My stomach growled loudly, abruptly bringing my attention to the gnawing hunger in my gut.

I sighed. Well, I wasn’t going to make up any of my lost weight just standing there. Might as well
get started. And maybe I should try exercising too. I looked at my spindly arm muscles.

…Yeah, I think I’d do that.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is subtitled “I Wanna Be Sedated”, courtesy of the Ramones.

Comments! Concerns! Criticisms! Critiques! Please?
April 2011

My father woke me up the next morning, with a sharp knock on my bedroom door.

“Taylor? You getting up?”

“Um… I’m not feeling so well. I don’t think I’ll be able to make it to school today,” I replied.

He opened the door a crack, looking in, frowning slightly, but then the expression shifted into a grimace when he saw me. I guess I didn’t look the best, though I was feeling quite a bit better than last night.

“Yeah, you’re looking a bit pale, kiddo. Well, if you think you’re really not going to be able to make it, I’ll call the school and let them know.”

I nodded fractionally. “Thanks.”

He smiled. “Of course. I’ll leave you to get some more rest, then. I’ll be heading out for work soon.”

“Okay. See you later.”

“See you, kiddo. Hope you feel better,” he said, closing the door.

I let out a sigh of relief. Good. He hadn’t noticed anything weird. That could have been bad.

Yawning, I let myself fall back to sleep to try and make up for what I hadn’t gotten last night.

When I woke up again, it was about ten in the morning. Dragging myself upright, I removed the bags of ice (well, they had been ice, now they were just bags of water). My ankle was significantly less swollen and didn’t hurt nearly as much. My hands must not have been as bad as I’d thought, because while they did still hurt, I could feel things if just barely.

Swinging my legs over the side of my bed and lethargically pulling myself into a standing position I made my way to the bathroom and cleaned myself up, only now noticing the slight burnt-hair smell I had.

_Ugh. Well, that’s what I get for fighting Mr. Fire-dragon himself, I guess._

I was able to get most of it out, but it still kind of clung to me, and I figured it would for the next couple of days.

I know I should have felt something by now about killing the raging, flaming asshole (_Heh, get it? ‘Cause he’s a pyrokinetic?_) but I really didn’t. Some part of me was glad that I’d done it, and not just let him go.

_(skin and flesh and bone effortlessly parting beneath my knife’s blade)_
The “kids” he’d been about to kill might have been a group of teenage criminals that I didn’t even really know about, but that was no reason to murder them.

*(the smell of iron and rust hanging in the air)*

Lung had been a fucking menace anyways.

*(the feel of his warm body next to mine, slowly cooling as blood flowed from his wounds and stained the sidewalk a dark sanguine red)*

Gangpressing teenagers into the “Azn Bad Boys” (What a lame name, I mean really?) and selling woman as sex slaves by forcibly addicting them to drugs was a fate I wouldn’t have wished even on the Three Bitches. Lung had ruled the ABB through terror and intimidation, and protected it from any other capes just through sheer *intimidation*.

Good fucking riddance.

Done with my shower, I got dressed and headed downstairs, mechanically going through the motions of preparing myself a bowl of cereal. I started eating standing up, walking over to the table to sit down when I froze with a mouthful of wheaties, staring at what I saw in front of me.

**Section C: Local News**

**Lung Dead**

…Oh boy.

I swallowed, setting my bowl down and sitting, pulling the paper so it was facing me.

*Early this morning, an anonymous tip was phoned in, telling us that Lung, the leader of the infamous gang “Azn Bad Boys” had been found dead by a member of the Protectorate. This has been personally verified by one of own, though the PRT and Protectorate have refused to comment on the circumstances.*

It went on, really just speculating about what might have happened, until it ended with *To continue, see LUNG, page 2C. For more information on the gang “ABB”, see ABB, page 3C*

Welp. That didn’t take very long.

I blinked. Wait. If it had been the Protectorate who found him… I had heard a motorcycle last night when we were leaving. So that would have been Armssmaster? Well, now I know why Tattletale had been so eager to leave.

…And despite how awesome would have been to meet him, it also probably been for the best that I hadn’t hung around. Because on the one hand, Armssmaster. But on the other hand, just-dead Lung with me being the obvious reason why.

That’s the sort of situation I *wouldn’t* want to meet a childhood hero in, you know?

Pushing the newspaper away from me, I focused on eating my cereal before it got too soggy.

It was a bit uncomfortable using my hands, and I wished I had some gauze or something to wrap them, but we didn’t really have any medical supplies in the house. Some antibacterial cream or something would have been handy too.
Well, Tattletale had said that if I went to the hospital tonight I’d get treated, and so far she hadn’t done anything to make me think I shouldn’t trust her (hell, she’d given me the money to get there). I’d just have to tough it out until then.

Finished with my breakfast, I rinsed the bowl and left it in the sink to soak, wandering back up to my room. Having nothing better to do, I sat down down at my desk and turned on my computer, booting it up.

The hard drive ground away (really need to defrag) and I idly examined the damage to my hands until the desktop appeared. Opening a browser, I headed to PHO, curious what their reaction to all of this would be.

By the looks of it, a combination of (initially) skepticism, incredulity, confusion, fear, and morbid curiosity about who could have done it and how. There had been a rumor in the early pages that it had been a knife wound, and it was confirmed later by some guy that said he’d talked to a PRT employee who wanted to remain anonymous.

Honestly, it was pretty amusing seeing how they were acting, if just because they were all talking about me (even if they didn’t know it). Apparently the PRT had even given me an internal codename, though they didn’t know what it actually was. I didn’t really mind; it wasn’t like this was ever going to happen again.

I checked my email, closing it down when I saw there wasn’t anything new, and spent the rest of the morning browsing the internet and working on the little Java networking project that my Intro to CS class had assigned.

The afternoon was largely uneventful, at least until around 4 when I went out and got the mail. A large envelope was sitting in the mailbox, addressed to me.

“Huh.” I got out a knife and cut it open. Turning it upside down, I was rewarded with an object landing on the table with a hearty thump, and a note falling out along with it. Picking up the note, I looked it over. One side was neat, methodical handwriting, the other blank.

Hey, it read, just wanted to thank you again for what you did from us last night. Regent never gave you your knife back, so I figured I could help you out and get you something a bit better than that flimsy thing. Especially if you’re going to start taking on seven-foot dragons of doom. Take care of them, alright?

- Tattletale

P.S. You probably won’t hear from us anymore, we don’t involve civvies if we can help it.

P.P.S. Oh, and remember: Brockton General, six o’clock.

I picked up the paper-wrapped object and tore off the wrapping. A black swath of fabric with a collection of velcro strips, and then inside of it…

A knife.

Lifting the small bar of spring-held metal that kept it in the reinforced sheath by the guard, I slipped it out. Jet-black, the blade was longer than half a foot, seven inches if I had to guess, and had a slight dip at the end. The blade was attached to a round black wooden handled that fit perfectly in my hand, the entire thing just under a foot long. I flipped the blade over. Near the joint of the blade and the handle was an engraving, solid letters that spelled out KA-BAR.

This… was a seriously nicer knife than the one I’d had.
Putting the weapon (because seriously, there was no doubt this was a weapon compared to the knife I’d had) down I picked up the thing that had wrapped it, spreading it out on the surface of the table.

It was a harness. A harness with the sheath I’d pulled the knife out at what looked to be the lower back. There were even other places where it looked like other sheathes could be attached to the straps in the front, underneath my arms, and my back.

I blinked. Because holy shit. I don’t know what Tattletale expected me to get into, but clearly she thought I should be ready for it.

Heading up to my room, leaving the rest of the mail on the kitchen table, I stripped off the t-shirt I was wearing. It took me a couple minutes to figure out how to put the thing on, but when I finally did, I found it surprisingly comfortable. There was a pair of over-shoulder straps, and two others: one that went around my ribcage just below my (non-existent) chest, and another that sat on my hips connected to that one by v-shaped straps in the front and back. It felt slightly weighted so it wouldn’t hike up accidentally.

I’m not going to lie, I felt like I was goddamn Rambo or something.

I’d stuck the knife back in the sheath, and tested how quick I could get it out. The answer: about a second. Nearly as fast as I’d been able to get my switchblade (fine, “spring-assisted knife”) out and flick the blade open.

Replacing the knife, I pulled my t-shirt back on. The harness was nearly invisible, the shoulder straps lining up just next to my bra straps so that they didn’t even seem to be there. I realized this was probably illegal, but I didn’t really give a fuck. Better to be prepared than caught off-guard.

Lying down on my bed felt a little weird on my back, but it wasn’t like I was going to sleep with this thing on or anything. Levering myself up, I went over to my desk and picked up the phone I had there. Calling a cab for 5:45 was relatively painless, and I ended up wasting my time until then looking up information about knives. Apparently the one Tattletale had gotten for me was the same kind of combat knife they used in the Marines. There were a couple things on proper care, like oiling it every so often to make sure it didn’t rust if it got wet, but it all seemed pretty simple.

Before I knew it, it was 5:40, so I closed everything down and shut off the computer, grabbing the money Tattletale had shoved in my pocket the night before heading downstairs.

The cab arrived right on time, and I kept my hands in my hoodie pockets so he wouldn’t notice anything was wrong with them. We made it to the hospital even faster than I’d anticipated, the trip only taking ten minutes, so I headed inside anyways.

There was a small line at the intake counter, but soon enough I was at the front of the line.

“Name?”

“Taylor Hebert. That’s one ‘e’, no ‘r’.” It was a line I found myself using often. The woman behind the counter typed on the computer for a second, and then turned back to me.

“Reason for visit?”

“Um, I burned myself,” I told her, deciding that was the worst of the two injuries (sprained ankle being the other), and that it’d be the best to tell them.

She looked at me over her glasses. “How severely?”
I blinked. “Uhh… I can’t really feel anything?” Which is kinda fucking bad, I know.

She looked at me for a second before sighing in what appeared to be exasperation. “Well, you’re in luck. Normally you’d go to the burn ward after getting the damage evaluated. But tonight Panacea’s making her rounds through here. Wait for someone to call you, and you’ll be taken to the back where we’ve got the non-life-threatening cases for her to heal.”

I nodded, and walked away to sit down at one of the generic plastic chairs in the room as she called out “Next” behind me.

Well. It made sense why Tattletale had told me to come here now. Amy could easily deal with whatever I had going on.

I knew her only in passing, really. She was in my history class, but sat on the other side of the room and two rows in front of me. She seemed to be around her sister most of the time, and I’d never had any real reason to talk to her. She was just in a different social circle than I was.

“Taylor He.. Hebert?” I looked up at my name towards the heavy double-doors that led to the hospital proper, where a younger guy stood with a clipboard. Standing up and walking over to him, he held open the doors for me to go through. “If you’ll just follow me, I’ll take you to where everybody else is.”

I nodded, and walked behind him as he traveled forward, noticing that we were staying in the ICU area. We soon enough reached another waiting area, and he directed me to sit down, saying “it’ll probably be only ten minutes or so.” I went and sat down as he disappeared back in the direction we came, I assume to handle someone else. There wasn’t really anything to do but wait, the few magazines on the corner-table next to me being generic tabloid rags that talked about celebrities and so-and-so suddenly changed their hairstyle so we all should know.

A figure in a white robe with red crosses that I’d seen before stepped into the room, and I looked over at them from the movement.

I’d never really seen Amy in her costume other than in photographs, and it seemed kind of strange. Like I was crossing some indiscernible line by knowing her both in and out of costume.

She made her way around the room, counter-clockwise, which meant I was the last one left as I’d sat in the corner of the room right by the door.

When she got to me, I finally got to have a really good look at her. And then felt strange. Something seemed… off about her. There were almost-imperceptible shadows under her eyes, and I just knew that she didn’t want to be here for some reason.

*If she doesn’t want to be here, why is she doing any of this?*

“Do I have permission to heal you?” she asked flatly, like at this point it was just routine, a rote memorized action that she didn’t even put any effort into.

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“Hand, please.” She held out her hand palm up, and I pulled my own out and placed it in hers.

For the first time, her eyes focused, snapping down to my hands and then back up. “Why didn’t you come in sooner? You should have gotten treatment before now.”

“What?” I asked, feeling my eyebrows scrunch together in confusion.
“These burns are days old, why didn’t you come in before now?”

“I… only got them last night,” I told her.

Her eyes narrowed on me, and then went back to normal. “Whatever. Here, they’re done. Your ankle too.”

There was a tingle in my hands, and the ever-present red lines jumped out at me for a second before I was able to push them back again. Amy blinked, momentarily freezing, and then looked at me curiously.

“You’re–” She cut herself off abruptly, and I could almost see the gears spinning in her head. “Do I know you?”

“Uh, well, I’m in your history class,” I supplied.

Her gaze sharpened. And then she relaxed, but I could tell it was forced. “I see.”

“Um. Do you mind if I ask you something?”

The girl in front of me seemed slightly irritated at the question. “Fine.”

“Why…” I tried to figure out the best way to ask it. “Why do you do this if you don’t like it?”

I could tell I’d caught her completely off guard, and she faltered before her face hardened. “What does it matter to you?”

I tilted my head. “I… I don’t know? I just… I guess I wonder why someone like you would do this if you didn’t want to. I mean, I get that there’s a lot of people that you can help, but… why? If you don’t like it, why?”

She snorted. “What, so I should just give it up? Ignore everybody that wants to be healed by ‘Panacea’?” I could hear the quotes in her voice. “Fat chance.”

“But, couldn’t you like, do it less? Take a break or something? Just… I don’t know, have time to recharge? I’m an introvert, and I know it’d be exhausting for me if I had to be around people all the time and live up to their expectations.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t act like you know anything about me.” I opened my mouth to tell her I wouldn’t mind getting to know her, but she cut me off. “Now, do you need anything else or can I go home now?”

I shook my head.

“Fine. Then I’ll see you later, I suppose. Good night.”

She turned away sharply and walked towards the hallway, leaving me sitting there by myself.

I let out a heavy breath, and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about this easily.

“Yeah. ’Night.”

Chapter End Notes
Oh look, bitchy Panacea.
Taylor’s knife harness is basically a tactical vest with all of the pockets and armor removed. Just for if you were trying to imagine it.

In response to how far I plan to take this: All the way. I’ve got plans for Levi, Butcher, S9, plus a few other events that I’ll keep as a surprise for now.

January 2011

“Daaaad, I’ll be fine. You don’t need to come in.”

My father gave me an inscrutable look. “Well, if you say so.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but made do with just grabbing my backpack and throwing it over my shoulder while opening the car door and stepping out. “I’ll be fine. Promise.” He was already going a step further than normal by driving me to school instead of taking the bus, and that was enough for me.

“Alright then. Have a good day, kiddo.”

I nodded, closing the door and stepping back away from the car and onto the sidewalk as he put it in first and pulled away from the curb. As soon as he was out of sight, I let out a sigh and turned around, looking at what was going to be my school for the next few years.

It was four stories tall, two long buildings with a short section between them that supposedly made the whole thing look like an ‘H’ from above.

Hiking my backpack up on my shoulders, I started forward towards the main entrance, a set of four glass and metal double doors. The first thing I noticed when I stepped inside was that it was clean. Clean and bright. Which probably said more about the state of Winslow than Arcadia, but still. It wasn’t like I needed anything more to tell me that Winslow was a fucking cesspool. I’d come to that conclusion early enough on.

There were helpful signs for the main office with arrows pointing off to the right, and I followed them until I reached what, indeed, appeared to be the administrative offices.

“Uh… Hi?” I greeted half-heartedly, standing at a counter where a woman sat, filling out paperwork.

“One second, sweetie. I’ll be right with you.”

She finished about fifteen seconds later, giving a signature at the bottom of the papers, and then looked up at me. “Yes? How can I help you?”

“I’m… new. I mean, I’m a transfer. From Winslow.” I fidgeted uncomfortably.
The woman smiled warmly. “Name?”


She rolled her seat over to a computer to the side. “Hmmm… You’re here in the system, but it says that you weren’t expected to transfer in for a few weeks.”

“I was in the hospital and got released early, and… I haven’t really got anything to do at home.”

“Lonely?” she asked knowingly. “Don’t worry about it, I understand.” She made a few clicks with her mouse and the large copy machine at the back of the room spun up. The woman got out of her chair, walked over to the copier and retrieved a sheet of paper, bringing it to me and setting it down on the counter. “Alright, here’s your schedule. Your locker number’s up here.” She pointed to the top right corner where a three digit number sat. “You’ll have to come by the office after school to get your ID made. Now, if you’ll wait a moment I’ll get someone over here with the same schedule so you won’t be lost. Oh, and I’ll send out an email to all your teachers to let them know you’re here, okay?”

I nodded, and she walked back over to her chair and sat down, picking up the phone and dialing in some number while looking at her screen.

“Mrs. Cressman?” she asked into the receiver. “Yes, I’ve got a new student here and was wondering if you could send Alex over?” A pause. “Thank you.” She replaced the receiver and looked back at me. “If you’ll just wait a couple of minutes there’ll be someone here to help get you on your feet.”

“Thanks,” I told her, meaning it. Something like this would have never happened at Winslow. Already I was starting to see the difference.

*Maybe this’ll actually make up for being in that fucking hellhole.*

I took a seat in one of the chairs off to the side, looking around the room while still trying to keep the jagged red lines out of focus. It’d gotten better over the last week, and I was now glad I’d waited until today to go to school, since in the beginning it would sometimes just happen, even progressing to that horrific falling-apart vision before I could shut it down. But I’d gone through all of yesterday without them highlighting themselves and I was hoping there wouldn’t be any new surprises today.

I had assumed Alex would be a guy, so when a short blonde girl stepped into the room I didn’t pay much attention to her. “Ms. Johnson?”

“Hello, Alex. She’s over there,” the woman behind the counter said, pointing over at me. I blinked, and looked closer at the new person. She had to be only 5’1“, and her skin was bronzed like she spent a lot of time out of school in the sun.

I stood up, trying to hide how nervous I was feeling. “Uh, hey?” I greeted, raising a hand awkwardly.

The girl walked over to me, tilting her head back so she could look me in the eyes. “Wow. You’re tall.”

I shifted uncomfortably. Being 5’9” isn’t exactly normal for a girl (and I had the feeling I wasn’t done growing), and I was a bit self-conscious about my height, expecting her to say something about how it was weird.
Instead, a grin broke out on her face. “That’s awesome. The basketball team’s totally going to try and get you to join. I bet you’d be great in soccer too. You’ve totally got that whole runner’s build thing going on. You’ll have to wait until next year if you want to do cross-country.”

“I… don’t really know, I’ve never done sports,” I admitted. It would have been just another thing for them to use against me, and I’d rather escape home than hang around Winslow more than I had to. I also hadn’t exactly been coordinated before, but now I was finding it easier to move around, like I was lighter on my feet, and I hadn’t stumbled once since getting out of the hospital. Maybe I’d had an inner-ear imbalance or something that had gotten fixed along with everything else in the hospital.

Alex looked thoughtful. “Well, you’ve seriously got the build for it. I thought you did track or cross-country just from looking at you. All I can do really do is soccer and softball.” She pouted. “It sucks being short sometimes.”

“Alex. You can pester Taylor about joining the athletic teams all you want later, but you girls should be getting to your first class,” Ms. Johnson said, looking over at us.

The short girl winced. “Right. Sorry, Ms. J.” Alex spun on her heel, looking at me over her shoulder. “C’mon, Mrs. Cressman’s pretty nice, as long as we’re not too late there’s nothing to worry about.” I nodded, easily catching up with her in a few steps in the hallway.

“We can go by your locker now, or after class, …or before lunch.” She glanced over at me. “Actually, here, let me see that,” she said, holding out her hand to me. I handed over my schedule. “Okay, your locker’s in the same hall as mine, so that makes things easier. We’ll go after class, ‘kay?”

“…Alright,” I agreed, taking my schedule back.

I was slightly overwhelmed by how outgoing this girl was, but also found it nice. It was a breath of fresh air, completely different from anything I’d experienced at Winslow. I still felt a bit uncomfortable, paranoid that this was all just an act and suddenly I’d be right back where I’d been before, at the bottom, but I was trying to ignore that as best I could.

“So where’re you coming from? You new to Brockton?” she asked as we walked up a flight of stairs to the next floor.

I shook my head. “Winslow.”

Alex made a face. “I have a friend from middle school who’s there. She says it’s terrible. I can’t believe half of the stories she tells me.”

“They’re all true.” The girl looked at me incredulously. “It’s… bad. Really bad.”

She grimaced. “Well that sucks. But at least you’re here now, right? You must’ve been lucky, I hear it’s really hard to transfer in because of how full the classes are.”

Flashes through my mind. Dark spaces. Walls closing in. The stench of rotting blood.

“…Right. Lucky,” I echoed weakly.

Alex didn’t seem to notice, though, and she pulled up short outside of a door labeled ‘216’. “This is it. You ready?”

I nodded, knowing that I couldn’t trust my mouth right now.
The shorter girl opened the door, and I was immediately met with the chatter of a full classroom before the bell had rung. Alex walked in nonchalantly with me trailing a few feet behind her, significantly more on edge as I noticed people looking over at me curiously while still in conversation.

A woman who looked to be in her late forties sat at a desk at the front of the room, organizing papers.

“Mrs. Cressman,” Alex said, making a beeline towards the front of the desk.

The teacher looked up. “Oh, good. You got back before class started.” She looked over to where I was standing. “And you’re Taylor?”

I nodded, swallowing nervously. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, seeing as I’m your first period today, I suppose I’m the one that should say welcome to our school, hm? Now…” She stood up and went over to the podium by the whiteboard, looking at what I guessed was a seating chart. “You can take a seat back by Ryan.” She pointed towards a seat at the back of the room next to a boy who had twisted to talk to two other guys on his left. “Oh, and thank you, Alex.”

“No problem. I’ll see you after class, ’kay Taylor?” she said, turning around and heading to the other side of the room towards an empty seat in the second row.

“You’ve got the textbook, right? The red one with the torus on it?”

I turned back to the teacher. “Oh, um… yeah.”

“Great, well, I won’t make you stand up here and introduce yourself or anything embarrassing like that–” I sighed to myself in relief. “–so you can go ahead and take a seat if you’d like,” she told me.

I nodded, and made my way over to the desk she’d pointed out, dropping my backpack next to me and sitting down. A girl a row forward and seat to the right looked back at me and opened her mouth like she was going to speak, but the bell went off and she closed it, shrugging apologetically with a half-smile.

I made a resolution right then to try and not push people away and just be normal, to actually get to know other people and maybe make friends. Emma had been part of the old me, but after everything with the locker and the hospital, I felt different, and now I had the chance to start over with a clean slate.

And I wasn’t going to let that go to waste.

“Look, all I’m saying is that that woman is out to get me. I swear she glares at me for no reason.” One of the girls at the lunch table, Emily, pointed her fork across the table at Alex, who was sitting on my left. “At least she grades fairly,” she muttered, stabbing said fork into the bean salad she’d gotten out of her lunchbox.

Alex rolled her eyes. “You’re just imagining things.”

“No! I swear to God!” Emily insisted.

The girl across from me, Sarah, sighed. Turning to me, she looked exasperated. “So how’s your day going Taylor?”
I shrugged awkwardly. “It’s… school.”

The blonde on my left snorted. “Isn’t that the truth.”

“I mean… like, I haven’t even finished my first day. All of the teachers seem pretty nice so far…” I explained.

She nodded. “Yeah, you’ve got, what? Cressman, Roberts, Carboni, and…”

“Brunner,” Alex completed around a mouthful of pasta.

Sarah nodded. “Right. Brunner. They’re all great. What’ve you got after lunch?”

“Chem and CS. So McCann and Shannon,” Alex told her, having swallowed her food.

I’d been surprised someone like Alex, who seemed so interested in sports, was taking CS, but she’d told me she was only doing athletics for fun and actually wanted to go to MIT.

“Wow. Yeah, you two’ve got great schedules. I’m actually a little jealous,” Sarah told us.

Alex smirked, throwing her arm around my shoulder, even though it looked odd as she had to reach up to do it. She did it so quickly I didn’t even have a chance to react, but felt myself blush slightly from being in contact with her. “That’s right. You should be jealous. Cause we’re awesome.”

“Pfft,” Emily giggled, breaking out into laughter, Sarah also smiling. “You’re so full of yourself.”

The blonde took her arm off my shoulders, grinning. “You know it.”

Emily just laughed, eventually calming down. The redhead turned to me. “So, I bet this pint-sized egoist has already sunk her claws in and talked you into joining every sport team under the sun.”

I shook my head, smiling.

“No, I’m still working her over. There’s a process, you know,” Alex told her.

“Of course there is,” the redhead responded flatly.

The blonde nodded sagely. “You have to wear them down gradually. Can’t go too fast.”

“What is that, dating advice?” Emily laughed.

Sarah looked across at me. “You should just give in. There’s no fighting it. Eventually, she’ll get you to think it was your idea all along. Better to agree and keep your sanity while you can.”

“Yep!” Alex agreed brightly. “And the soccer season just started, so you could totally join as a reserve at the very least.” She looked at me, widening her eyes. “Please? Pleeeaaaaasee? We could be soccer buddies. Oh, and Sarah’s there too.”

The aforementioned girl shook her head, “Of course that’s the last thing you say.” She looked at me. “If you do join, I’ll protect you from her. Promise.”

Alex somehow managed to widen her eyes further against all logic, making her look even more pitiful. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing at how ridiculous she looked.

“Fine,” I agreed impulsively, wondering what the fuck I was doing even while speaking. “I… I’ll
try it.”

The short girl’s eyes went back to their normal size as she nodded. “Exceeeelllent. Another one falls to my superior plans,” she cackled jokingly.

“‘Wear them down’ is not exactly a complicated plan,” Emily told her.

Alex scoffed. “Psh. What do you know? And it worked, so I’d say I’m right and you’re wrong.” she said, sticking out her tongue at the redhead.

“Very mature,” Sarah deadpanned. “You’re the height of sophistication.”

The blonde waved her off. “Eh, who wants to be sophisticated anyway? Sounds boring.”

I shook my head, smiling at the antics.

I’d needed this. I hadn’t even known it, but this… I’d missed this. More than I thought I would have. I still felt slightly awkward, but the three girls I was sitting with were so open. Welcoming. Accepting. My darker thoughts said they could just be leading me on, but there had been no signs of anything like that. And why would they do that anyways? They felt too genuine in the way they’d included me.

Of course, Alex could have just been trying to get me to join the soccer team, but that felt off too. She had no idea if I would join or not, and she’d still invited me to sit with her friends.

For the first time in a long while, I felt happy. Actually happy. I had good feelings about this.

“What. The. Hell.” I gasped breathlessly, staring at Alex while I leaned on my knees, bent over. Sweat was dripping off of my face. I could just feel it.

_Holy fuck_

Two days after my first day, and after talking to both my dad and the soccer coach, I’d been accepted as a reserve. And this was my first day of practice.

The girl grimaced, trying to catch her breath as well, face red. “Sorry,” she panted. “Didn’t know we’d be doing suicides today.” I regarded her flatly. “Still, you’re doing really, really well.”

“Alright girls! Two laps and then cool-down!” the woman on the sidelines yelled out. Coach Miller. My new personal demon.

I sighed in gratitude and started over towards the track that circled the football field, which had been turned into a soccer field for the season. Alex lagged behind me, catching up once I was on the rubber surface. “Well, at least you know how bad it can get. Conditioning days are the worst. Everything else is easier, I swear.”

I nodded, already feeling my heart begin to slow down and my head start to clear halfway through the first lap. Sarah was a couple meters in front of us, and noticing us she slowed down until she was on my right.

“So. What’d you think?” she asked. I gave a pained smile in response. “Yeah, that’s about how I’m feeling right now too. It gets better, trust me.”
“That’s what Alex said,” I told her.

She nodded. “Well, she’s not wrong. Although I’m hesitant to agree with anything Alex says on principle.”

Alex mock-glared at her. “You’re being mean.” She looked up at me. “Taylor’s nice to me, though. Aren’t you Taylor?”

“Uhhh…”

“Just say yes.”

“Yes.”

Alex looked back at Sarah. “See? Taylor’s not mean. Why do you have to be mean?”

The other girl huffed. “I’m hesitant to accept the opinion of someone who’s been told what to say.”

“Naaaah. It’s totally valid.”

“If you say so…” Sarah said, obviously just humor her, but also smiling.

We completed the laps and then joined the rest of the team on the field, going through cool-down stretches that Alex said would keep our muscles from clenching up painfully for the rest of the day and tomorrow. Afterwards we changed out of our “practice uniforms” (really just loose, breathable shorts and a t-shirt the coach had given me the day before when I signed up) and said our goodbyes.

Since the school’s buses were only active at the start and end of the school day, I had to make my way to one of the city bus stops, swiping my ID when I got on so I didn’t have to pay the fare. The ride was only about twenty minutes, and left a couple blocks away from my house, distance I easily covered quickly.

Dad wasn’t home, his car missing from the driveway, so I got out my key and unlocked the door, heading upstairs after locking it behind me. Reaching my room, I let my backpack drop to the floor at the foot of the bed, and collapsed onto the soft surface.

Surprisingly, I didn’t feel as bad as I’d expected I would after my first day of practice, but that could be because I’d been exercising just about every day since I’d gotten home last week. Resting for a few minutes, I eventually rolled out of bed and got my homework out, going over to my desk and spreading everything out.

Trig wasn’t too hard, History was only a few short-answer questions, and Chem was just stoichiometry. It was when I got to Latin that I got frustrated. I’d never been good at foreign languages, and this one was no different. Plus, Winslow had been slightly behind Arcadia in this class, so I also had to deal with catching up.

Frustrated at my lack of progress, I felt my control slip as my vision suddenly shifted, with bright red lines popping out at me. Annoyed, because I’d been doing so well with no incidents this week at all, I started pushing them to the back of my mind before I realized it wasn’t progressing to where anything was falling apart right now.

It was like a half-way point between fully seeing everything (the possibilities, the planes of division) and not focusing on them.
Blinking, I got curious. This was a power. I’d known I was a parahuman ever since the incident in the hospital, but it hadn’t really sunk in until now. So far all I knew was that I could see these things, but there had to be a reason behind what I was seeing.

Looking down at my worksheet, I focused on one of the lines that jumped around the corner of the page, examining it closer. When there were no hidden secrets revealed, I poked it with the point of my pencil and was shocked when the pencil sunk into the line.

Worried that I’d done something to my homework, I quickly retracted the pencil, but nothing seemed different.

Did I have to do something with the entire line?

Getting out a blank sheet of paper so I wouldn’t accidentally ruin my homework, I looked at it and the neon-red lines that flashed around, giving off a sense of finality. Placing the sheet on my desk, I pushed my pencil into the end of the line at the side of the page, again the point sinking in slightly.

And what is every kid taught to do with lines?

Trace them.

Dragging the pencil along the line, which had frozen as soon as I’d impaled it, I was surprised when the page parted along the path I followed like I was using an exacto-knife and not a pencil.

Weird.

Did that mean I could do this with any of the lines?

I looked around my room for something else. Frowning when I couldn’t immediately see anything, I started digging through my desk. I settled on a pack of cards and a bag of marbles, also taking out a ruler since it felt like my pencil wouldn’t be sharp/wedged/long enough, as I’d used the very point of the pencil for the sheet of paper.

Standing the pack of cards up on edge, I chose a line that angled from top right to lower left, catching the end of the line with the metal edge of the ruler and then dragging down. It felt like there was almost no resistance, like the proverbial hot knife through butter. Sure enough, the pack fell into halves, a perfectly straight division between all of the cards.

All of the lines pulsed, and suddenly I didn’t want to see any more.

Shaking my head as if to clear my mind, I pushed the lines away again, still unnerved by them. They felt like nothing.

They were something that shouldn’t exist, but did. They were like cracks and flaws in the world, and looking at them I could see exactly how everything could come apart. Humans… humans weren’t supposed to be able to see that.

It was overwhelming, and I noticed I was starting to hyperventilate. There… there was just so much. Too much.

I squeezed my eyes tight, but the lines rose up again, flashing around me in a way that I could feel, not needing to see them. It was wrongwrongwrongwrong.

Fuck!
Gulping a breath of air, I tried to slow my rate of breathing down, focusing on the tick-tock of the clock in my room instead of the ever-present cracks in the world that I’d never be able to fully escape.

It felt like eternity before I finally calmed myself, pushing away the bag of marbles, bisected card deck, and paper pieces, reminders that I didn’t want, didn’t need. What had I been thinking?

I made my slightly-shaky fingers pick up my pencil again, looking at my Latin worksheet and throwing myself fully into conjugation, trying to wash the lines from my mind.

But I knew that it would only ever be a temporary measure at best.

I fucking hated it. Hated that I’d even considered it, but in the end I knew that it was the best option.

I’d asked my dad to get me a pocketknife for protection, and he’d come home one day with one that he said he’d gotten from a friend. He seemed more at ease with my morning runs after that, also having gotten me a small can of pepper-spray.

The truth was I knew that if I ever needed to use the knife, I wouldn’t care how much I disliked looking at the lines because I’d be in a bad enough situation that the pepper-spray hadn’t worked.

Still, it made me feel safer.

A month into soccer practice, and Alex was already saying she was jealous about what it was doing to me. I hadn’t expected it, but I could definitively say that I was in much better shape than I had been. It seemed like my combination of a fast metabolism and good genes from my dad had actually combined to make it so that whatever I ate—combined with the constant exercise—contributed to helping me get stronger, all of it going straight to my muscles.

Now that I was away from Emma and her cohorts, I wasn’t constantly dealing with the words they used to tear me down and my self confidence had been growing, if very slowly, helped along by Alex, Emily, and Sarah. And now… now I could actually admit to myself that I looked good. I’d never be a model like Emma, never have that perfect hourglass figure, but I’d started wearing clothes that fit me better at school at Alex’s prodding, and actually gotten compliments. Me. Compliments. It felt unreal, like some sort of dream.

But I knew it wasn’t because I’d been living it for over a month.

This was what high school was supposed to be like. Granted, there was the usual teenage drama, but it never seemed to affect my little circle of friends. I was still a reserve on the soccer team, but the coach had told me that she was considering me for being a starting forward, depending how well I did in the first few games. It was exhilarating playing scrimmages both with and against Alex and Sarah, and the endorphin high I got from it was probably no small contributor.

Even if all the happiness was dulled by the nightmares I had and occasional sleepless nights that I’d learned to solve by going for a walk, I was still happier than I’d been in three years.

I had friends, people who cared and liked me for me. I had a life outside of just going to school and then sitting alone at home. I talked to other people, and could actually carry a conversation now.

I had what I’d always wanted.

And damn if I wasn’t going to fight to keep it that way.
Chapter End Notes

Oh look, Taylor isn’t being a complete social snail. How about that.
Dissociation 1.x

Chapter Notes

Gasp. A new chapter? After two days? Ludicrous!
…but really, I had this practically done before I finished the last one.

I love how some people are like “Taylor’s happy? Uh oh… [prepares for impending apocalypse]”. You guys. So silly. What could possibly go wrong?

In all seriousness though, I’m glad people are enjoying the brighter chapters. Like Bl4nk noted, I’m not really going for Warhammer levels of grimdark (“life sucks, the world sucks, and you’re never going to be happy before you die horribly at the end of a chainsaw”).

I’m going for KnK darkness, which is admittedly pretty dark at points but more supernaturally dark (“omfg he’s eating people!”), not characters getting their lives torn apart at every possible moment. I think the worst the Nasuverse ever gets is Matou Sakura. But I value contrast. Contrast is important. Dark content balanced by fluff. If everything is dark, you get inured to it, and boredom is the last thing a writer wants in their story.

Now that I think about it… I would love to see a version of Taylor with Dark Sakura’s abilities for her power. …Crest-worm locker scene, anyone?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April 2011

Lisa Wilbourn

Lisa massaged her temples, still trying to integrate all of the information she’d gotten in the past few hours as she stared at the laptop screen in front of her. It was full of text, text that relayed what had happened and what she’d seen tonight, as well as her own personal thoughts.

“So… knife girl seemed pretty cool. We gonna ask her about joining?”

The blonde looked up, turning to face Alec who was sitting on the sofa. “No.” It would be a terrible idea to even try to involve the girl –Taylor– as a cape.

“No?”

“No,” Lisa repeated.

The door to the hideout opened, Grue entering and closing it behind him as he removed his helmet. “No what? All I heard was ‘no’.”

“They over here doesn’t think we should invite knife-girl to join the club,” Alec complained.

Brian’s expression became stony. “I agree.” He turned sharply to walk to his room.
“What? Wait. Hey! You can’t just say something like that and then leave!” Alec yelled after him. “Why the fuck shouldn’t she join?”

The taller boy turned around. “Did you see her? That wasn’t some random girl or new cape. She wasn’t even upset over the fact that she killed a man tonight. In fact, I’m pretty sure she enjoyed it. And I don’t want someone who would rather kill than incapacitate on the team. She could be a serial killer for all we know,” he said harshly. “There’s something seriously wrong with her.”

Was extremely disturbed by casual killing. Thinks Taylor is mentally unstable. Thinks Taylor could be a major risk. Doesn’t want Taylor on the team. Thinks that if Taylor joined, Undersiders would be considered a greater threat due to her presence and become targeted by Protectorate.

Lisa looked over at Alec.

Is aware of Taylor’s abnormalities. Doesn’t care. Finds Taylor intriguing. Is a sociopath. Thinks Taylor might be a sociopath. Wants to understand her.

Great.

Brian continued to his room, not saying another word.

Taylor wasn’t a sociopath, as evidenced by the emotions that Lisa had seen her show tonight, but she had been extremely blasé about everything that’d happened. Lisa knew that she hadn’t killed anyone before tonight, but if Taylor had to do the same thing tomorrow, she’d do it with absolutely no regrets or feelings other than excitement and satisfaction.

A natural killer.

Alec looked over at Lisa. “C’mon Lisa,” he whined.

She just turned back to her computer, causing Alec to groan and splay out on the couch, his head tilted back to stare at the ceiling. “You guys are boring. Fuck all of you.”

Honestly she was just as disturbed as Brian was about Taylor, but her feelings were less disgust and more… concern. Taylor had issues, even if it seemed she was well-adjusted in most ways.

It wasn’t a big problem now, but if the girl ever lost touch with her humanity, lost the ties that kept her sane and grounded, Lisa’s power told her that Taylor could easily become the next Black Kaze.

And Lisa didn’t entirely know what to do about it.

“...she killed Lung.”

Tattletale just stared at the tall, disheveled girl on the side of the street in shock. The girl’s head was tilted forward, hiding her face under the failing yellow streetlamps that illuminated the scene like something out of a noir film. But that didn’t prevent Lisa from reading her body language.

Killed Lung. Did not intend to. Is satisfied with result. Enjoyed it. Would do it again.

“Wait… what?” Regent questioned.

“Killed Lung.” Tattletale repeated mechanically, climbing off of Brutus while surveying everything around her: Giant amputated arm in the middle of the road. Slightly sagging asphalt at the same place. Stress fractures in the road at various spots around it.
Christ.

She walked warily over to the dark-haired girl, and then noticed the hand creeping towards the knife embedded up to the hilt in the chest of the giant, scaled man who lay unmoving on his side.


How?

Tattletale looked at the stump of Lung’s arm where warm blood flowed lazily onto the concrete, pooling in dark puddles.

*Negated regeneration factor. Cuts caused permanent damage. Cuts have zero resistance.*

She turned back to the girl. For just a moment, the girl’s eyes flashed electric-blue, a purple ring around the pupil.


What.

What the fuck?

She didn’t even get a headache from that, her power had just… failed. It was like she’d been listening to a telephone conversation and then suddenly a fax came through on the same line.

Tattletale noticed the girl was still inching towards her knife and raised her hands up. “Hey, easy, we’re not going to do anything to you, we just wanted to see what was going on.”

The girl halted, and then deflated slightly. *Believes me. Doesn’t want to fight. Is injured. Would fight if necessary. Could be ready to fight in under a second. Could kill us.*

Alright. She could do this. Tattletale wasn’t usually the one who would be defusing a situation. *Usually* she’d be getting under the other person’s skin or trying to find weaknesses. …That wasn’t what she wanted here. No antagonizing the person who’d just killed one of the strongest capes in the world. That would be bad.

“I’m really sorry about all of this. Nobody else was supposed to get dragged into it,” the blonde apologized. She decided that would be a good place to start out.

The girl on the sidewalk looked confused.

Tattletale smirked reflexively, thinking about why Lung had been so pissed and the haul they’d gotten. …And then she remembered that it had gotten this complete innocent involved.

“This was between us and Lung,” she explained. “He was aiming for us because we hit one of his casinos. We were trying to figure out how to deal with him, but it looks like we didn’t need to bother, huh?” *Can’t get much more ‘dealt with’ than ‘dead’. …Thanks for that, by the way.*

She looked over at Grue, trying to prompt him to start talking. This was definitely more his thing than hers. *C’mon! You’re supposed to be the leader for crying out loud!*

He must have felt her glaring at him, because he glanced up at the brunette and then went back to staring at Lung’s body. “Oh. Yeah, thanks.” *Is stunned. Is uncomfortable. Is disturbed by dead*
body. Is disturbed by girl casually sitting next to dead body.

Well, he could at least pretend to act normal.

Tattletale rolled her eyes, turning back to the girl. “Ignore Grue. I’m Tattletale. That’s Regent.” … Who was playing with the giant amputated arm in the middle of the street. Fantastic. “…And behind me is Bitch. Or Hellhound if you want to be PC,” she introduced.

Bitch growled, but other than that was being almost surprisingly subdued compared to how she normally acted around new people. Sees girl as lone alpha. Does not want to challenge authority. Does not want to get in fight. Knows she would lose.

Would wonders never cease. Regent was quiet, Bitch was practically amicable, Grue was speechless, and Tattletale herself was trying to placate someone. It was like a mirror-world from a lousy Aleph B-movie.

Regent had apparently grown tired of prodding the scaled arm, because he walked over to where she was. “So who’re you supposed to be? You got a name?”

Tattletale wanted to stare at him. He knew better than to ask an unknown cape not in costume for their name. Either one. And this girl obviously wasn’t in any kind of outfit, since she was just wearing street clothes.

Doesn’t want to be a cape. Doesn’t want to go out as a cape. Didn’t intend to get in fight.

Then how did she? The blonde studied the other girl's face. There were dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in a while.

Taking a walk because of nightmares. Nightmares most likely related to trigger event and/or caused by powers.

Tattletale wanted to wince. That was something she had experience with.

The girl in front of them opened her mouth to respond. Is going to give real name. Real name is Taylor Hebert. Oh shit.

Goddammit Alec!

“Of course she doesn’t,” Tattletale preempted, interrupting Taylor. “Can’t you see the way she’s dressed?”

“Hey, I was just curious,” he said nonchalantly.

The blonde sighed in exasperation, looking back at Taylor and going over the girl's state and cataloging her injuries. Burned hands in fight. Cannot feel with hands. Nerve damage. Twisted ankle. Has extremely high pain tolerance. “Either way, you should probably get those looked at. Go to a hospital or something.” Will not regain full use of hands without parahuman intervention. Will be permanently scar–

Fifteen minutes since start of fight. Lung’s heat signature did not go unnoticed. Protectorate aware. Protectorate inbound. Armsmaster arriving in less than five minutes.


Taylor would be detained. Taylor would be questioned. Taylor would be forced into Wards. Taylor is extremely unsuited for Wards. Taylor does not want to be a cape. Taylor would
eventually suffer psychotic break and kill–

Oh fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

She was *not* going to let that happen if she could help it. It was the least they could do to pay her back for saving them from Lung’s wrath.

Just “…Fuck,” she cursed. Tattletale looked back at Taylor. “Alright. C’mon. We’re not leaving you here to deal with them yourself just for saving us. Will you let us take you somewhere, at least?”

*Please say yes, please say yes.*

Taylor nodded slowly. “Okay.”

The blonde villainess grinned, thankful she hadn’t had to resort to anything else. Crossing the gap between them, she reached down for Taylor. “Here, I’m going to help you up, okay?”

Not waiting for an answer, she hoisted the taller girl –for it was obvious as soon as she stood that she was much taller– to her feet, and then also helped her walk when it became apparent that even if she couldn’t feel the pain very much, her ankle still wasn’t in good shape.

Tattletale’s mind spun. *What else, what else?* Evidence. “Regent, grab her knife. Grue, stop staring at the dead man and help me get her up on Brutus.” Because there was no way she was going to be able to lift the hundred-fifty pounds of solid muscle that Taylor seemed to be made of.

Grue finally responded, and he hurried over to the pair of them as Tattletale climbed onto Brutus and helped pull Taylor up by her forearms so that she was sitting in front of the blonde.

“Where’re we taking her?”

“Home,” the purple-suited girl answered, fully aware of how Grue would feel about her plan, but it was necessary. “It’s not like we can take her to her house like this, it’ll be easier if we drive her home.” She sighed. “And yes, by we I mean you. If it really bothers you that much you can keep your costume on. But we really need to go. *Now.*”

*Armsmaster arriving in less than a minute.*

God they were cutting it close.

Thankfully, Grue and Regent managed to get on Judas quickly enough, and they left with thirty seconds to spare, Armsmaster’s motorcycle just becoming audible as they departed.

It was a short trip to the factory, and when they got there Tattletale slid off first, offering a hand up to Taylor. The girl must have misjudged her ankle injury, because she almost fell off of Brutus with the blonde barely managing to catch her and stand her up.

Taylor glanced back at Tattletale, her face flushed. *Is attracted to females. Is bisexual. Finds me attractive.* Well that was flattering. The blonde couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face, and Taylor turned away. *Is embarrassed.*

Sometimes her power gave her really redundant information.

Taylor was quickly distracted by the giant dogs returning to their usual size, however, and watched them interact with Bitch until Tattletale grabbed her wrist to get her attention. When the brunette looked back at her, she tugged on her arm. “C’mon, over this way.”
Taylor took a step, and then hissed. *Oh. Duh.* Tattletale helped her after that, guiding the two of them along to the shed that stored their communal car while Grue trailed behind them at a distance.

“Hey, Grue, can you get the door?” The leather-clad boy grudgingly complied, and Tattletale led Taylor to the passenger side, helping her in.

“Alright. A couple things,” Tattletale began. “First: you didn’t meet us. We were never at the Docks, and you want to hide whatever happened from whoever you’re going home to.” *Father. Mother deceased. Mother died three years ago. Mother died in car accident.*

Tattletale barely managed to keep herself from wincing at that, forcing herself to continue instead. “So, two: Stay at home or play sick or something tomorrow so they don’t find out about tonight.”

And now for the big one. “Third: tomorrow night, Brockton General, six o’clock.” Tattletale had Panacea’s schedule completely memorized, just in case shit *really* hit the fan. She already felt bad about Taylor getting involved in all of this, and the girl clearly didn’t need permanent scarring or nerve damage on top of everything else. “If you go there then, you’ll get treated, okay? Take a cab or something, you can do that, right?” *Family is lower-income. Does not have extra spending money.* “No, of course not.”

Tattletale bit her lip, and unzipped the hidden pocket on the right side of her costume, pulling out a few of the bills she kept there for emergencies. This definitely counted.

Peeling a hundred off, she tucked the rest away. “Here, use this for the fare. Least we can do. Seriously. You don’t know just what you saved us from.” Tattletale held out the money, and then winced. Hands. Right. She put it in Taylor’s hoodie’s pocket for her. “Put some ice on your hands and ankle as soon as you get home. In ziplock bags or something. Try and keep it there overnight if you can.” That should help with some of the swelling and numb what was immediately painful.

Taylor nodded in acceptance of the advice.

“And… for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about getting you into this. Really.” Tattletale smiled at her. She didn’t believe this completely made up for what the girl had gone through, not in the slightest, but it was a step in the right direction. “But it was nice meeting you, even considering the circumstances.”

Grue climbed into the other side of the car, still in his leathers and helmet, and started the car. Closing the passenger side door, Tattletale walked out of the garage and watched as they pulled out, moving onto the road and then out of sight as quickly as possible.

Once they were gone, she let out a sigh.

Taylor Hebert. She’d heard that name before, somewhere.

Hebert. Hebert, Hebert, Hebert.

And then it came to her. Three months ago. The Winslow incident. It’d been quickly covered up, but something had happened and a student –Taylor– had been hospitalized. The upper administration had been found to be criminally negligent towards students and ended up being dismissed. She hadn’t seen any information about what had happened *exactly*, but she also hadn’t really been looking.

Tattletale made her way into the factory, peeling off her domino mask once she was inside. Wearily ascending the stairs, she thought of what this night meant for Brockton Bay, and more
specifically, for Taylor.

The purple-suited girl sighed, knowing there was no way she could leave the girl alone now that she knew everything about her.

Stupid guilt-complex.

Lisa stared at the screen in front of her, and her nearly finished report for Coil. She’d ultimately decided to completely omit Taylor from it, only explaining that they’d found the body and what it had been like. Only bad things could come of him knowing about her. Plus, keeping her a secret meant she would have someone who might actually be able to help her in her plan to escape Coil’s clutches.

She’d tell Brian later, once he wasn’t as upset about the whole Taylor vs. Lung situation, but as Coil wasn’t even in contact with anyone on their team other than her, the information should be safe. If she could keep this girl from the same fate as her, she would.

Not to mention Lisa had a feeling that Taylor would not react well at all to any attempts to force her to do what she didn’t want. She wouldn’t hesitate to kill anyone in her way if she had to. Not to mention, how her power worked was a complete unknown, other than the fact that it had negated Lung’s regeneration and allowed her to cut through scales as strong as steel with a cheap knife.

Blinking, Lisa looked up at Regent. “Regent, do you still have her—” He was playing with it, flicking the blade in and out with the little slider on the side almost hypnotically.

She sighed.

They’d need to return that tomorrow. Or maybe… maybe she could do one better.

She started pulling up knife websites. If Taylor’s power relied on a knife and it was her only method of self-defense, she definitely should have something better than that dinky thing.

And then she’d start planning how to really help the girl out.

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Colin Wallis

Colin Wallis’ night started out simply. Tonight was a Sunday night. Sunday nights meant patrol time.

He was currently on his custom-built motorcycle, which had been specifically tuned to his weight and power armor so that it was at peak efficiency for city driving. Anything less would have been inconceivable.

“Console to Armsmaster.” Assault’s voice came through the molded earpieces in his helmet, the audio perfectly replicated in such a way that the other man sounded like he was right next to him.

“Yes?”

“Heyyyy Armsy,” Armsmaster had to restrain himself from reacting to the idiotic nickname Assault had given him. Still, his eye twitched against his will. “The computers here registered some heat patterns that your program said is Lung.”

His attention became fully devoted to the conversation. This might be exactly what he’d been
waiting for. “I see. Location?”

“South Docks. Here’s the coordinates.” A dot appeared on the HUD in his visor, and Armsmaster immediately began making his way towards it as fast as legally possible. He was not going to let this opportunity go to waste.

Capturing Lung could revitalize his lagging career, and he’d finally be recognized for his true value.

“I’ll handle the situation.”

“Alrighty then. Call if you need anything. Console out.”

He wouldn’t need anything. He could handle this on his own. He’d prepared for this, a halberd with a special injector of sedative—which he’d concocted specifically to counteract Lung’s regeneration and force him into unconsciousness—being one of the many he had stored in various compartments of his motorcycle.

Even at top speed, it took him thirteen minutes to get to the location, as he’d been on the opposite side of the bay. Once he got within five hundred meters of the location, he popped open the compartment that had the halberd he’d need in it, retrieving it and placing the one already on his back in the now-empty slot and retracting the rack.

At the mouth of the street that the coordinates directed to he skidded sideways to a stop, efficiently propping up the kickstand and using the momentum remaining from the action to cleanly dismount and unfold his halberd in one motion.

His eyes scanned the scene: flickering orange streetlights, graffiti-stained walls of abandoned buildings, cracked cement sidewalks.

But no Lung.

Moving forward cautiously, he tightened the grip on his halberd, ready to react at a moment’s notice.

There was a lump in the middle of the road, and he stepped towards it, still wary of his surroundings.

Ten feet away, he could finally make out the object.

An arm. A large arm with metal-like scales. Blood stained the area around the stump, speckled spots around it in a splatter pattern that showed it had been severed cleanly where it was. A depression was next to it in the asphalt, looking recently melted.

Armsmaster looked around for any other signs. And then he saw something he’d never expected: twenty feet forward and to his right, haphazardly splayed out on the sidewalk, lay Lung himself. Armsmaster stepped towards him with care, his guard up. There was no telling the situation.

But as soon as he got close, he could see everything with perfect clarity. The thick pool of blood beneath the imposing scaled man. The stump of an arm that hadn’t even begun to heal. A deep gash on his right leg. And perhaps most importantly, a knife wound between the six and seventh rib, where a trail of drying blood had formed.

Still on edge, he moved to the infamous cape’s neck, placing two fingers over his jugular and feeling for a pulse to confirm what all of his equipment was telling him.
There was none.
Lung was dead.
*Lung* was dead.
Lung was *dead*.

Armsmaster hastily looked around. The person who’d killed him could still be around. But his proximity and infrared heat sensors informed him there was nobody in the vicinity, only himself and Lung. Who was dead.

The blue-suited man lifted a hand to his right earpiece, pressing the button there that would connect him to Protectorate HQ.

“Armsmaster to Console.”

“Console here,” Assault’s voice came through. “‘Sup Armsy? You get the big bad dragon?”

“Lung is dead.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. What?”

“Lung is dead,” Armsmaster repeated testily. He’d already said it once.

“You can’t drop a bomb like that without some details! What happened? You do it?”

For a moment, the Tinker considered claiming responsibility. It was not impossible: using the sedative and then his halberd, he might have been able to achieve the same effect here. Except for the fact that the seemingly fatal wound shouldn’t have been fatal.

But the possible attention he would get for such an action would be highly negative, most likely a black mark on his record. Not to mention that if it was discovered that he had lied, he would be further discredited.

“No. It appears to have been done by an unknown.”

“Huh. Well *that’s* not concerning at all. Alright, I’ve alerted the PRT and shot off a memo to Piggot since she’d probably be interested in this. You got anything else?” the former villain asked.

“No. Armsmaster out.”

“Seeya.” The encrypted direct line to the Rig closed, leaving Armsmaster in silence.

Folding his halberd and attaching it to his back, the man crouched down, examining the dead cape in front of him.

Infrared told him the body was still warm, and he’d only been alerted to Lung using his pyrokinesis fifteen minutes ago, which corroborated with his observations. The stump of his right arm was a clean cut, almost disconcertingly clean, and analysis indicated that it was a perfect planar division. If Armsmaster hadn’t known any better, he’d have sworn that this cut had been performed by the experimental blade he was developing with Dragon.

But that didn’t explain the lack of regeneration. The cut on Lung’s leg was through the scales, and was a cut the man should have healed from within seconds, but he hadn’t. And Lung had been known to replace missing limbs before, which also meant that the arm’s stump should have begun to show signs of cell growth.
And even stranger: the apparently fatal damage that should not have been fatal. It would have only punctured the man’s lung, another wound that should have healed near-immediately with Lung having reached the point of becoming scaled.

The sound of engines and sirens came from behind him, and Armsmaster stood quickly, pulling out his halberd and extending it, resting the hilt on the cement. A set of large vans appeared, their headlights highlighting him and temporarily affecting his vision before his visor darkened to compensate for the sudden brightness. They stopped fifteen feet away, the rear doors opening and PRT officers spilling out. Unexpectedly, Miss Militia also stepped out of the first truck along with the company.

Armsmaster walked over to the woman, nodding in greeting. “Miss Militia.”

“Armsmaster,” she returned. “I was at the PRT building when the notice came in. So you’re the one who found him?”

“Yes.”

“Any hints to cause of death?”

“There are a number of knife wounds, but none that should have been fatal to Lung.”

The woman walked towards the body, looking it over. “Curious… and it looks like his healing factor wasn’t working,” she noted.

“I came to the same conclusion,” Armsmaster agreed.

Miss Militia nodded absently and pulled out the green combat knife at her back, the weapon shifting fluidly between different knife shapes while she stared at the various cuts across the dead man’s body. The weapon eventually stopped changing when it became a rather thin blade that could only be five inches long at most, attached to a rectangular handle.

“The weapon was either a fixed-hilt knife, or more likely, considering how prolific and easy to acquire they are, an out the front switchblade.” Miss Militia frowned, her knife shifting back to its initial shape which she replaced in its holster. “In either case, the blade would barely have been long enough to cause this,” she said while pointing to the arm-stump, “Did you see any sign of the weapon in the area?”

“I did not.”

The foreign woman nodded. “Perhaps the MEs will be able to tell us something more.” She glanced back at the PRT personnel who were standing behind them at a distance. “We should let them get to their business.”

Armsmaster stepped away from the scene, allowing the other men and women forward to do their jobs.

Both he and Miss Militia remained in the area for the entirety of the clean-up, the woman dealing with a nosy reporter that had somehow found out about the event within twenty minutes, which made Armsmaster grind his teeth as he thought about the most likely culprit: that over-confident blonde teenage villain who thought she was smarter than everyone else. **Tattletale.**

How she’d have found out he had no idea, but it was almost certainly her, even if nobody on the Undersiders was the culprit. As much as he was loathe to admit it, killing did not fit their MO. They intentionally avoided harming others when possible, only incapacitating at most.
The rest of the night past quickly, as everyone was involved in the after-event field report, and there was little time for much else as plans had to be considered and fallout to be prepared for. The fall of the leader of the ABB was not about to go unnoticed, and it would have the gang in turmoil. The problem was there was no guessing the actions of Oni Lee nor the bomb-tinker Bakuda that they’d heard rumors about.

In the end, all they could do was wait and see.

Colin was staring at his halberd on the workbench in front of him, but for once he wasn’t actually working on it.

“Colin?”

A voice came out of one of the screens at his left, the avatar of a young woman appearing.

“Dragon.”

She smiled slightly. “How are you?”

Colin sighed, resting his elbows on the metal surface in front of him and rubbing his eyes. “At a loss,” he admitted. Dragon was one of the few he felt truly comfortable with and could relax around.

“I read the report. It’s quite the mystery, isn’t it?” she asked, sounding slightly excited.

“Yes,” Colin gruffed, frustrated at the lack of information they’d gotten from the crime scene. He turned to the computer screen. “It makes no sense.”

“Well, there have been stranger things known to happen,” Dragon said. “But I can understand how this might be worrying.”

“The cuts look they were caused by a monomolecular blade. Like the nanothorn project,” he said sourly, looking across the room where the blade they’d been iterating on sat.

“Yes,” Dragon agreed, and Colin could have sworn her eyes were twinkling in excitement. “Isn’t interesting though? If someone managed to achieve what we’ve been working on, but sooner? A tinker with a specialty in bladed weaponry, perhaps.”

Interesting wouldn’t have been the word to describe it. Vexing. Extremely frustrating. Annoying. Someone had managed to achieve exactly what he’d been trying to make, but before him, and now the blade he was working on wouldn’t be so unique, wouldn’t be as impressive.

Colin noted he was gritting his teeth tightly, and relaxed his jaw.

“That doesn’t explain the lack of Lung’s regeneration,” he countered.

“Hmm.” Dragon looked thoughtful. “What if they specialized in fields? Force fields, area-of-effect, etc.??” she mused. “If that were the case, they could have created a field that suppressed cell division, and then used a cutting tool with a force-field edge like Narwhal’s. He could have bled out, then.”

Colin had to admit that it was the best explanation he’d heard so far tonight, and accounted for how the man had actually died, unlike the other leading theory.

“The Protectorate and PRT think that it might have been a Striker/Shaker, one that could have
triggered directly in response to Lung himself. A field that stopped his regeneration, and a power that lets them the cut through any biological material. But that wouldn’t explain the cause of death. If it was just his healing being negated, he shouldn’t have died from exsanguination.”

Dragon nodded. “I saw that in the notes, it was how I came up with my theory. But until we find more evidence, that’s really all they are.”

Colin sighed, and the woman on the screen looked at him fondly.

“You should get some sleep. How many hours have you been awake?”

“…sixty-seven.”

Dragon looked at him in exasperation. “Go. Get some sleep, Colin. You shouldn’t do this to yourself. Maybe it’ll help give you a fresh perspective.”

For once, Colin just nodded, taking a deep breath and beginning to turn off the many monitors around him.

“Have a good night,” Dragon said, her avatar winking out a few moments later.

He turned off the screen she’d been on, and walked to the door, turning off the lights before preparing himself for the journey home.

Armsmaster pointed to the board at the front of the room. “At approximately 12:18 AM, the parahuman known as Lung was found dead.” He looked at his audience, evaluating their reactions. As the Protectorate overseer of the Wards team, it fell to his shoulders to inform them of such a serious event that could potentially affect their patrols.

They all appeared to be stunned.

It was seven o’clock in the morning, as there was no doubt the papers would be running some kind of story, it had been decided that the Wards should be informed beforehand with all the relevant details.

“Lung bit it?” Dennis was the first to recover. “Holy shit.”

That seemed to pull Missy out of her stupor, and she glared at the boy. “Language.”

Dean was the one who managed to gather his wits enough to ask the question Armsmaster had been waiting for. “How?”

“It appears that he suffered physical wounds that led to his death, caused by a knife. His healing factor did not function on the injuries, but the wounds he received still should not have been fatal.”

Unless Dragon’s theory is true.

“Could it be some kind of power-negation? A Trump ability?” Carlos thought out loud.

“No. Lung was still able to grow and manifest scales. It is believed to have been an anti-healing power or effect of some sort, but there are no known capes in the area with that ability.”

“…But if the person triggered right then, they could have gotten whatever powers they needed to survive,” the boy reasoned, and Colin was a little surprised that he had come to the conclusion so quickly.
“That is one of the leading theories”

“So what, now we’ve got to deal with Jack Slash 2.0?” Dennis asked. “Well, I’m not going to be volunteering for patrols anytime soon. I’ll be happy with the console, thank you very much.”

Dean glanced over at the younger boy. “That’s not funny, Dennis.”

“No, seriously,” Dennis defended. “Out of the blue, some new guy appears, and the first thing he does is kill Lung? I don’t care what you say, that’s not an accident, that’s a statement. They’re telling us they can take out capes like Lung easily. I don’t want to go up against someone like that on any day.”

Colin grudgingly admitted that Dennis had a point. It had come up during the Protectorate meeting tonight. “In any circumstance, the person has been determined to be between five-eight and five-ten based on the injuries Lung sustained. They have been labeled ‘Switchblade’, and given a tentative rating of Striker 4.”

“Four? Shouldn’t it be higher?” Dean questioned.

“Evidence indicates that this cape requires a tool, and there is no knowledge of how their power works other than it allows them to cut biological material perfectly,” Colin stated gruffly. “However, if you come in contact, do not approach. You are to immediately retreat and notify console.

“The largest problem as a result of this event is the gang war that will likely break out due the sudden power-vacuum. If that occurs, you are to come here, and not attempt to fight. Is this understood?”

Everyone in the room nodded.

“Good. Dismissed.”

Claire Hanazawa

She couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t fucking believe it. She’d only been in this gang for two and a half weeks and already their fucking leader was dead.

Fucking Lung was dead.

She wouldn’t have even considered it true except for the fact that one of her moles in the PRT had confirmed it, the entire organization in an uproar over the event.

And now all of the sycophantic assholes in the ABB were scrambling over themselves like some snotty kid had come and kicked over an anthill.

Pathetic.

Of course the first person they turned to was her. They had no idea how to manage themselves, and Lung had always been the one at the top, a cape. So, like the idiots that they were, they came to ‘Bakuda’ to save them.

Oni Lee was completely useless. He had less emotional capacity than a nematode. All he could do was act as a front-line combatant, not a competent leader, which is what they needed.

Claire wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass. With Lung gone, she could finally have a chance
to show what she could do. To show Brockton why she was to be feared and respected, and that she was now the leader of the largest gang in the Bay.

…The biggest problem was that the other gangs were practically foaming at the mouth to destroy her own, and that was not something she could allow to go unanswered. They wanted a fight? She’d give them a fucking fight.

They wouldn’t even know what hit them.

Bakuda’s specialty may have been explosives, but that was about the only limitation. As long as an explosion was somehow involved, she could build things that would make Kaiser shit himself in fear.

And that was exactly what she was doing.

Time-locks, singularities, sensory deprivation, sensory overload, pain-receptor agonist, molecular decohesion, absolute-zero freezing, acoustic sonics, plasma, EMP, bombs that exploded into personal force-fields, she could do it all and more.

And with Oni-Lee to deliver them, there was an effectively infinite supply as long as she built at least one of each.

She needed to make an initial statement, too, of course. Let Brockton Bay know who was the new leader of the ABB. Wouldn’t be good to do all of this without anybody knowing who had done it.

The other thing she needed to do was draw out the asshole who killed her former boss and return the favor. Couldn’t have people thinking they had a chance going against her.

That plan she’d let stew for a few days. She wanted to come up with something… special for them. Maybe something that replicated Gray Boy’s punishment. But she’d figure it out.

But for now, she needed to show her poor, ignorant underlings exactly why they should fear her. Which was why she was currently knuckle-deep in some poor bastard’s cranium. Cool thing about brain surgery: no nerves. No need for pesky anesthesia that could accidentally end up killing whoever she was working on.

Picking up the small pill-like explosive device from the stainless-steel tray at her side, Bakuda pushed it into the guy’s skull, so that it was sitting right between the two hemispheres of his brain. Taking the coin-size piece of bone she’d cut out, she put some medical glue around the edge and stuck it back where it had come from, replacing the small flap of skin and gluing that down as well.

Moving around to the front of the man she’d been working on, she looked at his wide, fearful eyes and smirked. Unclasping the ball-gag in his mouth, Claire put a single finger against his lips, keeping him silent. “Do you understand your situation?”

The man nodded quickly, as much as he could with the head brace in place, which was barely anything, but it was enough. “Good.” He looked like he was about to piss himself and pass out. Putting his cheek, Claire smiled. “Don’t worry. If everything goes according to plan, nothing’ll happen to you and your friends, wakaru?” He nodded again, causing her smile to become a grin. “Excellent. Just remember: no funny business or pan!” She mimed an explosion with her hands, and then started undoing the straps that held him in place.

He stood up slowly, and began shakily walking towards the door until she pushed him forward to hurry him along.
She had a hundred other assholes to do this to, and no time to waste.

And then she’d get to show the world her art.

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Amy Dallon

Standing in her darkened room, Amy sighed, laboriously removing each part of her costume and hanging it up in her closet until she was down to her underwear. Reaching around her back to unclasp her bra, she threw it in the hamper and got out a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt, putting those on and then climbing into bed.

Staring at the white stucco ceiling didn’t do anything for her, but it gave herself something to focus on since there was no way she was about to fall asleep.

The day had started weird and just gotten stranger.

First, there was the news that Lung was dead. Lung. Dead. The man who had personally driven off the entire Brockton Bay Protectorate. And it was only after Victoria had asked Carol about what happened that they found out he’d been stabbed. Stabbed in the lung (talk about poetic irony), a wound that should have been non-fatal to most people, and especially to the Dragon of Kyūshū.

It made no sense. Brandish had told them that the PRT was thinking it was a new trigger, someone who had triggered in response to Lung himself, gaining a power that allowed them to perfectly counteract Lung’s abilities. It made sense, and the cape had been labeled a Striker based on the damage to Lung’s body.

At school, it was all anybody could talk about. Speculation as to who could have done it, how powerful they were, what they were going to do now. Like if they were going to take over the ABB. Amy had snorted at the last one. But then, considering it seriously, she realized it could very well happen, and wouldn’t be all that unexpected.

The news had even come up in the Parahuman studies class –which she was only taking because Vicky was too– and her history class. The first had recognized what had happened and teacher seemed resigned to the discussion, and they had talked about the morality of capes and why there were much fewer cape deaths in cape vs cape fights than there were collateral casualties. The second had used it as a tool to talk about major power plays, how little things could have huge effects, with a particular example being the death of Franz Ferdinand acting as the catalyst that pushed an already-strained Europe over the edge and into World War I.

Honestly, Amy hadn’t really cared. Gang wars happened. It may be unexpected and unusual that the cape leader had been outright killed, but gangs had collapsed from fallen leadership before. It wasn’t anything new.

And so the school day had ended uneventfully, and Amy had prepared herself for –yet another– visit to one of the local hospitals in the evening. Tonight had been Brockton General, and it was the same thing as every other visit she’d done. Smile mechanically at the doctors who thank her for doing such miraculous work, and don’t show how tired she was of the continually monotonous actions: “do I have permission to heal you?”, heal, move to the next, “do I have permission to heal you?”, heal, next, ad infinitum.

The life-threatening cases had been first as always, and she couldn’t even remember what she’d actually dealt with today, other than it seemed longer than usual. And then she’d moved to the
non-life threatening cases, going through them just as robotically as she’d dealt with the ICU, plastering a fake smile whenever she got the inevitable “thank you” or something to that equivalent. And then she’d gotten to the last person.

It was a tall, lanky girl with curly brown hair who’d sat in dim lighting of the corner of the room. As with the previous patients, this one had started off as just yet another unremarkable healing. At least, until she’d actually touched the girl’s hand.

“Do I have permission to heal you?” Amy asked the girl flatly.

It was ridiculous that she had to ask it in the first place. The people wouldn’t even be here unless they wanted to be healed. But she had to in order to prevent any lawsuits from happening like that one comatose asshole she’d saved from critical organ failure due to alcohol poisoning who’d then turned around and sued New Wave because he apparently had wanted to die there.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” the girl replied.

“Hand, please.”

The girl reached out, and Amy could see she’d been badly burned. She idly noted that the girl didn’t have a wristband, so she wasn’t an inpatient, and the fact that she was wearing street clothes only further cemented the idea. As soon as the girl’s damaged skin touched Amy’s, her awareness exploded, every minute detail and process available.

The first thing she noticed was that the girl was healthy. Extremely healthy. No signs of previously broken bones, with the lung capacity and muscle density that you’d expect from a person who’d been playing sports since they were a kid. The girl had to be seriously active normally.

Clearing her thoughts, Amy pulled away from the big picture and looked for the damage she’d seen externally. She noted that most of the girl’s nerves weren’t functioning properly beyond either of her wrists, and her ankle was slightly swollen from an overextended set of ligaments.

Amy focused further on the hands, witnessing the constant cell division, the lymphocyte reactions handling any possible pathogens, the keratin structure buildup of the beginnings of scar tissue, the layering of new epithelial cells that were trying and failing to fully replace the ones that had been burned so severely. Everything pointed to these burns being nearly a week old at this point.

Why the hell hadn’t this girl gone to the ICU? She would have expected with the way this girl had to take care of her body she would have immediately gone to see someone. But what she was seeing told her a different story: that this girl had waited until now to have them dealt with.

The healer looked up at the brunette’s face, pinning her where she sat. “These burns are days old, why didn’t you come in before now?”

The girl looked confused. “I… only got them last night.”

No. No way. The girl had to be lying, and Amy didn’t know why. Was she trying to hide something? Amy pushed the thoughts out of mind. If the girl wanted to hide something, let her. It didn’t affect her or anything.

“Whatever. Here, they’re done. Your ankle too.” Even as she spoke, she manipulated the various molecular constructs and proteins, altering cells and repairing damaged tissue, turning keratin into proper skin. A slight pulse of activity traveled up neural paths when she reconnected the sensory and motor nerves.
Done, Amy looked up at the girl. And felt her heart nearly stop.

Instead of the dark chocolate brown they had been before, the girl’s eyes were a luminescent, shockingly-bright cerulean with cyan-colored fibers woven within. A violet ring sat in the blue, circling just around the pupil and standing out violently from the rest of the iride. Wisps of color from the ring—purple and magenta and fuchsia and every shade in between—seemed to flow into the pitch-black pupil at the center, sucked into a void that felt like it could swallow you whole, never to be seen again.

The image was gone in a blink, brown eyes back as if there had never been anything else.

“You’re—” Amy barely managed to cut herself off before she could finish with a *parahuman*, heart pounding with the thought that she’d almost outed a completely unknown cape in a public setting, with no idea of how they’d react.

She hadn’t looked at the girl’s brain before by habit, an action that was specifically so that situations like this wouldn’t happen. But now that there was evidence, her suspicions were confirmed almost without thinking, the fully-developed Gemma nestled in the girl’s brain becoming visible to her.

Something tugged at her memories, and Amy would have sworn she was experiencing *déjà vu* except for the fact that she *knew* it wasn’t. There was something there, she just couldn’t remember it, but it felt important.

Concentrating on the girl before her, she weighed the risks and decided that if the girl tried anything she could simply knock her out through the contact they still had.

“Do I know you?”

The girl blinked. “Uh, well, I’m in your history class,” she answered innocently.

Amy looked her over again, and knew she wasn’t lying. She could see it, and it felt like the girl’s name was just on the tip of her tongue, out of reach. Something with a ‘t’. Tracy? Tabitha? Tara? But the healer also knew that it wasn’t the connection she’d been looking for. There was something else. Something more, but the girl wasn’t saying anything else.

“I see,” Amy responded diplomatically, without any emotion.

She dropped the girl’s hand, and was about to step away when the brunette opened her mouth again. “Um. Do you mind if I ask you something?”

*Yes,* Amy wanted to say. She wanted to get out of here. Away from this unknown new cape. Up to the roof where Victoria would pick her up and she’d get to enjoy the few minutes of being held in her sister’s arms before she had to deal with being home.

But instead she looked back at the girl in annoyed resignation. “Fine.”

“Why…” the brunette seemed to struggle with her words. “Why do you do this if you don’t like it?”

Amy’s thoughts halted. *How did she know?*

She managed to fool everybody, even Victoria, so how did she know that? And even for that matter, what business was it of hers? “What does it matter to you?” she questioned pointedly.
The girl cocked her head, as if trying to figure out the answer herself. “I… I don’t know? I just… I guess I wonder why someone like you would do this if you didn’t want to. I mean, I get that there’s a lot of people you can help, but… why? If you don’t like it, why?”

Amy snorted. Like it was that easy. This girl was seriously naïve. “What, so I should just give it up? Ignore everybody that wants to be healed by ‘Panacea’? Fat chance.”

“But, couldn’t you like, do it less? Take a break or something? Just… I don’t know, have time to recharge? I’m an introvert, and I know it’d be exhausting for me if I had to be around people all the time and live up to their expectations.”

What, did the girl think she hadn’t thought of that? Breaks didn’t help. Every patient wore away at her, every day scraping away layer after layer until she felt like she’d be shaved down to the bone. At first it may have been rewarding, but now she saw how greedy people really were. She wasn’t a person to them. She was just another cape. Another tool that was the solution to all of their problems. ‘Panacea’. The universal cure.

Amy’s eyes narrowed on the tall girl in front of her. “Don’t act like you know anything about me.” The other girl opened her mouth, but Amy was done with this conversation, and she cut her off before she could start. “Now, do you need anything else or can I go home now?” she asked harshly.

A shake of the head was the only response.

“Fine. Then I’ll see you later, I suppose.” And I’ll find out how I know you.

“Good night,” Amy ended with finality, turning around and walking out of the door, only a quiet “Yeah. ‘Night” drifting behind her.

The girl’s words wouldn’t leave her mind. “If you don’t like it, why?” They circled ceaselessly, and Amy was forced to admit to herself that she might have been harsher than she could have been. The girl had treated her like an actual human, not just a healing machine. She’d seen her as a person who had limits, and that was something Amy was unused to, and hadn’t been prepared for.

The only people she saw as really doing that were Victoria (beautiful, perfect Victoria) and the one or two acquaintances at school. And even then, those were more Vicky’s friends than hers. Before she’d thought of Victoria as being enough for her, that she was all she would need. But now she was wondering. Even normal people needed outlets, right? And… as much as she hated to admit it, she couldn’t share everything with Victoria. Vicky had other friends, other people in her life.

Amy’s thoughts immediately flew to Dean, and she pushed them out of her mind before the pain and depression and jealousy could set in, trying to ignore how her Victoria would never feel that way. Never return her feelings. Never want Amy like Amy wanted her. Wrestling with her spiraling control, she forced her thoughts back to the girl from the hospital.

Right before she’d cut the girl off at the end, reviewing the events she got a sense that the girl was about to ask if they could be friends. Amy wanted to scoff at the girl’s sheer nerve and impulsiveness, but for some reason, the idea didn’t seem all that disagreeable. In the heat of the moment she would have doubtlessly refused, but now that she actually considered it, she… she might accept if the girl asked again.

The loneliness when Victoria wasn’t around could become crushing, especially in the house under Carol’s constantly disapproving frown. The only escape Amy had was her healing, but even that
had become something she resented, tainted by both Brandish’s expectations along with the responsibility that she hated she felt. She knew that it wasn’t her responsibility to heal every person in Brockton, but that didn’t change Carol’s unrealistic expectations nor the conscience that had been conditioned into her, constantly nagging and eating away at her.

“If you don’t like it, why?”

The question that always came back around. Why the fuck was she doing this? Because of the overbearing “responsibility” she had, and the unrealistic hope that maybe, someday, she could get Carol to look at her the same way she looked at Victoria. But that did nothing for her.

“Can’t you just… take a break?”

Hah. She wished. She wished she could. If only it were that easy. If only she could say “no”. If only she could put her foot down and tell everyone how she really felt. But she couldn’t, because she didn’t want to bear the look in Victoria’s eyes or the sheer disapproval she knew would come from Carol.

But this girl had been about to offer, hadn’t she? About to offer to be something like that, someone who Amy could tell how she really felt, dump all of her feelings on to and rant all day.

It was unnerving how this one tall, lanky girl could get under her skin like this. But just like Amy had gotten irritated at her for presuming she knew about what she was going through, who was she to know what the other girl had gone through and dealt with? She was a parahuman, and first generation triggers could be horrific, terrible things.

Amy shivered, thinking about how she’d discovered what the other girl was.

Those eyes. Those hideously stunning eyes that felt like they could look into the very depths of your soul. It was like the image had been burned into Amy’s mind. What would give someone a power like that? It had to be some kind of Thinker ability. They were the sign that this girl was a cape, but she’d never heard of any capes with eyes like that, and there hadn’t been any recent transfers. It was completely possible that she simply didn’t want to use her power publicly, that she didn’t like it similar to how Amy was coming to resent her own. And that had a greater sense of rightness than the possibility that the girl was trying to hide her abilities for some ulterior motive.

The question became what should she do now? What should she do tomorrow? They’d be in a class together tomorrow, so it would be possible to learn the girl’s name, which might in turn remind her of that annoying thing she couldn’t seem to remember.

Amy decided she wouldn’t actively seek the girl out, but if the brunette came to her she wouldn’t be as harsh. Honey and vinegar and all that.

After all, what was the saying? ‘Keep your friends close and your enemies closer’? Potential, Amy appended. Potential enemy.

But even that felt wrong, and she tried to ignore the feeling. She’d figure out who and what this girl was, why she felt she could remember her.

And then she’d go from there.

Chapter End Notes
Negotiator kinda derped there with the Root. But that’s what happens when you try to understand the Akashic records without being conditioned for it.

Poor Amy. She’s so sad. Don’t worry Panacea! Taylor doesn’t bite.

Like it? Hate it? Love it? Tell me! I read your reviews with great relish!

EDIT: Because everybody is saying TT’s power is figuring out things it shouldn’t be about Taylor: Why yes. Yes it is.
I stared at the ceiling of my room, shadowed in darkness. I had been right, in the hospital: I couldn’t stop thinking about her.

Amy Dallon, better known as Panacea.

“Healing wonder”, they called her. Miracle-worker.

The cape with the highest number of lives saved through personal intervention in the world. Member of New Wave. Daughter of Carol and Mark Dallon, Brandish and Flashbang. Sister of Victoria Dallon, better known as Glory Girl. Student at Arcadia High. Member of my history class.

But perhaps most importantly (to me, at least), someone who had healed me not once, but twice now, saving me from injuries that normally would have been crippling.

I turned over onto my side, staring at the wall.

Amy hadn’t been anything like I’d expected. Well, then again I didn’t know what I’d expected, but it certainly wasn’t what I’d encountered.

She’d seemed so… tired. Worn out. Disillusioned. Jaded. Cynical. Way too much for a girl who was only a year and a half older than I was. It was fucking ridiculous.

“But act like you know anything about me.”

Her tone had been so sharp. Acidic. And yet… underneath it all I’d heard a thread of pain. The pain of loneliness, something I was way too familiar. She didn’t have someone who she could rely on.

I hadn’t either. I hadn’t had anybody, just a lonely pariah. An outcast. An outsider.

Until suddenly, I wasn’t. It had been three girls (and wasn’t that fucking hilarious) that accepted me, and showed me that I hadn’t been doing anything wrong. Everybody else had been.

Alex, Sarah, and Emily. And then the others that had joined us. John. Michael. Ayame and Sayaka.

My friends. I wouldn’t have believed it a year ago, but now that I had them, I couldn’t imagine being without them.

“Why do you care?”

I almost flinched at the memory of how her accusing voice had sounded.

It was because I knew what it was like. I knew how hard it was to go through the same thing, day in, day out. I’d lived it. The same thing that wore down at you, crushed you until you felt like you would break. Her situation might be more… unique than mine had been, but I could still
empathize more than enough to know how bad it could get.

The better question was “Why doesn’t anybody else?” I could see she’d never been asked about herself, about her well-being. Why? How could they not? How did nobody else see the tired girl that I had? How could they ignore it?

I didn’t understand.

Except… I could, as I’d also been ignored like that. But she was Panacea. People had to care about her, right? And yet… they hadn’t noticed anything.

I didn’t know what to do. It felt wrong to tell other people what I’d seen. To tell them something they should already know. To tell them something that she could have told them if she’d wanted.

Instead, I… I wanted to help her. I wanted to show her what it could be like. But this evening she’d gone cold, just locked up. Maybe it was because I’d caught her off-guard. Maybe it was because the question had been so personal.

Either way, I didn’t like the thought of leaving things the way they were.

That night, I dreamed.

I floated. Floated in an empty space, seemingly forever.

And then it wasn’t empty, filled with darkness and light. There was darkness inside the light, and light inside the darkness. Creation and destruction. Life, and death.

Alone, they were chaotic, lost, uncontrollable. Together, they were harmony, each balancing the other.

It was so right, that I was almost brought to tears.

But when I woke it all drifted away, slipping through the cracks in my mind. And even the knowledge that there’d been something faded into nothingness.

“Taylor~”

I shut my locker door and didn’t have any time to react when a blonde blur rushed up and hugged me from behind. After a few seconds, she released me, and I turned around.

“Hey Alex,” I said smiling.

Her eyebrows scrunched together. “You weren’t at school yesterday. And you missed practice!” She huffed, trying to frown.

I grimaced. “Yeah. Sorry. I wasn’t feeling well. I’m doing fine now,” I fibbed. It wasn’t a total lie. There’s no way I would have been able to play with my ankle the way it had been.

She couldn’t keep the expression up for long, it quickly turning into one of her wide grins. “Well, I’m glad you’re okay. The others were worried about you too. You seriously need to get a cell phone already.”

“Yeah, I know,” I muttered, internally wincing at the thought of the conversation that would require having with my dad. Not one I particularly wanted to have.
“Just do it! I know your dad’s all weird about it ’cause of your mom, but seriously! What if you got in some horrible accident or something? How would I know where to go to save my favorite soccer buddy from a terrible fate at the hands of some vile villain?”

I snorted to myself. *If only you knew.*

Looking at her flatly, “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean,” she said.


“If you need backup, just let me know and I’ll be there!”

“If you say so,” I ceded. Though I doubted I’d take her up on the offer, it was still nice to know she’d support me if I needed it.

Alex grinned. “Most excellent.” She hooked her arm through mine. “Come, Taylor! It is time to conquer the dastardly land of polar coordinates and cosines!”

I shook my head in amusement and allowed myself to be dragged forward by the energetic blonde to our first period class.

School managed to capture my full attention for once, as people around me were still talking about Lung. I’d have thought it would have mostly blown over thanks to short teenage attention spans, but I’d apparently been wrong.

It wasn’t too hard to feign as much ignorance as everyone else, though some part of me—for some completely inexplicable reason—wanted to claim responsibility, to let everyone know who’d done it, even though I knew that would be monumentally stupid.

The first two periods passed quickly, and after a deep breath at the door, I walked into history praying to God that I didn’t look as nervous as I felt.

And then I saw her.

Amy.

For a moment I froze, all of my thoughts leaving me like the worst case of stage fright. Alex looked over to me in confusion, and that helped snap me out of my stupor, waving her attention away to let her know there wasn’t anything wrong.

Amy was engrossed in a paperback, but when I finally made it to her desk, she turned and looked at me. Her eyes widened slightly, and then she sighed.

*Okay Taylor, just fucking say it.*

“I… I’m sorry about last night. It wasn’t my place to ask you that stuff,” I apologized. “And… I really don’t want to leave things like that.”

Amy grimaced, and seemed to wrestle with herself for a second. “No, it’s not your fault.” She sighed, looking down. “I was a bit harsh. I’m not exactly used to people asking how I’m doing.”

*I know, and I can’t fucking figure out why.*
Amy looked back up and met my eyes. “Look. Why don’t we just start over?” She held out a hand. “Hi, I’m Amy Dallon.”

Grinning, I shook her hand. “Taylor Hebert.”

She smiled faintly.

I glanced at the clock and noticed we only had a minute or so before class started. “L-look, this might be a bit forward but, um, if you want, you could come sit with my friends and I for lunch?” I half said, half asked, looking over at Alex.

Amy followed my line of sight, and the blonde must have felt us looking because she looked up at us, and then grinned and waved when she saw who I was talking to. Amy looked back at me. “Who was that?”

“That’s Alex. She’s one of them,” I told her.

Amy bit her lip, looking conflicted. “I… I guess so.”

“Only if you want to,” I told her quickly. “I-I know you’d probably rather sit with your sister, so if you don’t I totally understand!”

Her lips formed a thin line, and something in her eyes changed, becoming resolved. “No,” she said quietly, shaking her head. “No,” she repeated. “I… I’ll sit with you guys for today.”

The bell rang. “Okay, well, um, we’re at those round tables at the front of the cafeteria. It’s pretty easy to see.” She nodded. “I, I guess I’ll see you then,” I hurried out, and then made my way to my seat.

Once I was there I let out a sigh. That had been much more nerve-wracking than I’d expected, but I really hadn’t wanted to fuck it up again and end up having her hate me.

That would have been extremely counter-productive.

But everything had gone fine, and the first step of my plan was complete. Now… now I just had to figure out the next one.

Fucking fantastic.

Thankfully, the round tables sat ten, which meant we didn’t have to do anything weird like trying to fit a chair between two of the little round plastic seats that were eternally attached to the table itself.

Amy was actually the third to make her way over, after Alex and Emily, Alex on my right and Emily on hers. Amy looked a bit nervous as she walked towards us, but with every step she became more sure of herself.

“Hey,” I said as soon as she was within five feet.

“…Hello.” She seemed to be a mixture between resolute steel, cold anticipation, and wary nervousness.

She sat down on my left, placing her generic lunchbox down as she looked at the two on my right.

“Um, introductions. Amy, Alex and Emily. Alex and Emily, Amy.”
“Hi!” Alex chirped, while Emily’s own “hi” was more subdued.

“The others should be along pretty soon. The twins and Michael normally buy food here,” I told her.

She looked incredulous. “How many are there of you?”

“Uh… eight,” I said after mentally tallying everyone.

Amy looked incredulous. “To be honest I’m surprised they’ve stuck around this long with Alex’s charming personality,” Emily told her.

“Hey! I resent that,” Alex protested.

The other girl scoffed. “More like ‘resemble’ that.”

A pair of girls walked up to the table, sitting across from us, a boy who arrived seconds after sitting in the empty seat between the pair and Emily.

One of the girls blinked at seeing Amy, but before she could say anything Sarah and another boy arrived simultaneously, Sarah sitting next to Amy and the boy sitting on the other side of the girls.

“Alright. Um, so. Sarah, John, Saya, Aya, Michael, Emily, and Alex,” I introduced, going around the table clockwise and pointing out each in turn. “Everybody, Amy.”

A chorus of greetings, and then Saya looking between Amy and I before turning to Alex. “New girl?”

“New girl,” Alex, Emily, and Sarah chorused, with Alex sounding significantly more chipper than the other two’s deadpan responses.

“What?” Amy asked in confusion, looking at everyone who’d spoken and sounding slightly offended.

Michael sighed. “Don’t worry about it. It’s really nothing.”

I could tell Amy didn’t really feel satisfied with the answer and was slightly annoyed, but she didn’t say anything else.

Saya and Aya, really Sayaka and Ayame, were identical Japanese twins who had immigrated to America with their parents as Japan’s economy collapsed in 2000. Michael was Hispanic, Peruvian on his mother’s side, I think. And John had been born in New York right after Behemoth had hit it, his father having died in the attack and his mother deciding to move here to get away from it after he’d been born.

Thankfully, everyone seemed to have picked up on my rather informal introduction of Amy and the not-so-subtle hint that I did not mention her cape name.

“So what held you two up?” Emily asked, looking across at Sarah and Michael as we all started eating.

“Mucci,” John said, as if it was all that was needed in explanation—which it really was as apparently he had a tendency to go over the bell—, Sarah nodding in agreement.

Amy wrinkled her nose at the name. “Do you have him too?” I questioned.

She nodded slowly, as if debating if she should really answer. “…Yeah. Unfortunately.”
“Spanish or Greek?” Sarah asked.

“…Greek,” she replied hesitantly, and the brunette winced.

“I’m sorry?”

The girl on my left sighed and shook her head. “It’s… It’s my third year with him, so I’m used to it.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re a year ahead of us, aren’t you?” Emily asked. “How’d Taylor manage to lure you over here?”

I flushed at the implication, but still responded. “AP World History,” I said, causing John to nod knowingly.

“Yeah, that would make sense,” he commented. “I’d forgotten you were in that one.”

We had a choice of AP courses for our history requirement after freshman year, as well as the order we took them in: Comparative Gov/Pol, US Gov/Pol, Modern European, and World History. It was required to take either the standard, honors or AP US History course our first year.

“So how’s the test in Art History?” Sarah asked the twins.

“Hard,” Saya reported gravely.

“The stupid aho wouldn’t even admit that he messed up one of the questions! One more time and I swear I’ll kill him.” Aya angrily stabbed a potato slice on her lunch tray, fuming and muttering under her breath.

“Shit,” Sarah cursed. “I studied, but now I’m worried.”

Saya glanced at her sister before looking back at the brunette. “You’ll do fine. Aya is just being a perfectionist.”

“Business as usual, then,” Alex quipped.

Sarah just nodded.

Amy looked at me. “Is it always this… lively?” she asked quietly. I could tell she was very off-balance by it all, and didn’t really know how to feel.

“Pretty much? I mean, with Alex there’s no real chance of it not being,” I told her.

“I hear you talking about me over there,” the mentioned blonde said, peeking around my shoulder. “Anything good?”

“Not really,” I replied.

“I’m hurt,” she said, feigning offense.

On the other side of Amy, Sarah snorted. “Of course you are. You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t.”

“Tayylorrr. Sarah’s being mean to me again!” the blonde whined, like a child complaining to their parent about some other kid.
I gave Amy a flat look. “See what I have to deal with?”

For the first time since she’d sat down, a small smile appeared on her face.

“I see how it is. Hmph,” Alex said, turning to the girl on the other side of her. “Emily~”

“Oh-uh. I’m not part of this, so don’t go dragging me into it,” the redhead said.

Alex drooped.

Amy laughed softly, and then froze, seeming shocked at the sound she’d made. I smiled at her.

“It… might be lively, but there’s never a dull moment,” I told her.

She nodded slowly, as if trying to figure out her own feelings, extremely unnerved at the slip she’d made, almost annoyed at herself.

I decided it’d be best to let her brood everything over rather than push, and left her to her thoughts as I turned back and focused on my food.

Lunch had passed easily after that, Amy mostly just watching everybody talking to each other instead of actively interacting. She’d answered a few innocuous questions directed at her about what she was doing in school, but other than that was mostly left to herself, the others having recognized that she was more than a little guarded. We’d all been the same initially.

“That was… nice,” Amy admitted as we threw out our trash on the way out of the cafeteria.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “They are.”

Now that we were away from everyone else, she seemed to be regaining her emotional balance. And I was losing the confidence I’d had from being around my friends.

Just get it over with!

“Look I… I was wondering if maybe we could… You know, I mean…” I stumbled out. God damn this fucking shit was harder than I’d expected. Turns out asking a world famous superhero if they’d like to be friends wasn’t easy. “Get to know each other?” I finally managed. “You. Not, not…”

“Not ‘Panacea’?” she asked flatly, the harsher personality that I’d seen last night surfacing again right before my eyes.


She’d sure as hell regained her emotional balance alright. It was like the difference between night and day.

Amy sighed. “Look… I…” Her jaw tightened and she placed a hand over her eyes, holding her face.

After a moment, she spoke again. “Yes. Okay.” She sighed again, sounding defeated. I blinked. That easy?

She took her hand away and looked me in the eyes. “Alright.” Her voice was firm. Amy took another breath, letting it out slowly. “After school. The gates. Today’s one of my few free days.”
I nodded, trying to keep myself from grinning. We had practice everyday except Tuesday and Friday, so this was fucking perfect.

The early bell rang, and I looked at the clock. Shit. My class was on the other side of the school. “I’ve um… I…”

She rolled her eyes and huffed. “Go.”

I nodded again, this time unable to keep the smile from my face as I quickly turned and made my way to class.

I got held up a little in my CS class and ended up running a couple minutes late. I hurried to get all my stuff from my locker, and after saying goodbye to Alex and everyone that was still around, I made my way out of the building. I tried not to be too obvious I was in a rush, but I really was.

I made it down the front steps of the school and out the gates and looked around. I almost missed her in the crowd of students walking by, but she had a cellphone out and seemed to be reading something.

“Hey,” I greeted, walking up to her and making sure I didn’t startle her or anything.

She glanced up at me. “Oh. You’re here.”

“…You make it sound like you didn’t expect me to actually show up,” I looked at her for a moment. “Were you hoping I wouldn’t?” I asked, not really offended but more worried. I didn’t want to be overbearing.

Amy froze for a few seconds. “I… I don’t know. Okay?”

“Are you having second thoughts? If you don’t want this—”

“Just… Just forget about it.” She dragged a hand down her face. “Look, how about we get going?”

I nodded. “Where to?”

She sighed. “Let’s just go to the Boardwalk and get food or something. I really need a cup of coffee right now.”

The dark circles under her eyes I’d seen last night were still there, so I could understand why she might want the caffeine.

We caught a bus to the boardwalk, and made the ride in an awkward silence. Well. It was awkward for me. Amy seemed to be crashing from the day, staring out of the bus’ window blankly.

She was aware enough to realize when we got to where we wanted, though, because I didn’t need to get her attention or anything.

We got off at the west end of the boardwalk, Amy leading me directly to a café a few blocks away. She got coffee. I got green tea. Actual green tea, something I was surprised they had, but I wasn’t about to waste the opportunity. The twins had introduced it to me, and I’d found myself actually liking it despite how weird it looked being a solid bright green color.
We sat down in a booth, Amy sipping at her drink, life slowly returning to her eyes. After a few minutes, she looked markedly better.

Glancing up at me, she winced. “Sorry. I… I needed this.”

I shook my head. “I get it. It’s gotta be hard for you.”

Her expression darkened slightly, head tilted down so her eyes were shadowed. “Yeah. Right.”

Shit.

She shook her head as if clearing it. “Anyways. What were you thinking to do?”

“I, I don’t know? U-um. How about introductions, I guess?” I sat up straighter. “I’m Taylor Hebert…” I thought about what to say. “I’m fifteen, I like talking to my friends and playing soccer, and my favorite color is red.”

(Slowly dripping, spreading across cracked concrete. Rust and iron and warmwarmwarm.)

Amy looked at me in curiosity. “You’re only fifteen? I would’ve guessed sixteen.”

I nodded. “I… I’m a bit tall for my age.”

The other girl snorted and muttered something like “no kidding.”

“So… what about you?” I asked.

Amy rolled the coffee cup between her hands. “Amy Dallon. Seventeen. But you knew that, I’m guessing. I like… I like flying with my sister.” A smile crept across her face as she said that. “And my favorite color is blue.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. “Why blue?”

She shrugged. “It’s… the color of the sky. And the ocean. They’re so…empty. Freeing.”

She was probably talking about flying, considering what she’d just mentioned.

“A place where you can just let go?” I asked, wondering if I was right.

Amy nodded. “Yeah.”

There was a pause, and I tried to think of what else to talk about, running through everything before landing on something I decided was good enough.

“What were you reading today? Before class?”

“Looking for Alaska” She took a sip of coffee.

That was rather… interesting. Darkish and philosophical, but I could see the appeal for her. A good amount of suffering, which I was unable to keep myself from relating to her. Denial of authority and a contrast between action and inaction and their consequences.

…Having a mother who’d been an English professor made it hard for me to read a book and not analyze the fuck out of it.

“It’s a good book,” I commented.
“Yeah.” She rolled the cup between her hands again. “I’m liking it so far.”

Another moment of silence.

I slumped onto the table. “God this is harder than I thought.”

_Nobody said it would be easy._

Amy smiled wryly, shrugging. “You’re doing alright so far.”

I rolled my eyes. “Greaaat. At least I’m not making a complete ass of myself.”

She laughed. “Well, I’ll ask something then. What do you do in your free time?”

I thought it over. “Soccer practice after school takes up a lot of time. Homework, unfortunately. Reading. I run in the mornings. Hanging out with friends. You?”

“Reading. And… that’s really it. Well, except for…” She gestured at my hands and I nodded in understanding.

_Healing._

It brought my thoughts back to the night before. How she’d looked. The dullness in her eyes. And she’d brought the topic up, right?

“Do you mind if I ask…?” I started, hoping I wasn’t making a mistake.

She seemed to understand what I was saying, thankfully not reacting the way she had last night.

“‘Why?’” Amy finished.

“Yeah.”

She sighed. “Yeah. It’s fine. I’m sorry for snapping at you last night too. I’m not used to having people…” _ask. care._ “Honestly? I…” She seemed to waver for a second, on the edge of something. I nodded, encouraging her.

Amy took a breath, letting it out. “I hate it.”

I blinked.

“I _hate_ it,” she repeated, stronger. “There are some days I just want to tell everybody to fuck off, but I can’t because I’m…”

“Panacea,” I completed, and it was like some wall crumbled inside of her.

“_Right_,” she said distastefully. “‘Panacea’. God. Even the name is telling. ‘Cure-all’. What, do they think I’m some sort of answer to every goddamn problem? Just because I can heal doesn’t mean I fucking want to!”

It appeared she had quite a bit of unresolved anger and bottled up feelings.

“It’s like… like, _because_ I can heal people with my powers, I _have_ to. You don’t see Othala going around and volunteering at hospitals, do you? So why the hell do I?”

_‘Can heal people with her powers’?_ She made it sound like that wasn’t the only thing she could
do. That there were others.

“You can do other things?”

She looked at me in pure shock. “W-what?”

“You just said ‘can heal people’, like you could do other stuff,” I explained. A sudden thought came to me. “You can make things, can’t you? They said you had to use some of my muscles—”

“They ‘said’?” Amy interrupted. Her eyes narrowed sharply, and her voice suddenly became arctic. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Had I not told her that yesterday? I went over the conversation in my mind, and realized I hadn’t.

“You um… you saved my life.” I guess she wouldn’t have remembered me. I was only one of many people she’d dealt with that day, and doubtlessly one of hundreds that week. It would have been ridiculous to expect her to.

Her gaze hardened. “Is that why you’re doing this? Because you feel like you owe me? Because you pity me and you’re paying off some kind of debt?” She stood up suddenly, grabbing her bag, with her jaw clenched in anger. “You know what? Fuck this.”

W-what? No! Shitshitshitshit!!

My hand snapped out and grabbed her wrist just as she was turning to walk away from our table. I felt a pulse travel through me, and all of the bright red cracks jumped.

Amy turned back to me, and the blood drained from her face.

I pushed the lines out of focus, trying to think of what I was going to say.

“I swear to God, Amy! This isn’t about that! I mean, yeah, I’m grateful, but…” I struggled to express myself. “Damn it, I wouldn’t do that!”

She swallowed and then sat down slowly, putting her bag down at the same time. “F-fine, then.”

Why was she so on edge all of a sudden?

“If it’s not because of that, then why are you doing this? And how exactly did I save your life?” Amy looked down at her wrist. “And… and can you please let go of me?”

I quickly pulled my hand away as if I’d been burned, trying to stop the blood I could feel rising to my face.

Alright,” I agreed, hesitantly. “Alright.” She’d told me about herself, right? And this couldn’t be one-sided. This would just returning the favor. And if I opened up to her, maybe she’d do the same. “It’s because… it’s because I know.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Know what?”

“What it’s like, to be stuck somewhere you don’t want to be,” I said haltingly. “I… I was bullied for a year and a half.” I looked down at my hands. I was fidgeting.

“I don’t like talking about it, but it was really, really bad,” I admitted. “Alex knows, but she’s the only one.”

I took a breath, trying to disperse the tightness in my chest and slight claustrophobia I was feeling.
“Everyday, they’d do something. It never got physical except for a few times, it was mostly psychological stuff. But there was never a way to escape, and I couldn’t stop it. Nobody would help me. I was all alone. On my own. And I couldn’t stand up to them.”

I looked back up at her, meeting her eyes. “Before winter break, they suddenly stopped. I thought maybe they’d given up on me, decided to move on. And then when I came back to school after break, I found they’d stuck used tampons and other stuff in my locker right before break, letting it sit there the entire time.”

Her face turned slightly green.

“When I opened it and saw everything, the smell made me throw up. Sophia, the one who had always been more physical, shoved me into my locker from behind as I was leaning over, and then locked me in.” I grit my teeth. I hated telling this, but if this was what it took for her to believe me then fuck it, I would.

“They tell me I was in there for three days. That the scratches I got on my shins from being pushed in were infected from kneeling in all the shit. When they found me, I was barely alive,” I took a breath, forcing myself to continue. “They say my heart failed twice before they could stabilize me, but I think it happened in the locker too, because I blacked out and everything was so cold.”

I died.

I don’t know how I knew it, but I did. I knew I’d died, been gone completely, but somehow my heart restarted and my body stayed alive.

(But I was already gone. Gone gone gone.)

“I had TSS. My muscles and shin bones were infected. They had to filter all my blood. I didn’t have any of my organs fail after my heart, but it was touch-and-go and I was in a coma for a week straight.”

(Floating down into ʃʃʃ. A place of nothingnothingnothing. No light or darkness. No sound. No time, no meaning, but I still saw. Only death and ʃbeingʃ. Nothing living, but I was alive, still alive. At peace at the center of ʃdeathʃ, at the center of ʃemptinessʃ.)

“And then I woke up.”

(Life once more, but I could still see death. The ʃemptinessʃ and ʃdeathʃ that invaded my mind, my ʃselfʃ, my ʃoriginʃ and would always be a part of me.)

“They said you healed me, and that you used some of my muscle mass to do it. But… that would require breaking them down, moving the proteins and stuff, changing them, and then using them for something different, making them something else.”

Amy flinched, and then stared down at her hands, mumbling something.

“What?”

“I don’t want it. I wish I didn’t have my powers. I wish I hadn’t triggered.” Now wasn’t that something I could empathize with.

She looked up and pinned me where I sat. “But no, I have to use them because it’s my ‘responsibility’, she continued bitterly, like she was quoting someone else. “Because what would
people think if ‘Panacea’ didn’t heal?” Amy scoffed, and then shook her head mirthlessly. “I fucking hate it.”

She turned and looked out of the window at her right, watching the people go by. “And they have no idea.”

“But I do.”

She turned to me and gave me a half-hearted smile. “Yeah. You’re the only one, you know. The first one I’ve told. The first one who even fucking noticed.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “For trusting me.”

Amy picked up her cup of coffee and drained the rest of it. “Yeah. Well.” She sighed. “I figure we’re not so different.”

“What?”

She ran her fingers through her hair, taking a breath. “Fuck it. As long as we’re sharing stuff, I should probably tell you. You deserve to know anyways.”

“Tell me what?”

“I know.”

I blinked. “Know what?”

“Taylor. I know.”

My heart stuttered for a moment. What was she talking about? Did she know I killed Lung? Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Why was she even talking to me then?

“H-how?” I asked cautiously.

“I saw. Yesterday. And in your head.”

_Huh?_

“What are you talking about?”

She rolled her eyes, leaning over the table slightly. “Your Gemma,” she said quietly. “And it’s not exactly inconspicuous either.”

“What?”

She sighed. “God, Taylor. Your powers.”

I blinked.

“O-oh.” Shouldn’t I feel worried, or concerned, or something? One of my biggest secrets, and yet I couldn’t seem to bring myself to care about her knowing. She hated her own powers as much as I did, so if anything, she’d be the only one I was actually comfortable knowing about them. I probably would have told her eventually anyways. Not for a few weeks, depending on how well everything went (it was going really well so far), but sooner rather than later.

Wait.
“What do you mean ‘not inconspicuous’?”

She looked at me strangely. “The glowy thing your eyes do.”

What?!

“What are you talking about? They glow?” I felt my voice raise an octave.

Her expression changed to disbelief. “You didn’t know?”

I shook my head, even as she reached into her bag and pulled out a small mirror.

“Here.”

Taking it from her, I looked into it. My eyes were brown, just like always.

And then I allowed the lines to rise up.

As I watched, electric-blue bloomed from the center, growing and taking over the brown. A circle of violet formed around my pupil, and it looked like wisps of the rings were sucked into the dark points, they themselves having dilated to twice the size they’d been before.

And yes, they glowed.

“Whoa.”

They were so pretty. Mesmerizing.

“You see now?”

I nodded, and forcibly pushed the lines down, my eyes fading back to their usual color.

“I, I had no idea,” I told her, looking up. “I don’t… I don’t exactly like my powers at all. I’ve never had a reason to look in a mirror. It just happens sometimes, but I can stop it almost immediately now.”

Not that that helped with the tremors and cold sweat and anxiety and restlessness I got at night.

“What is it?” she asked. “What does it do?”

“I… see things,” I said, shuddering. Things. Yeah. More like the death and destruction of every thing around me and how to kill it all.

(Such beautiful things.)

I didn’t really want to talk about it, and thankfully Amy seemed to pick that up. “You… The locker?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Swallowing, I thought about what I’d seen in the mirror. If that was what happened, it meant I needed to try twice as hard to keep the lines away when other people were around, and shut my eyes as soon as possible when they popped up.

“Please, don’t tell anyone?” I had a feeling she wouldn’t but I needed to make sure.

Amy looked affronted. “Why would I even want to? Not to mention it’s against the rules.”

I tilted my head. “The rules?”
“The unwritten rules. You seriously don’t know?”

I shook my head. “Don’t want to be a cape. I hate it.”

Her expression softened, becoming slightly sympathetic, and some of the tension in her body dropped away. “Well, you should know anyways. The rules are that we don’t expose other capes even if we know who they really are, and that we don’t go after each other in secret identities. Which… shouldn’t apply to you if you really stay out of it. But the first one does.”

“Oh.”

So that was why New Wave never got attacked out of costume even though everyone knew who they were.

Amy nodded, raising her cup but then realizing it was empty and looking at it mournfully before putting it back down.

“What’s it like? Your family, I mean. It’s got to be different, right?”

Her expression changed again, this time to mild pain, frustration, and a hint of helplessness. “No. I don’t think it’s any different from a normal family.”

I looked at her curiously. “What do you mean?”

She opened her mouth, and then shut it, shaking her head. “Never mind. Just… it’s nothing. Typical family drama.”

I knew that she wasn’t telling the whole story. That there was more she wasn’t saying. I was tempted to push, to see if I could get her to open up any more, but I was also slightly afraid of losing whatever little progress I’d made so far. Push too far, and…

Well, let’s just say I wasn’t exactly looking forward to seeing the cold, cynical personality Amy had when she clammed up. She could be vicious.

I nodded as if I understood. “Well… um. If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here?”

Amy looked at me with her brows furrowed, like she was confused and trying to figure out if I had some ulterior motive. “Al…right, then.”

Fuck. “No, I’m serious. Just…. look, here.”

I grabbed a paper napkin and scribbled my number and address on it with a pen from my backpack.

I slid the napkin over to Amy, along with the mirror she’d handed me earlier. “My number and address. My house number, ’cause that’s the only phone I’ve got. I’m going to be trying to get a cellphone, and if I do I’ll give you that one too. If you just need to talk to someone, call me. Anytime.”

She nodded slowly.

“And… I know this might be kind of weird, but if you ever need a place to go and get away from anything, you can come over. I… I know what it’s like when you’ve got nowhere you can go to just get away. I usually end up at Alex’s or the twins’ place, but at this point my Dad half-expects someone to crash on our couch at least once a week. Just…” I sighed. “I know how much I would’ve liked someplace to escape from life back then.”
“I’m… not the first one you’ve done this to, am I?” she asked, looking from the napkin to me.

“No,” I admitted, mildly guilty. “But it’s different. They’re not you. You’re not them? I mean, I know you’ve probably already got people and places but every little thing counts, if that makes any sense?”

There was a flash of expressions, confusion, wariness, longing, sympathy, and a stab of understanding, and then Amy’s emotions appeared to stabilize, settling back down. “Yeah. I get it.” She paused. “Thanks,” she finished softly.

It may have been small, but it was progress.

Amy was… less guarded after we left the café. Not a lot, but enough that she was pointing out shops she’d gone to with her sister, and telling a couple stories of things they’d done.

I got the sense that Amy was around her a lot. More than she was at school, even. Eventually she looked at the clock on her phone and told me she had to go, not realizing it was already five.

I waved her off, saying it was fine.

We ended up parting around the middle of the boardwalk, and she headed towards the end we’d come from and the bus, saying we’d do it again soon.

I was left wandering around, really just staring at clothes and stuff inside of windows, and I even walked into one phone store just to look around and see what was on the market right now and what we could afford.

It was around three-quarters of the way down the boardwalk towards the bay that I saw something in a window.

It was a jacket. A bright red fitted leather jacket.

And it looked fucking awesome.

“Pretty nice, huh?”

I looked over to the girl on my left that had walked up behind me as I’d been staring through the window.

She was blonde, a braid running down her back, with bottle-green eyes and freckles dusted over high cheekbones.

Turning back to the window and looking at it again, I agreed. “Yeah, it is.”

I felt a hand slipping into mine, and looked in surprise at the girl, who’d turned towards the door of the shop.

She looked over her shoulder. “C’mon, I want to see you in it, I think you’d look good.”

I was slightly surprised by her action, but at this point I was pretty desensitized thanks to Alex’s random bouts of spontaneity.

Without even giving me a chance to protest, she pulled me into store, a bell dinging.

It was relatively large inside, jackets on just about every wall and racks.
There were pants, too but I highly doubted I’d look any good in those with my spindly long legs, despite the surprising amount of muscle I’d built up in the last three months.

A guy walked over to us, with a nametag that read ‘Robert’.

“Can I help you ladies?”

The blonde dropped my hand, pointing at the red jacket in the display. “Yeah, have you got that in medium? It’s for her,” she said, tilting her head and jerking it in my direction.

The young guy leaned to the right and looked over her shoulder. “Yeah, I think we do. Over here.”

I was speechless, unable to say anything to the two in denial, simply following behind the blonde who was drifting after the man.

We ended up at a rack, and he shifted through a collection of the same type eventually pulling out a medium.

“Aaaaand… here,” he said, holding it out to me. I took it from him wordlessly. “Do you need anything else?”

The blonde shook her head. “Alright then, I’ll be over by the counter if you need any further assistance.”

He walked off, and I was left standing there, holding the jacket awkwardly. The other girl turned around to me. “Well? Come on, try it out!”

I blinked. “Um… okay?”

Setting my backpack down, I pulled my sweatshirt over my head, making sure the harness I was wearing underneath my shirt didn’t get exposed with my t-shirt being pulled up along with the hoodie.

She looked me over appreciatively, and I blushed. “You’re pretty fit, huh?”

I just nodded, unzipping the leather jacket to take it off of the metal and wooden hanger, putting that back on the rack, and then slinging the jacket around my back, slipping an arm first into the right sleeve, and then into the left.

The girl walked around me, eyeing everything. When she got back to my front, she pulled down on the two sides, straightening it, and then zipped it up about three-quarters so that the collar still folded over.

She nodded to herself. “Nice. Much better on you than that thing was,” she said, waving at the dark blue hoodie on my backpack. “Alright. Come on.”

“I-what?” I asked.

“Let’s get it. I knew you’d look good in it as soon as I saw you checking it out,” she said, as if it was the only conclusion.

I spluttered, shaking my head. “I-I can’t…”

The blonde rolled her green eyes. “Fine, then I’ll get it for you. But there’s no way I’m letting something like this,” She lightly smacked my abs with the back of her hand, causing me to flush
even more than I had before, “go to waste by being hidden by something like that.” She looked pointedly at my hoodie.

“N-no, I couldn’t…”

“Good God, I’m doing this for you. If you don’t accept right now my ego’s going to end up being bruised and I’ll start taking offense,” the girl said.


She nodded, dragging me over to the counter, me barely managing to grab my backpack and other jacket before we got too far away.

“She’ll take it,” the girl told Robert, who was standing behind the register.

He nodded, and rung it up. “That’ll be three hundred even.”

I nearly choked. WHAT!?

I hadn’t even gotten a chance to look at the price tag, the blonde having distracted me.

The girl didn’t bat an eye, pulling a wallet out of her purse and pulling out three bills, handing them over.

H-holy shit!

He punched a few buttons, and the register slid open with a ‘ding’. He stuck the bills in, and then closed it.

Robert looked at the girl in front of me, and I realized I hadn’t even gotten her name yet. “You need a bag?”

She shook her head. “Nah. Thanks!”

He nodded. “Have a good day.”

The girl smirked, and turned to me. “C’mon, let’s go.”

I hurriedly took my backpack off and shoved my sweatshirt in it, because there was no way I was going to risk wrinkling something as nice as what I was wearing right now.

She led me out of the store, and I just trailed behind as she wandered through the crowds, before suddenly turning and looking back at me. “I never gave you my name, did I?”

I shook my head, unable to say anything.

“I’m Lisa,” she said with a grin.

“Uh… Taylor.”

Her grin widened, “Nice to meet you, Taylor. Wanna walk around with me?”

I just nodded. Seriously, this girl had just paid for a three-hundred dollar jacket for me and wasn’t even saying anything about it. Did she normally go around buying random strangers stuff or something?

“Awesome. Come on, I know this pretty nice park that’s only a couple blocks away.”
She turned and strode away, and I rushed to catch up to her.

We made it to the park, and she sat down on a bench at the edge, me joining her a few seconds later.

“So. Tell me about yourself.”

Déjà vu, much? I’d just gone through this only hours ago with Amy, now I was doing it again. But if this was what she wanted for buying me that jacket, then I’d tell her anything she wanted without complaints.

“Um, Taylor Hebert. I’m fifteen. I’m a sophomore at Arcadia, and a starting forward on the JV soccer team.” I paused, and Lisa nodded encouragingly. “My dad’s head of the Dockworker’s Union, and I read a lot in my free time.”

“Oooh, what sort of stuff?”

I shrugged. “Anything? Classics, Young Adult, Sci-fi, philosophy, obscure fantasy. Mostly stuff that’s been reviewed pretty well.”

Lisa ‘hmm’-ed. “Tolkien?”

I looked at her flatly. “What do you think?” I’d read that the summer before Emma— I mentally shook my head to clear it, pushing those thoughts out of my mind.

She laughed. “Yeah, I guess that was a little obvious. What other kind stuff?”

“Asimov. Herbert. Anne McCaffrey.”

“Yeah, Dragonriders is a pretty good series,” she agreed. “Bit of a cult classic, though.” She looked at me, silently asking me to continue.

“Uh… Harry Potter, at least until it started getting worse in the last few books.” Apparently the Aleph versions were a lot better, but I hadn’t gotten a chance to look for them. “Vonnegut. Carl Jung. Kim Harrison. Patricia Briggs. John Green. Rainbow Rowell. Jay Asher. Zusak, though I didn’t really like his stuff, actually.”

“Basically the full gamut,” she noted.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Nice,” Lisa commented. “I can’t say I’ve gotten a lot of time to read lately, but I’ve heard of a bunch of those.”

I nodded in understanding. My time lately had been taken up by soccer, leaving me less time for reading. Not that I was really complaining.

The green-eyed girl tapped her chin. “Hm. I’m seventeen. I graduated early by getting my GED. I study.” She looked at me. “I’m trying to get a college degree online.” She grinned. “Behavioral psychology.”

That was pretty neat. I could see it too.

“I do a lot of computer stuff too, actually.” I looked at her in interest. “Some programming, but mostly security,” she clarified. “Penetration testing and stuff.”
Hacking. Well, legal hacking where you get hired by a company to test their firewalls and stuff. It was something I’d only really heard about. It also paid really well. No wonder she had the kind of money she did.

“And I like watching mysteries. Reading them, too, but like I said, I haven’t been doing that much.”

“Cool. I take a CS class, but that’s really it.”

She nodded, and then shrugged. “Eh. It keeps me busy. I don’t like getting bored.”

Well, she was certainly hyperactive enough to remind me of Alex. So I could believe that.

“So you got a cell number?” she asked. “So I can text you if I find a really good book or you’d like to ask some fancy computer question?”

I blinked, and then shook my head. “No, I don’t have a cell phone.”

Lisa looked at me incredulously. “Seriously? Seriously? It’s 2011, you’re a fifteen year-old, and you don’t have a cellphone?”

I shook my head again.

“Well.” She got a glint in her eyes. “Let’s fix that, shall we?”

“W-what?”

Lisa stood up. “Come on. You heard me. Cellphone. Chop chop.” She turned to start walking away, expecting me to follow.

I stood up quickly. “Wait!”

She turned back to me. “What?”

“Why… Why are you doing all of this?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. I just saw you and was like, ‘I bet she’s interesting. She seems like she’d be a cool person.’ And then I saw you were looking at that jacket.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s not like I can’t afford it or anything.”

I guess when she put it that way…

“Relax, Taylor. I don’t expect you to pay me back for it or anything. Just consider it a favor. I don’t exactly get out and get to talk to people much, so… well, if you’re really uncomfortable with it, just think of it as bribery or something. Say I kidnapped you and forced you to accept my generosity,” she said with a grin.

And then she gave me a stern look, her eyes twinkling. “But there’s no way I’m letting you go without getting a cellphone. That is a travesty that needs to be fixed.”

“A-Alright.”

I thought about my dad, and how uncomfortable he’d be with it. But, better to ask forgiveness than permission, right?

Lisa nodded decisively, and then turned on heel once more. I grabbed my backpack and walked after her. “So, anything you’d like?”
She was asking me?

I just shrugged.

“Jeez, you aren’t going to make this easy, are you? Fine then. *I’ll* decide.”

I suddenly felt a cold shiver travel down my spine. Why did I feel like I’d just condemned myself or something?

I’d been right. She’d ended up ignoring any protests I had and getting me some kind of black smartphone that I thought was completely unnecessary, but according to her, was.

Lisa was even more stubborn than my father, throwing the box out and pushing the phone and charger into my hands as soon as we got out of the store so that I couldn’t quote-unquote “try and return it”.

As I’d put the cable away, she’d taken the phone back and fiddled with it, handing it back once I was done, telling me she’d put her contact information in there.

After that, she’d walked me to the bus stop, surprisingly giving me a hug and then waving me goodbye on the bus.

It left a warm feeling in me, something that I didn’t expect. It wasn’t a crush or anything, but a comforting feeling from the thought that some completely random stranger had picked me out and become my friend in less than two hours.

When I got home, my dad was already home for once, and upon seeing the jacket, had been curious where I’d gotten it. *That* had led to telling him the story about Lisa over dinner, ending with the confession that she’d basically forced me to get a phone.

Unlike what I’d expected, he’d just sighed and said that it was probably time he get one too.

The day had been full of surprises like that.

But you know what?

In the end, I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

Complex Amy is fucking *complex*. Jeezus.

Also, creepy subconscious is creepy.
Wednesday, April 13, 2011

When I woke, it was still dark out.

For a moment, I was confused, as my clock said it was only three in the morning, and I hadn’t woken up on my own. There hadn’t been any nightmares last night, thankfully. They seemed to be happening with less frequency anyways.

There was a low rumble outside, and I sat up. Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I easily made my way to the window, pulling the blinds up and looking outside. Another rumble, and I saw a cloud of smoke lift up over the horizon and then slowly get pushed sideways.

There was a *boom*, much closer, and I felt it in my bones, the windows rattling in their casings. I couldn’t see the results of that one, though.

A popping sound started up, piercing the night with a sharp staccato that started and stopped at random intervals. It was seconds before I registered it as gunfire.

I looked towards the door just before my dad opened it, an expression of worry on his face as he first looked towards my bed, and then around the room, becoming visibly relieved when he saw me.

“Taylor–”

“I know, Dad,” I said. “Gang war.”

He just nodded. “It’s looking pretty bad. I called Kurt and Lacey, and they’re saying it’s even worse closer to the docks. That asian gang’s at the center of it all, apparently.”

I turned back to look out the window, and the clumped, dull orange light I could see on the horizon, with smoke trailing above.

Fires.

“Good thing we went out and got food pretty recently, huh? I’m hoping it’ll blow over quickly, but with Lung gone…”

Without Lung, the ABB would likely be in total disarray unless some other cape stepped up and took his position. Either way, the two other gangs, the Empire Eighty-Eight and the Merchants, would be out for blood, looking to grab as much of the weakened gang’s territory as possible. Not to mention Tattletale’s group (I’d learned they were called the Undersiders from some web research last night), which was near the center of the docks and would probably want to maintain some form of control on their area.

To be honest, I was surprised it had taken everyone this long to decide to attack, but I suppose it would make sense if they were gathering the forces to do it, and even Skidmark—who was apparently an absolute dickhead, but that wasn’t exactly surprising with a name like ‘Skidmark’—would recognize that it’d be better to launch an assault with more people and *some* planning than
less and none at all.

Still, I had no idea what the fuck these explosions were supposed to be, it was like someone had
gotten a hold of military-grade C4 or something. Because pipebombs sure as hell didn’t make
explosions that large.

“Well, I suppose we should try to get back to sleep, if we can. Not much else we can do except
leave it all to the authorities and hope it’s over soon.”

“Yeah…” I agreed quietly.

He moved away from where he’d been behind me, walking to the door and closing it most of the
way. “Get some rest, Taylor.”

I nodded where I was at the window, still looking out of it at the horizon where fires were blazing.

Dad shut the door, moving into his own room across the hall.

After a few moments, I lowered the blinds, closing the scene and returning to my bed. Under the
covers, though, I made no effort to go back to sleep, staring at the ceiling.

*I caused this.*

Indirectly –well, actually very directly– I had caused this gang war. It was a bit hard to
comprehend, thinking about the power and impact such a little action as killing Lung had.

I had thrown a city into chaos with only four cuts.

Underside of the right arm.

Front of the left thigh.

Severing of the upper right arm.

And finally, a single stab to the chest between the sixth and seventh ribs.

*(it had been so beautiful)*

Four cuts, one death, and it had such profound ripples. I wasn’t usually very philosophical, but
this really got me thinking. I wondered what would happen if I killed any of the other gangs’
leaders.

Well, being Brockton Bay, probably nothing in the long term. My dad had told me stories before,
telling me about how there used to be other cape gangs in the city. That it seemed to be simply a
fact of life. Brockton had gangs, and the best thing to do was to stay out of their way.

But why did they have to be the way they were? Dad’s stories of Marquis had made him sound
like he was pretty decent for a villain, he just also happened to be utterly ruthless against anyone
who crossed him, something I could sympathize with.

What would happen if instead of Lung, there was some decent person in charge of the ABB?

It was much more likely the ABB than the E88 or the Merchants. The Merchants were basically
washed-up dregs of society and bums, and the E88 were *neo-nazis* for fuck’s sake. Can you
imagine the leader of a neo-nazi gang actually being a nice guy to *everyone*?

Yeah, no.
But what could happen? Safer drugs? Less prostitution? Those were things I could get behind. It would mean a better Brockton in general, which was something we could seriously use.

It’s funny, you know? Capes, superheroes, the Protectorate… They were supposed to be doing good stuff, but the ones in Brockton never seemed to make an impact. They were always fighting to stay with the group, not ahead of it. You heard about cape fights every so often, but if anybody did get captured, there was a 95% chance they’d get out and be back on the streets within a week.

It felt like a game, almost. Amy’s description of the “unwritten rules” only made that feeling even stronger. Like, I understood there was the escalation factor. Go after villains when they’re not in costume, and you’re asking to have the same done to you.

Then again, some people practically lived as their cape identities, from what I understood. Skidmark, and his girlfriend Squealer. Armsmaster. The Triumvirate. Oh, and those “monstrous” capes who apparently got the short end of the stick and wound up with some serious mutations. Those were the only ones I could think of off the top of my head, but there had to be more.

Why did they all do that? Was it just that much easier to not have a secret identity at all?

Another loud boom outside drew my attention back to reality, and I sighed, resigning myself to trying to get back to sleep, even if it wasn’t going to be easy.

“—The mayor urges the public not to go outside if possible, to keep all windows and doors locked. Please inform the police of any suspicious activity you notice.”

There was no school that day. Apparently when there’s a gang war, they don’t want kids on the street. Shocker, I know. So school was canceled and the mayor had declared a state of emergency. The explosions had slowed, but they were still going off randomly about once an hour.

My group of friends was safe, made sure through texts once I’d convinced them that yes I was in fact who I said I was and yes, hell had actually frozen over and I now had a cellphone.

There was nothing to do other than read and browse the internet on our lousy DSL connection. And of that, well, the only really interesting thing was PHO and their discussion of everything that had been going on.

The threads had exploded (ha ha, yes I know I’m funny), and had more information than anything else I’d seen so far, including the news.

Apparently the explosions were the work of some bomb-Tinker named ‘Bakuda’, the same person who had been behind the Cornell bombings over a month ago. She’d taken control of the ABB, and was somehow managing to temporarily hold off both the Merchants and the E88, with only the help of Oni Lee.

Pretty impressive, I had to admit. Especially for someone nobody had even really known about until now.

Still, innocents had gotten caught in the crossfire of her bombs, and there’d been more than a few civilian deaths. It was currently under fifty, but was still rising.

The worst thing? Amy was working at one of the hospitals healing people.

After our talk yesterday, it made me think about just what kind of stress that would put on her. Because there was no doubt that healing people was just going to wear her down further and
further and further.

I’d… be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about her a little bit. With something like this gang war going on, with being forced, pushed to her wits’ end to heal people when she’d outright stated she didn’t even want her powers…

It wasn’t a very good situation.

I didn’t have her number or anything. I’d given her our house phone on that napkin, but she’d never given me hers.

Not that I’d even contact her. Amy was a very tricky situation. She was defensive as all hell, which meant that while I had been able to reach out, I couldn’t do that a second time. It was frustrating, because what I had done yesterday was literally all I could do. I couldn’t force her to accept my help, all I could do was let her know that I would, but only if she wanted, only if she asked for it.

…Fuck my goddamn savior complex.

This was not the first time it had showed up. You wonder about how everybody in our little group got together? Yeah. Me. Me and my fucking inability to leave things alone. It was a recurring problem, yet I couldn’t even really hate it, because in the end it had brought us all together, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything.

Still, Amy… I couldn’t stop thinking about how she had looked Monday night before she’d healed me. Her eyes had been just… dead, glassed-over.

A mirror image of what I’d used to see every day, myself.

It was strange thinking that I could relate to a world-famous cape like Panacea, in such a mundane, normal way. But… she wasn’t Panacea. I mean, yes, she was, but she wasn’t. For her, Panacea was just a name, it was associated with her, but it wasn’t her name. She didn’t think herself as Panacea, because she refused to be defined by her powers.

And… I actually really respected her for that.

For her, she was just Amy. I think that she actually came closer to what New Wave had been going for than any of the others. Amy had powers, but she wouldn’t be any less Amy if she didn’t, and she wasn’t any more than Amy because she did.

I pulled my knife out from its place hidden in my desk as I sat in front of it. Checking it over, I played with it for a couple seconds, twirling it around before flinging it up and grabbing it out of mid-air, looking at my reflection in the blade’s edge. At my beckoning the lines rose up, and I watched the bright, supernatural blue overtake the brown in my eyes.

…Even with powers, I was still Taylor.

And I always would be.

The day passed slowly, punctuated by intermittent explosions. The fact that I was now able to talk instantly with my friends made it pass quicker, but not by much. And it was all spent inside.

The number of casualties by lunchtime was forty-eight people.

Forty-eight.
Apparently Bakuda wasn’t just fighting back, but also engaging in some sort of terror-campaign against the other gangs, and it was working. Kaiser was organizing his capes, and already a few fights had gone down. The Merchants… well, the Merchants didn’t really have a chance if Bakuda could go up against all of the E88 and hold them off.

Lunch was with Dad, an irregularity that almost never happened, but we made sandwiches and ate at the table together.

Afterwards I headed back upstairs, entertaining myself by reading and the novelty that was texting. Eventually, though, I grew bored, and started calling people just so I wouldn’t feel so… alone.

Alex had been busy watching a movie with her younger brother, so I’d switched to Emily and then Sarah, who were both on the southern side of the city. Apparently the explosions were closer—and therefore louder— to them, and they were staying in their rooms. Emily in had seemed particularly spooked, as a bomb had gone off only two blocks from where she was, and she said her family was actually considering getting out of the city if it kept up.

Michael lived only three blocks away from me, and so he was in much the same boat as my Dad and I were: stuck inside, but not particularly worried.

And then there was the twins. Aya was a bit prickly at times, and suspecting this would be one of those, I called Sayaka instead.

“Taylor?”

I smiled, though she couldn’t see it. “Hey Saya. How’re you?”

There was a heavy sigh on her end of the phone. “Alright. Ayame’s getting irritated from being forced to stay inside, but my parents agree that it’s the best option right now. Not to mention there’ve been these creepy rumors of people disappearing on PHO.”

That was news to me. People going missing in the middle of a gang war? What the hell could be doing that?

Bringing my attention back to the conversation, I spoke. “And you?”

“I’m fine. A little similar to Aya, but not so bad. Hanging in there. I’m just frustrated. There isn’t much to do, and it’s boring. Hanafuda are only so interesting for the first five games.”

I chuckled. “I can imagine.” The twins had talked me into learning, and I’d somehow managed a winning streak for the past few weeks against Aya. But the games could be long.

“So how are you, Taylor?”

“So doing oka–”

I heard a bang in the background, like the sound of a door being forced open, the wood breaking.

“Soaya?”

“Taylor!” Saya yelled. “I think there’s someone he–” She was cut off by a loud crack.

I could hear indistinct shouting, lower-pitched voices that I couldn’t recognize, and a different language that I recognized as Japanese from my time with the twins.
“Saya!?”

A sharp scream came through the line, causing me to wince in pain before the sound was abruptly muffled. Thudding sounds grew louder, and then something plastic scraping against something else, like a floor.

Without any warning the phone in my hand went silent, the screen lighting up and backing out to the previous frame that displayed my recent calls. As soon as it had loaded fully, I pressed the green phone next to Saya’s name.

It went straight to voicemail. No ringing, nothing.

I pushed Aya’s dial icon the next time, and the same thing happened.

*FUCK.*

Okay. Okay.

I took a breath.

Alright. Gotta stay calm. Put the facts together.

I was on the phone with Sayaka. She was fine. There was a noise, and she was telling me she thought that someone was in the house. And then… all of that happened.

It looked like there was a pretty fucking high chance her suspicions were right.

I was still breathing quickly. Focusing, I started forcing myself to slow my breathing.

Okay. Alright. What to do. What the *fuck* should I do?

Call the police?

I switched over to the number pad and punched in ‘911’ as soon as I had the thought, hitting call as fast as possible. There wasn’t even a pause, it just went immediately to a busy signal.

Shit. Shit shit shit.

They were probably completely tied up with everything going on in the city right now, and I doubted they’d even have anyone they could dispatch in the next hour, if the emergency lines were even open.

And this *couldn’t wait.*

I didn’t know her family’s neighbors’ numbers, and if they hadn’t noticed anything wrong already, I had doubts they were going to.

Shit. *Shit!*  

I was moving over to my desk before I entirely realized what I was doing. My knife and its harness were where I’d stored them the night before, in the top right drawer, and I pulled them out, taking my shirt off and working my way into the collection of straps, tightening everything down. Once I’d gotten everything settled and secure, I pulled my t-shirt back on, hurrying over to my closet. Inside, I grabbed the surplus boots I’d gotten with Sarah one day and quickly laced them up over my jeans before reaching for my jacket hanging on one of the hooks behind the door.
My hand halted inches away from the familiar dark blue hoodie. Half a foot to the side, my new red jacket sat on the other peg.

…Fuck it.

Grabbing it, I pulled it on, hastily going over myself over to make sure I had everything.

Phone? Check.
ID? Check.
Knife? …Right where it was supposed to be.

Grabbing a pen and a piece of paper from my desk, I hastily scratched out a note for my dad. There was no chance of making it downstairs and out the front door without him noticing, so…

I looked in the direction of one of windows. Great.

Unlocking it and lifting it open wasn’t the hard part. Nor was actually getting out of the window. The hard part ended up being sitting outside on the sill and closing it behind me.

Once it was closed as quietly possible, I pushed myself off of the windowsill and fell the fourteen or so feet to the ground. The height hadn’t looked too bad, and I’d been right, as I easily landed in a crouch, dead silent, something I never would have managed three months ago.

Powers that came with fighting abilities were oddly handy in other places.

Standing up, I looked around and made sure nobody had noticed. Thank God for small mercies. The last thing I needed right now was someone asking me what the hell I was doing. There wasn’t any time for me to deal with something like that.

Sides, back, or front?

Sides. Dad would most likely be in the living room, and the twins’ house was southwest. Running towards the wire fence at my left, I gripped the top edge and jumped while shifting my weight, lifting my legs up to my side and over the fence. I relaxed once I was past the halfway point, allowing momentum to pull me the rest of the way over, again landing silently on grass.

This time, however, I didn’t pause. I ran straight for the sidewalk in front of the house and turned right, following our street south, and then turning and beginning the route I made at least once a week, but usually at a much easier pace.

It normally took me a good forty-five minutes of walking to get there.

I didn’t have that kind of time.

From my time with Alex and Sarah on the soccer team, I’d learned that Alex’s initial assumptions of me had been right: I was a fast runner. Like, really fast. I had a suspicion part of that was tied into my powers somehow, and tried not to stand out, though I also felt that I could go much faster than I had in practices and games.

Considering my current times, I was pretty sure people would start looking at me funny if I did run any faster, because at that point I’d probably be pushing Olympic speeds effortlessly and that was a sign of two things: taking steroids, or being a parahuman.

And I did not want people figuring out I was a parahuman. I didn’t need that kind of attention.

So I held back.
But now? Now I didn’t, because this was my fucking *friends*, and if there was any reason to risk being outed, it was them.

Pushing myself, my trip to their house was significantly quicker.

Once I was within three houses, I slowed down, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

There was a pair of vehicles in the driveway I didn’t recognize: a white-panel van and a black car. Even as I watched, the van started pulling out, and then the car.

Oh, *fuck* no.

I ran towards them, but they were already out on the street, and whoever was driving must have seen me, because suddenly tires were squealing and they were both racing away as fast as it could. They must have gotten up to at least thirty miles an hour by the end of the street, and showed no signs of stopping or slowing down, leaving me standing there in the middle of the street, staring off in the direction they’d gone.

With absolutely no chance of me being able to catch up.

Chapter End Notes

Taylor continues to wax philosophical. And manages to turn not being a “real” cape into a personal statement. God, Taylor. /rolls eyes
Alright, people. The overwhelming majority of you have probably already read most of this. Most, not all. There’s new stuff.

After the comments of zoufi about last chapter, I decided to go back and seriously revisit what I had written. I wasn’t really happy with it when I posted it, it had already gone through three near-complete rewrites, and at that point I just said “fuck it” and posted the damn thing.

So. This the second half of what was Sever 2.2, with an added scene in which Danny and Taylor talk about what Brockton Bay used to be like. It feels significantly more coherent, as it focuses solely on Taylor and her intentions towards Bakuda due to the events of the last chapter. Which now only deals with the beginning of the gang war and Taylor’s culpability in causing it, her thoughts on Amy and cape identities, the discovery that people were randomly going missing while the war was going on, and the twins’ kidnapping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

Fuck!

I was at home already, having come back after realizing with a absolutely frustrating certainty that there was nothing I could do at that moment.

It felt like giving up, and I hated it.

I hadn’t even needed to look inside the house to know it would be empty. Saya had said people were going missing for some reason… and then… and then…

And then my friends had been kidnapped. Their entire family.

Why!?

I felt helpless. For the first time in my life, even including my time with Emma and the others, I felt truly helpless. I had no options, no choices. The situation had been taken out of my hands, stolen away from me.

I hadn’t seen the vehicles’ license plates. I hadn’t needed to in order to know who had done it. There was only one group of people who would be speaking Japanese while invading somebody’s home.

The fucking ABB.

I knew that they forcibly induced members, but I hadn’t thought they would go to the extent of kidnapping families from their own home.
My anger simmered below the surface, like a pot of water that was right on the edge of boiling, as I tried to think of what to do.

Shit.

Why? Why did this have to happen? Everything had been going so well. I’d been happy, had friends, everything. But then Lung happened. And then all of this came from that. I guess in Brockton Bay, you could only avoid insensate cruelty for so long. What a fucking shitshow.

Grinding my teeth, I glared at my desktop,

This made no sense. Why the fuck would the ABB kidnap the twins’ family? There wasn’t anything special about them. They were a pretty average family, a bit better off than Dad and I, but not significantly. Their father worked at the university, some sort of low-level administrator or lab technician or something, and their mom was an assistant at a bookstore.

Completely average, unremarkable, normal people.

That high pitched scream, Saya’s scream, still echoed through my mind, and I momentarily lost control of my vision, the lines snapping into view. The sound wouldn’t leave me alone.

And it made me so. fucking. angry.

My first impulse was to go after the ABB now, instead of waiting. Find the first hideout I could, take all of the men out that were there, and question them. And if they happened to lose a couple limbs in process? Well, they always said gangs were hazardous for your health.

But I couldn’t do that. Because a) my dad would notice me missing, and b) the ABB had guns, and I wasn’t bulletproof. They also seemed a bit trigger-happy with the gang war going on.

Yes, I was fast. Yes, I seemed to have some sort of fighting sense of where everybody was around me in nearly a half-block radius. Yes, I had an almost uncanny intuition about what was about to happen in the next instant, enough that I might be able to dodge a bullet.

But I didn’t want to test that.

I slammed my fist down on my desk. This was so frustrating. I couldn’t do anything except wait, and I had no idea what was happening to them in the meantime.

Damn it all.

“Dad?”

He looked over at me. We were sitting eating dinner, leftover lasagna and some green beans.

“What’s up?”

“Can you… can you tell me more about what it was like before? The gangs and stuff, I mean. It couldn’t have been this crazy? You always said the Marquis was even pretty honorable.”

My dad leaned back in his chair, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin.

“Yeah. He was a hell of a lot better than the current ones. The E88 was around, but he kept them in line. The Archer Street Merchants weren’t nearly as much a bunch of washed-up bums, and that Asian gang, the ABB, wasn’t even here,” he said.
I nodded.

“He was the one here, actually, in this area. In charge of the Docks and stuff. Always seemed like a nice kind of guy. Never gave any of the Dockworkers any trouble. Kept his men in line. Street-crime rate was at an all-time low. Rapists were punished horribly, abuse wasn’t tolerated, it was… it was a good time, until New Wave got him.

“Never would have guessed that would happen. Every time so far that they’d fought he’d come away none the worse for the wear. He even fought off the Slaughterhouse Nine. That… I think is what really it drove it home. That out of all of the”bad guys” out there, he was the least of all evils.

“I mean, don’t misunderstand me, Taylor,” my dad said, looking at me. “Marquis was a villain. He wasn’t a Robin Hood hero or anything. But he kept things sane. Kept them stable. You could predict what he was going to do, and that made getting through the days that much easier.”

Dad sighed.

“It was after he went to the Birdcage that everything started going rotten. Little Asian gangs started popping up in the area, and then when Lung came here he gathered them together.” Dad shook his head. “The ABB aren’t anything like Marquis. I mean, there’re always going to be gangs. People will be people, and when they’re unhappy they get together for better or worse. Gangs are that ‘worse’, depending on what they’re like, of course.

“I was just hoping someone good would step in, clean everything up after Lung died. Looks like that isn’t going to happen. It’s a damn shame, too, because we could sure as hell use it right now.”

He sounded disappointed. I suppose when you lived through something like having the Marquis in charge, everything would fall short.

He was just reinforcing the ideas I’d had earlier, too. If someone were in charge of the ABB that actually cared about the city, what kind of good could they do with that sort of manpower? Probably no small amount, even while still dealing in the shady stuff that Brockton would always have.

It looked like that just wasn’t going to happen.

The hours passed slowly, nervously. I didn’t tell any of the others what had happened, not wanting them to freak out and worry. I would get the twins back.

The TV was on in the background, never having been shut off. I was too invested in seeing what was going on, knowing who the innocents were that died because of my actions. Really, I was just going over everything in my head, brooding and trying to think of what I could even do about all of it, how I could get the twins back.

“I… I’m getting word that we’ve suddenly received words from the alleged leader who has orchestrated the recent attacks. We… have gotten a video through an anonymous email.”

I looked over at the TV in surprise.

“This video has not been screened,” the news anchor said, holding her hand to her ear. “Please be warned that there may be content not suitable for sensitive viewers.”

The image cut suddenly. A woman appeared, a plain white wall behind her. She had straight black hair, and wore a gas-mask with separate, large opaque red goggles. A set of braided wires ran over a heavy coat that sat on her shoulders.
“Hello, Brockton Bay.” Unlike Lung, she had no accent, sounding distinctly northeastern. “My name is Bakuda. And I am the leader of the ABB, and the one responsible for all that has happened today.

“To the Empire Eighty-Eight and the Archer’s Bridge Merchants: You have tried to subdue us. You have tried to steal from us. You have tried to take what is ours. And for that, you have paid in blood. It isn’t even close to over yet.

“To the one who killed Lung, our former esteemed leader: Every two hours tomorrow, a bomb will go off in a major civilian center. After a day, it will become once every hour, on the hour. Their blood will be on your hands unless you decide to come forward. We will be waiting for you.”

The screen blanked suddenly, and then the female news anchor was back. Her face was pale. “I… I think that’s all for now. Thank you.”

The TV cut to a static image with the channel’s logo.

…Holy shit.

Fuck.

She was crazy. Bakuda was bat-shit fucking insane. If I didn’t go to them they’d blow up someplace every two hours?

No. No.

I may have been responsible in part for what had happened today, but if I could prevent something like that just by going to her, I would.

She needed to be put down.

And I was the one who was going to do it.

I’d kept my knife harness on the entire day, so all I needed were to put my boots and jacket on again. Once more, I slipped through my back window, my dad already asleep.

Instead of going right this time when I got to the street, I turned left, heading towards the Docks. And I also took my time, rolling everything over in my head.

Bakuda would die tonight. She was like a rabid dog, and couldn’t be allowed to pose such an unstable threat to the city, holding it hostage.

Instead of dread, I felt a sense of electric apprehension and excitement, a tensing, almost vibration in my muscles as I anticipated the fight and what would be happening.

I was going to enjoy this.

As soon as I hit the shadier parts of the Docks, I started looking for people in red and green. It took a few blocks, but eventually I found a group of three standing around and muttering to each other.

One of them noticed me and nudged the guy next to him, and the trio started walking towards me, sneering. “You shouldn’t be around here, little white girl.” He leered. “Bad… things can happen late at night, you know.”
I stared at him impassively. “Where’s Bakuda?”

His expression shifted to aggravated confusion. “What the fuck do you think you’re tryin’ to do?”

One of his buddy’s nudged him and whispered something in Chinese. The first man’s leer came back, and he started towards me. “You know… If you do us a little favor, we might tell you.”

In a second I was in front of him, holding my knife to his crotch and looking down at him. “How about you tell me where the fuck Bakuda is, or I cut your dick off?” His face drained of blood.

I let the lines rise up, and I knew the sight of my eyes turning blue unnerved them all, because the third guy suddenly pulled a gun out and pointed it at me. I glared at him.

“Fuckin’ cape!” he yelled, his hand shaking.


“You got a death wish or something?” the man I was in front of asked nervously.

“…You could say that.” A death wish for Bakuda, more like. “And while you’re at it, where the fuck are the people you’ve been kidnapping?”

He scowled. “I don’t know. They go to her.”

It was the ABB. I felt my anger towards Bakuda rise. Yet another reason to kill the insane bitch.

“So, where is she?”

His jaw tightened. “Eight blocks north. Three blocks east.”

I nodded, pulling my knife away and stowed it at my back, simultaneously pushing the lines back down. “Don’t worry. She wanted to meet me anyways.”

I turned around, keeping my ears peeled on the men behind me. I may have turned my back on them, but that was more of a power play than anything. To show them that they didn’t intimidate me. But I wasn’t stupid. The moment I heard a hammer cocking I’d be running. I doubted that they were good enough shots to hit me at thirty, forty feet.

But there wasn’t any sound like that, instead, hushed nervous voices in the same language they’d been speaking when I walked up to them.

I turned left at the corner, heading north, and followed it for eight blocks, sticking to the shadows when I could to avoid any attention. Eight blocks up, and then three over.

As I got closer to the location, I noticed there were actually less people around, not more. Interesting. I wondered what that meant.

The location I’d been sent to was a warehouse. Long and made of sheet metal, with a barely-peaked roof. Rust was all along the bottom edge of the walls, and there were even a few holes in them.

Moving down the side of the building, I looked for a smaller access door, and eventually found it two-thirds of the way down.

Cautiously, I tested the handle, and was surprised when the door opened an inch, not even having been locked.
What the hell?

I opened it far enough that I could slip through, and then eased it closed behind me so it didn’t clang shut.

It was dark, with only a few bare, flickering bulbs hanging in a hallway that went left and right. I went right, looking for someplace to get into the warehouse itself, because I knew that there had to be some way to access the larger inner area that the doors at the front of the building opened to.

I found one, and repeated the process to get through it, drawing my knife. The hairs on the back of my neck were starting to rise, and the fact that the warehouse proper was lit similarly to the hallway wasn’t helping.

I stepped quietly through the row the door had opened into, trying to find something of significance, and once I reached a crossing I went left, heading in the direction of the center, where it felt like something might actually be.

There was a scratching sound, and I spun around, searching for the source. When nothing happened, I warily lowered my knife.

The sound repeated and I was instantly on guard again, trying to find where the hell it had come from. The second time had been closer, on my right.

And then suddenly a rat ran out from under one of the metal shelves. It moved across the floor in front of me, and I heard the scratching sound again, coming from its nails.

*Just a rat.*

I tried to calm my rapidly beating heart, taking slow, even breaths.

Once the rat was gone, I turned around again, and continued forward. After five or six more rows, I came to the end of the aisle, finding a metal wall that stretched in every direction, with yet another door in front of me. Standing to the side, I slowly pushed on the crossbar, the door being surprisingly thick once I started actually getting it open.

That was a good sign there was something there.

But instead, I found a large open room that had to be the width of the entire warehouse and at least half the length.

*Where…?*

I looked around cautiously, and saw nothing on the sides or corners. There was a table in the middle of the room, and something was placed on it haphazardly. It wasn’t bomb shaped, so I walked towards it, trying to see what it really was.

A small tablet. My eyebrows scrunched together in confusion.

Looking around again and finding nothing, I picked it up with my left hand. It was largely featureless, looking to be just a generic tablet you could find in an electronics store. I pressed the power button with my right hand, holding my knife away at an angle, and the screen lit up, displaying a simple “slide up to unlock”.

Biting my lip as I debated what to do, I slid the lockscreen up.

The resulting screen was blank, except for a single word, dead center.
“Hello.”

Dropping the tablet on the table, I spun around, searching, looking for anything that could possibly be there.

Suddenly, a row of harsh florescent lights switched on at the end of the room opposite where I’d come in with a heavy ‘thnk’. A second later, and another row came on, closer. Each second another row lit up, traveling in my direction, reaching me after six.

I gritted my teeth, my heart speeding up again, and I could feel the flash of adrenaline that spread through me like electricity running through my veins. I was squinting, trying to adjust to such brightness after being in the dark so long. Once the lights had reached the side of the room I’d come from, there was a sound from above and behind me.

I rotated around so fast it was almost instantaneous, prepared for anything.

I wasn’t disappointed.

“Bakuda.”

She stood on a catwalk near the ceiling, looking down at me as she leaned on the rails, her arms straight. “You know, you aren’t at all what I expected. But I doubt any other cape that nobody’s ever heard of and carrying a knife would try to find me. Occam’s Razor and all.”

I was instantly evaluating how to get up to her, my mind flashing through routes bouncing between the steel posts at the wall and then jumping across to her.

I didn’t waste any time and immediately moved to do just that, running towards the wall when suddenly a blue barrier appeared in front of me.

I bounced off of the barrier, hard, and shook my head to get my bearings.

“Naughty, naughty.”

Grinding my teeth, I pulled the lines forward, staring at the sudden wall in front of me. They were there, crawling across the surface, and it took less than a second for my knife to flash out and slash through one, the whole barrier disappearing as soon as I’d traced the entire length.

“What the fuck!? SHIT!” the woman yelled.

And then the world around me turned gray as I was running forward.

Colorless, sapped of all saturation, leaving only contrasting shades and mixtures of black and white behind.

Without warning, I was eight feet back.

“Good fucking God.” Bakuda swore breathlessly, her voice muffled.

I ran forward.

“I thought I’d get more time than that,” she said, running her fingers through her hair.

I ran forward.

“But you’re definitely, the one, aren’t you? I wasn’t sure, but you just fucking cut through a
forcefield that could have held against an armor-piercing tank round like it was nothing.”

I ran forward.

“No wonder you were able to kill Lung if that’s what you can do,” she said. “I have to thank you for that, by the way. Being leader of the ABB is the best present someone’s ever gotten me.”

I ran forward.

“You want to know what that is?” There was a grin in her voice. “I replicated Gray Boy’s bubbles. It took a fuck-ton of effort, but it was definitely worth it for you, I’d say.”

I felt a sinking sense of dread as I ran forward.

“Well. I think that about wraps it up. Enjoy the next few millennia. Ta-ta,” Bakuda called happily, waving her hand in my direction and then turning and walking away on the catwalk.

I glared at her as I ran forward.

There were no lines around me. Nothing. For the first time in three months, they were just… gone.

Row by row, the lights switched off in a reverse of their previous movement.

After ten seconds, I was left shrouded in complete darkness, all alone.

And I ran forward.

Chapter End Notes

Marquis was super-cool. Business manager, supervillain, and a well-principled family man all in one package. What more could you ask for?

Ah, Bakuda. Such a wonderfully stereotypical villain. You really fucked up this time.
Ehhhh. Yeah. I know the last chapter wasn’t my best. Sorry. I rewrote it three times, and it had taken a month, so I just said “fuck it” and decided I’d try and make up for it with this one. Hopefully, I can do that. Let’s see. This is significantly more like what I promised in 2.1.

Have fun.
people I’d grown to love like family.

And I sure as fuck wouldn’t start giving up now.

My eyes let me see death, let me see the end of everything, the inevitable destruction and decay. The entropy that nobody, nothing, could ever escape.

I’d hated it. It had made my insides squirm, my very self recoil at the intensity and overwhelming feelings and knowledge.

But now. Now, I needed it.

Now, I wanted it.

I was Taylor Hebert. And I saw 「death」.

I accepted it. It would always be a part of me (so 「empty」), and there was no reason to reject it. So instead I brought it towards me, grabbed the unnatural feeling I’d always pushed away and pulled it closer. I embraced it.

And it felt right.

My soul sang, resonating with the otherworldly sense.

This was right.

Around me, things began to shift. I saw the air itself unfold, wrinkles and furrows twisting through space that I never would have been able to see normally. And at those folds, my lines appeared.

I watched them split and fall apart, ripping seams in the very fabric of reality. I studied them, cataloged every possibility, every potential destruction, every ending to the prison I was locked in.

And then I pulled them towards me, manipulating the sight so that I could see lines around my knife that was ever moving forward, slicing through the air as I ran. And finally, one appeared directly in my blade’s path, twisting and shifting until the tip of the blade sunk into the end.

There was no resistance. There was never any resistance. Even when I was cutting through a barrier of time and space itself, there was no resistance.

My blade reached the end of the line.

And I was free.

There was no shift between the grayness and color. No moment, no time. At once, it simply was and then it simply was not, like it had never been.

I skidded to a stop in the enveloping darkness, letting the lines go out of focus until I called for them again.

Now. Time to find Bakuda. If I was an insane bomber woman, where would I be?

Sheathing my knife, I walked over to the table in the center of the room and picked up the tablet I had looked at before that Bakuda had left behind. It was the only clue I had. Maybe there was something on it that would help me figure that out.

Bakuda was a Tinker, so she probably wasn’t stupid enough to do this, but I also doubted she ever
thought I’d get a chance to look, so the possibility wasn’t zero.

I’d take everything I could get.

Unlocking the tablet, I searched around it and eventually found the maps application. Furrowing my brow, I looked for some sort of menu, eventually finding it slightly hidden. And wouldn’t you know it, there was a thing that said “timeline” right there.

Even if she’d wiped it completely –and it looked like she had–, I’d learned just the day before yesterday from getting my own cellphone that phones and tablets defaulted to a) always having WiFi and/or GPS on and b) recording and reporting location information and history at regular intervals.

And Bakuda had either been thoughtless enough, or too fucking arrogant to bother changing the settings from their default. Personally, I was more inclined to believe it was the latter. She was going to seriously come to regret that if it ended up leading me right to her.

I wonder how she’d feel about seeing me again? She’d been pretty shaken just from me breaking through her force-field. Think I can make her die of a heart attack when she sees that she utterly failed at getting rid of me?

I was certainly going to try.

I stood on the roof of a building, looking at the horizon that still glowed at points with untamed fires. The tablet said it was still early Thursday morning, 1 AM, so I’d actually only been in the bubble for an hour or two.

It had felt like a lot longer.

I’d looked over the device a bit more in the warehouse, pinpointing at least three places I’d need to try since it looked they were more important than the others. The tablet’s records said it had been at them multiple times, so there had to be something there. If she wasn’t at those places, I’d try the other spots that it had only been at once.

From appearances, she’d been moving around a lot. The tablet only had records for the last seven hours, which was when I assumed she’d wiped the thing.

God. I just couldn’t fucking believe how stupid or arrogant she’d have to be not to think this could be used to track her. Bakuda had literally given me a goddamn map of where she could be, and this time I didn’t have to be worried about traps. …Unless these places were traps, but I highly doubted that.

Maybe she meant to come back for it, and I sure as hell believed she’d never even considered the possibility of me getting out of that bubble.

But still. Really? Really? This was like Villain 101: never leave loose ends around. Even I could figure that out.

And this was a loose end that would turn out to unravel the entire fucking tapestry.

Whatever. It just made finding her easier, which meant I’d get to kill her sooner rather than later.

Once I’d gotten out of the warehouse, I’d looked around for and climbed the first fire escape I could find. I’d have to be traveling pretty far distances between these three places, so it would be better if I could run as fast I could without worrying about being seen by the mooks.
Checking the tablet one last time to verify where I was going, I put it away inside my jacket and took off.

I ran completely silent despite wearing combat boots, which is a bit hilarious in retrospect. Jumping between buildings was easy, being only eight or ten feet on average, though there were a couple larger gaps.

It took about fifteen minutes straight of running over and jumping between buildings before I reached the first place, which looked like a pretty standard three-story apartment building. Of course, if Bakuda had been here then it was probably anything but normal.

Unlike the warehouse, which’d had progressively less ABB guys as I got closer, this actually had a few loitering around, at least seven or eight, undoubtedly with more inside.

_Hm. How to go about this…_

I could either deal with the ones outside first, or go inside and deal with the others first, which had a higher chance of me encountering Bakuda.

Drawing my knife and tapping the flat against my chin, I debated the benefits of both. Well, either way it’d end in everyone that I needed to deal with being incapacitated.

I should… probably not go for any lethal attacks against the mooks. Maiming would be okay, if they really tried to fight me, but I’d try and keep it clean and just knock everyone out. I was a bit upset at the ABB collectively because of everything they’d done lately, but I also realized Bakuda was completely delusional and insane, so I couldn’t hold them completely accountable.

Deciding to go with the inside route, I swung off the side of the apartment building and dropped the thirteen feet to the first fire escape platform. Landing quietly in a crouch, I looked at the window in front of me. It looked a bit… unmaintained. I tried to open it, but wasn’t surprised when the thing didn’t budge an inch

Fuck it.

Pulling the lines forward, I eyed the edges of the window and started tracing a line on each side. Once I finished, I kept my knife wedged in the gap of the last one I’d cut (the top) and started trying to lever the entire frame towards me. That actually took longer than cutting through it did, but after a minute of working on it, the pane plus four wooden sides fell into my ready arms.

Setting it to the side on the fire escape, I stuck my head in the entrance I’d made and looked around. I’d already known it was a dark, closed room from what I’d been able to see through the window, and I couldn’t feel anyone around, but it always paid to double-check.

Especially after I’d fallen for such a stupid, idiotic, _obvious_ trap once already tonight.

There was nobody, so I stepped through the window and headed to the door. _Now_ I could feel people. They were at the end of the hallway that the door opened into, but I had no way of knowing if they were facing away from me or not.

_Well, nothing for it._

I took a breath, preparing myself, and then opened the door and sprinted towards where the men were.

They were facing away from me, just standing there talking to each other, and hadn’t even heard
me come up behind them.

The first one went down from the hilt of my knife to the base of his skull.

The second one was starting to turn around, surprised at the sudden collapse of his buddy, but I whacked him over the head and he fell just as easily as the first.

The sound of them going down had been quiet, but not quiet enough that I would put it past someone to have noticed. Stepping over the prone bodies, I continued down the hallway, and not finding anyone else I had to take out, eventually reached the end. A set of cement stairs went down, so looking back at the two men I’d knocked out and deciding that they were okay just lying there for the moment, I went down the stairs.

I really wished I had some zipties or something, but I hadn’t exactly planned on needing to do this. And I was strangely a bit disappointed that it had been so easy.

Reaching the second floor, I tried to feel if there were any people in the hallway, but I couldn’t, so I poked my head around quickly and then pulled it back.

There hadn’t been anybody, so best just to go down the hallway and search for people.

I kept to the wall on my right. A couple of doors were open or ajar but none of them held anybody. At least, not until the sixth one on my side of the hall.

I heard voices inside the room, and tried looking through the crack between the door and the jamb to see who was talking, but all I saw was a white wall six or so feet away. I thought there were three or so, but I wasn’t sure.

Okay, then.

Flipping my knife back around so I was holding it normally, I burst into the room, instantly taking in the positions of all six people, two on a couch, one in a chair smoking a cigarette, a guy counting out money at this short table, and then two guys standing up gesturing at each other.

As soon as the door had opened they’d looked towards it. But it was too late, because I was already three-quarters of the way across the room. I got the one in the chair first, hitting him in the head and causing him to slump down. With him out of the game, I vaulted over the back of the chair, landing on the arm and immediately pushing off in the direction of the men on the couch.

It wasn’t like I knew martial arts or anything, so I was mostly going with my gut and instinct. Which, in the end, basically boiled down to “hit them as hard as you can”.

I personally thought it was a great tactic.

I got the one on the right in the jaw and felt something crunch as he fell over from the force of my blow. The left one was starting to stand up, but I punched him right below his ribcage and he folded, wheezing hard.

…Solar plexus. That hurts. Got hit by a soccer ball once there in a game. Not fun. And I definitely hit him way harder than that ball had hit me.

I turned around –deeming him a non-threat since that’d probably put him out of commission for at least five minutes– and checked on the other people in the room.

The one who’d been counting money was standing up and taking out a knife while the two guys behind him were starting to pull out what looked to be guns.
Using the grip my boots gave me on the floor I was by the first one in a half-second, his switchblade having only *just* extended.

I cut through the blade and kept going, punching him in the sternum so hard he fell down and hit his head on the floor, instantly out like a light.

…That one was probably a concussion.

The two guns were pulled out and almost pointing in my direction, so I sped up, reaching the one on the left first and cutting through the entire firearm.

I ended up taking a few fingers off as well.

Oh well. Losing fingers wasn’t all that bad in the long run. I could have taken his entire arm off just like Lung. At least this way there was no chance of him bleeding out.

Once my hand had passed by his head I pulled it back towards me, hitting him with the hilt of my knife right on the back of his skull. He crumpled forward to the floor, face-down.

Wasting no time, I whipped around and cut off the barrel of the other man’s gun.

And then I stopped.

In total? I’m pretty sure it had been under fifteen seconds.

The man in front of me raised his gun in front of his face, staring dumbly at the obliquely-sliced stub of a barrel before he looked at me in fear. “Èmó”

The other man on the couch was still trying to catch his breath and groaning.

I held my knife out towards the Asian guy in front of me. He had to be only twenty seven at most. “You’re going to tell me what I need to know,” I stated.

He swallowed, looking between me and the blade.

“And you’re *not* going to lie to me, or you’re going to end up a lot worse than they did,” I told him, and he looked around the room at the unconscious men, the severed fingers, and the lone weakly groaning guy before turning back to me. “You understand? No fucking heroics or trying to trick me. I’ve already dealt with that shit tonight so if I *do* find out you lied, I’m going to come back just to kill you.”

I don’t know if I was serious or not. I was pissed off enough by that trio that had directed me towards the warehouse, and I was still debating what I would do if I ever came across them again. I was seriously considering cutting their dicks off like I’d threatened.

The guy’s face blanched, and he nodded.

I pulled the tablet out of my jacket and struggled momentarily to unlock it with only one hand. I managed though, and held it out to him. He stared at it.

“What is Bakuda?”

His eyes flicked back to me. “I… I do not know.” The guy’s voice was heavily accented, but I still understood it.

“Well then where do you *think* she is?” I questioned.
He looked trapped, and once again his eyes flicked between my face and the knife in my hand. His gaze returned to the tablet, and he raised a shaky hand.

“Here. I think she is here,” he spoke, pointing to one of the western points, the one I’d been planning on visiting third. Looked like I was going there next instead.

“You swear?” I asked

“I swear! I think she is there!” he said, panic starting to seep into his voice.

I searched his face for any hint of lying, but couldn’t see anything.

“You will kill her?” he suddenly asked.

I blinked. “…That’s the plan,” I confirmed. It wouldn’t matter if he knew or not. Bakuda knew I wanted to kill her already, and she was the only one who mattered.

His eyes hardened. “Good.”


Okay, if I didn’t think she was insane before now, now I definitely would have. Killing her own subordinates as test subjects? Just, what the fuck!?

Well, I definitely believed that he wasn’t trying to lie… if all of that was true. And it certainly sounded real.

I put the tablet away back in my jacket. “Well… thanks. I’m going to knock you out now, no hard feelings, okay?”

Without giving him a chance to respond, I hit him with a right cross and he fell down, dead to the world.

Hm. Probably best to get out of here as fast as possible before anyone wakes up and has a chance to let Bakuda know I was coming for her.

I looked over at the guy on the couch I’d gotten in the solar plexus and found he’d actually passed out, the whites of his eyes showing.

Huh.

Well, that was a thing.

I made my way across the room and out the door, closing it behind me. I went back in the direction I’d come from as quickly as possible, following the path I’d taken before in reverse, back to the fire escape. The two men I’d knocked out in the hall were still there. That was a good sign. Maybe they’d be out for a while longer.

Once I was outside, my knife went back in its sheathe. I clambered up the brick wall of the building and flipped myself over the edge of the roof into a roll, standing up when I was level.

Alright. So north-westward then. More roof running.

There were a couple places I had to work around in the trip because of the number of floors, but it
was largely as the crow flies, taking thirteen minutes to get from where I was to where I needed to be.

By the time I was there, the tension I’d felt when I’d started this whole thing tonight was back, even more. I was practically shivering, shaking with the anticipation.

Taking a deep breath, I let the air out of my lungs slowly, staring at the building in front of me. Four stories. No fire escapes. No obvious entry points.

And I’d bet you anything she had it rigged to blow at a moment’s notice.

Okay. I tried to think about all the possible types of triggers she could have used: pressure, heat, light, proximity, motion, sound…

You know, I probably should have thought about this at the last building, too.

The question was, could I avoid and/or survive whatever they triggered?

I’d gotten through that force-field and the Gray Boy bubble, but I had no doubt she’d have much more conventional bombs (or at least conventional in the sense they exploded and caused pain) at someplace like this.

God. Assaulting a Tinker in their own base, especially when they did bombs, was not the smartest idea, was it?

But I couldn’t think of any way to draw her out, and I wanted to maintain the element of surprise I had since she thought I was no longer part of the equation.

Which meant doing exactly that. Assaulting a Tinker in their own base.

Fuck.

Deep breath. If I were a sadistic, insane bitch of a bomb tinker, where would I put the bombs?

Roof, for one. Um… in the walls… Definitely where I was working.

Oh God this is so sketchy.

I was going to have to go fast. Really fast. It felt like I’d never really gotten to my limit, either that or it’d gone up, but this was going to make me push that as hard as I could.

So. Enter through a window, which would probably trigger a bomb in that room, and then down whatever hallways I needed to, also triggering bombs along the way in order to find her.

This was not going to be subtle.

Then again, sometimes subtlety was overrated.

There were going to be cameras for sure, but as long as I got to her fast enough that she didn’t truly have time to prepare, I’d have achieved what I was going for.

Aaaaand I also had to consider the possibility that Oni Lee was here.

Prioritize, my mom would have said. Though I doubt she’d have thought I would be applying it to single-handly attempting to destroy a gang.

Okay. So, Bakuda first, Oni Lee if I got a chance or there was an opening, otherwise he came
second. I nodded to myself, still looking at the building from behind an A/C unit.

The best path looked like… through one of the third story windows. Which meant I’d have to jump and then run a couple steps until I could grab the ledge.

Ready?

Never.

I still ran forwards from where I’d been hiding, pushing myself to full speed and pacing my steps so that when my right foot landed on the very lip of the roof, I launched myself across the gap. My left boot grabbed the brick wall first, and then my right and my left again, before I pushed myself off the wall at an angle and grabbed the window sill.

Using the momentum of that final step, I flipped over the edge and crashed through the window, rolling and immediately sprinting as fast as fucking possible for the door.

There was a bang behind me, but I was already in the hall. Instead of trying to slow down to turn the corner, I simply shifted my weight upwards and ran on the wall for a few steps before gravity brought me back down to the floor again.

Bootprints on walls were going to be the last thing Bakuda would have to worry about tonight if I had anything to say about it.

There was another explosion behind where I was, and as I neared a cross between hallways, I made a split-second decision to go left, running at the far right corner and then launching off of it in the new direction I wanted to go.

My heart was hammering, adrenaline running through my veins, and I could honestly say that I’d never felt more alive than right then, a grin on my face despite knowing exactly what I was trying to do and what would happen if I made a single mistake.

Right!

I bounced off of another corner and turned right, and the entire hallway I’d been running through exploded in a burst of flame.

Behind me was a strange sound like a bubble popping, and I didn’t even think as I tilted my head to the left, a glob of… something flying right by me and landing on the floor. It immediately ate its way through the surface like the strongest acid to ever exist.

Hot damn.

At the edge of my perception, I got the feeling of a person, but it was like they were… down. Second floor, then. Need to find a stairwell.

Or…

I saw a window at the end of the hallway I was running through and another building’s wall seven or eight feet beyond it.

My grin widening, I accelerated, speeding up as much as I could. When I reached the end of the hallway I jumped through the window head-first, doing a forward flip and twisting in the air so I was facing the ground when my feet hit the other wall.

Absorbing the kinetic energy through my legs, I seemed to hang there for a heartbeat, just
squatting on the side of the wall like it was nothing unusual. And then I pushed off as hard as I could, rocketing forward and crashing through the window that was below the one I’d come through, rolling forward to disperse some of the force and then running forward like I’d never stopped.

I heard both of the windows detonate with… something, changing directions to the left at another cross just as some huge projectile went rocketing past me and exploded when it hit a wall.

Man, Bakuda didn’t do things half-way, did she?

Laughing, I wondered for a moment if I wasn’t insane.

Nahhhhh.

Feeling around at the edge of my perception for that familiar person I’d sensed before, I located them after a moment, to the right.

Right it was.

Twenty feet away I followed the feeling at a turn, sensing that I was getting closer, almost on top of it. I pulled my knife out of my sheathe as I ran, searching for the best way to get there.

And suddenly, in the wall, there was a very generic door, just like all of the other doors I’d run past. But this door…

This door had somebody behind it.

I didn’t hesitate to cut through it, not even trying to open it as I had no idea what would happen. Jumping over the pieces of what looked like steel that had fallen away, I entered the room.

What I found inside was a mad scientist’s wet dream.

Wires ran everywhere, some coiled, some laying flat. Beakers and vats of something bubbled, a few Bunsen burners heating Pyrex glass. Something that looked like a distillation setup sat in the back corner, condensation running through small tubes and spiral-shaped glass channels to collect in flasks.

There were parts and pieces of various electronics all over the place, with a few computers and screens sitting on a couple of the tables at the edges of the room.

A red light was flashing, which I guessed was some sort of alarm that told her I’d gotten in. On four large screens set on the far wall of the room, there were images of the hallways I’d just run through, now smoking and atomized and melting and half a dozen other things.

And in the center of the chaos, facing me, was a woman with black hair and a gas mask.

I grinned. “Hello.”

“Wha-what the fuck are you!?” she yelled, edging on a scream. Her voice was taut, frayed, with a hint of desperation and fear. “How the fuck did you get out of there!? You, you can’t do that; it’s imposs–”

“I killed it.”

My voice interrupted her frantic speech and she froze.
I stepped further into the room.

“What does that even fucking mean!?”

“Everything has a lifespan, an ending and beginning. Time and space aren’t any different, apparently. I was just naïve enough to believe I could avoid it. Live without having to see the death and destruction of anything and everything. Live without knowing how to kill it all.” I smiled at her.

“You and that bubble forced me to accept that that’s impossible. Thank you for that, by the way,” I told her sincerely. “It’s the best present someone’s ever given me.”

She seemed visibly unnerved by the repetition of the sentence she’d said only hours ago.

“And Bakuda… I can see your death. It’s going to be really soon.”

I flipped my knife around in my hand, from forward to reverse grip.

The woman suddenly threw one of the things in her arms at me, but she wasn’t even that good of a shot. There was a small red light blinking on the side of the object, and I calmly stepped forward to intercept it, cutting it in half without pause.

The two pieces fell to the floor with a thump, and Bakuda just stared dumbly at the bisected shape.

“It’s useless. I can see so much more now,” I told her.

Not just the lines running across her, the one going from left shoulder to mid right bicep, the slash of red across her middle, and a small line right above her right breast that I knew would kill her instantly. I could see others, others I’d never even considered.

I’d been so limited before, thinking I could only kill things that could be seen.

No, I could kill that which defied common sense. The invisible. The abstract. I could kill each of the connections I saw coming from her chest, running away from her like spokes in a wheel. The lines running from her right foot to the bundles in her arms.

“And it’s all because of you.”

“Lee!!!!” Bakuda screamed, looking over my shoulder.

I ducked, just in time for a knife to whistle over my head. Without looking behind me, I stabbed my blade backwards, thrusting it into where I could feel one of the lines.

The man appeared a couple feet in front of me and to the right, with a black bodysuit and a bunch of knives and grenades on a bandoleer. He wore a distinctive red demon (Oni, the twins had said, which made sense given his name) mask that had a wide grin and visible fangs.

As soon as my knife had finished sinking into the line embedded in the clone (because it had to be one of his clones based on his powers), I felt it dissolve, the ash blowing across my back.

The man reeled as if he’d been physically struck with a crowbar, holding his head in his hands.

I took advantage of the opening, stepping forward and catching a line that ran across both his forearms.

They separated cleanly from his body, falling to the ground with the sound of wet meat slapping
on cement, blood splattering all over floor.

Without hesitating, I flipped the knife in my hand back around to a forward grip and reversed my arm’s upward motion. This time I aimed for a line that was nearly vertical, from next to his neck on his right side to his left hip, right through his heart. It took less than a second.

Less than a second.

Less than a second to trace the line.

Less than a second to kill a man.

The two halves of his body slid apart almost comically, the way you see in the special effects of those TV shows and movies with blades so sharp they left only a hairline cut.

For me, that was exactly how it worked.

His torso fell to the right, organs falling out of his abdominal cavity. Liver. Spleen. Stomach. Liquid, not just blood—though there was a lot of blood—, but bile and other fluids from his small intestine spilled out. The smell of shit rose in the air from where I’d cut through his large intestine.

Killing a man is messy business.

His lower half plus the right side of his chest and arm fell backwards. Blood flew everywhere, the leftover momentum of it traveling through his body forcing it out his vena cava and then being propelled by the centrifugal force of the body falling. I saw more than a few droplets splatter across Bakuda’s front.

She just stood there, her mask facing the two halves of the body as she took in the gory image. I’m sure she’d killed other people before, just as messily too. But I doubt she’d expected Oni Lee to be dealt with so quickly.

I took a step forward, uncaring of the blood that would track on the bottom of my boots.

Bakuda must have noticed my movement, because her head snapped up, and she fumbled for one of the other objects in her arms, desperately lobbing it at me.

It exploded feet in front of me, a black dot that grew into a small sphere. It was pure black. Jet. A void in the center of the world that all light was sucked into and never escaped. A hole in reality.

If it hadn’t been intended to hurt me, I might honestly have been curious about it.

Air was sucked towards the innocuous-looking circle. Small pieces and devices littered around us were also being caught up and drawn to it, crushed into nothing. The blood on the floor wasn’t exempt either.

I felt my body being dragged forward, but I didn’t fight it, letting myself be drawn further into its sphere of influence. Once I was within arms’ length, I raised my right hand and allowed it to be pulled forcibly towards the warped point of space-time, cutting right through the singularity just as easily as everything else.

With a slight ‘pop’ to my eardrums, the air pressure reasserted itself, the distortion no longer present.

I could almost hear Bakuda swallow.
“It’s useless, you know.”

I took another step forward. And a second.

Bakuda took a step back, but I don’t even think she noticed.

“D-don’t come any closer!!” she screamed. “I’ll kill them! I’ll kill them all! Everyone! All of the bombs in the city. A-and if you kill me, I have a dead man’s switch! So you, you can’t do that either!” She laughed hysterically.

I frowned, staring at all of the lines spreading away from her.

Following my instincts, I raised my blade, catching one of them. It flexed like a thread, but after a second the sharp edge of my knife sliced through it. And another. And another.

“H-hey!! What the fuck are you doing!? I told you I’d–”

“Shut up.”

She fell quiet immediately, her voice cutting off.

Like a skein of thread, I pulled all of the strands together into one solid, thick rope, holding them together in my hand. It felt strange. Like I could feel them, but not with my skin. They were present, but ethereal.

And then I killed them.

Sliced through, they all snapped back to Bakuda, the half I held dissolving in my grasp.

“W-what did you just do!!?”

“No more.”

She scrambled backwards as I strode towards her.

“No more threats. No more innocent deaths. No more kidnapping. No more hurting the people I love.”

Bakuda tossed yet another bomb at me, but I quickly stepped around it while continuing to move forward. I heard a wet-sounding explosion behind me and knew that it was something like the acid I’d seen in the hallway.

“W-wait! We can talk about this! You, you don’t have to do this!” She dropped all of the things in her arms and suddenly ripped off her mask, revealing a young, early-twenties Asian-American face that reminded me slightly of the twins. “You’ll regret it!”

It changed nothing.

I was soon within two feet of her, towering over her, five-foot-nine to five-foot-two, staring into her eyes.

“Yes, I do. And no. I really, really won’t.”

My arm shot forward, and my knife was embedded up to the hilt in the small line above her left breast before she’d even had a chance to blink. Her brown eyes widened, realization gracing her features as she registered what had just happened.
I pulled the blade out of her chest and a small trail of blood dripped from the wound. As droplets fell from the tip of my knife to the floor, the light in her eyes slowly faded. Her legs folded beneath her, and she crumpled bonelessly on the ground, like a puppet with its strings cut, her arms splaying out to the sides.

And it was finally over.

Bakuda was dead.

Chapter End Notes

50,000 words, and she’s finally accepted that her eyes are there to stay. About freaking time, girl.

Ever wonder why I gave Ryougi such a high mover rating? This is partly why. Don’t believe me? Go watch Future Gospel. What’s required to keep up with Servants is absurd.

Channeling your inner Shiki there much, Taylor?

So, this is the way Bakuda ends, not with a bang, but a whimper. I bet she hates that.

Action? Check. Adventure? Check. EXPLOSIONS!? Double check with a side of bakuhatsu. Type-Moon-style action scenes are so fun.

In other news, this story is now on the front page of Worm fics. I don't know quite how big of a deal that is, but it feels unreal to me.

Thank you.

In the end, I’m just a girl doing this because I love it. You all are the ones who take it above and beyond.
1:42 AM EST, Thursday, April 14, 2011

“Hello?”

“Uh. Hey, Lisa?”

“Taylor?”

“…Yeah,” I confirmed.

There was a silence.

Better just get on with it. “Look, you do computer stuff, right?”

“Yes…” she answered hesitantly, drawing out the word.

“Hypothetically, how would you go about deleting security footage when you don’t know if it’s stored on-site or somewhere else?”

Okay. Yeah, I know, I could have done better. But give me some credit. How the hell else are you supposed to ask that sort of thing?

Another silence. And then an exasperated, “Taylor, you’re calling me at… one-forty-five in the morning to ask me about ‘hypothetically’ deleting security footage? I know I told you to call me, but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.” A sigh. “What happened?”

I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything, she spoke. “…Don’t answer that. Are you on a time limit?”

“Yes?” I had to get home before Dad woke up, so there was that. But it was four or five hours away.

A second heavy sigh came out of the earpiece, this one sounding more exasperated. “Taylor, did you do something illegal?”

“…No,” I told her, truthfully.

Technically I hadn’t. Bakuda had a kill order put on her within hours of her public announcement of holding Brockton hostage last night. So killing her wasn’t illegal. I’m pretty sure nobody cared what happened to Oni Lee. Plus I doubted this place was even registered as private property, so breaking and entering was unlikely as well.

“…Then why do you need to delete security footage?”

Shit. Um. “Because while what I did wasn’t illegal, I still don’t want anybody to know it was me?”

I could just imagine her rolling her eyes. “Alright, alright. If it wasn’t illegal you won’t mind telling me what you did that you have to delete security footage for, right?”
I chewed my lip.

“Taylor, just fucking tell me what you did so that I can help with damage control.”

Lisa sounded honest, and she’d come off as sincere when I’d met her. I felt like I could trust her. And those sorts of feelings hadn’t led me wrong so far. So…

“I might have killed Bakuda.”

There was a flat “What.”

“Uh, yeah.” I laughed nervously. “Problem solved? City safe?”

“…” There was a silence for a few seconds. “You know what, I don’t even want to know how you managed that.” She took a deep breath. “Okay. Listen. Where are you? I’ll come over. Chances are there’s a lot more than security footage you need to deal with.”

“…It’s not exactly pretty. They’re still, um, here.” I eyed Oni Lee and the wet, meaty mess that he’d made-slash-become.

“Look, however bad it is, I’ve probably seen worse. You have no idea the graphic shit I’ve seen before, and I’ve seen just about everything. Now where are you?”

I gave her the address.

A short silence and then, “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

The line abruptly went dead.

I pulled my phone away from my ear and stared at it momentarily, then turned off the screen and put it back in my pocket.

Five minutes? That was fast. Did she live in the area? She had to. But why would someone as well-off as her live in such a shitty area?

I aimlessly spun around in the office chair in front of the main computer console with the four large screens. Say whatever you want, but Bakuda had a good taste in chairs.

My eyes traveled around the room from the motion, and I took the scene in.

After Bakuda had died I’d gone around and cleaned everything up, killing all of the devices and bomb-related things I could see, except the computers. Those might end up being important.

It seemed that with her death, though, or maybe it was being disconnected from her, all the bombs had deactivated.

Both Oni Lee and Bakuda were still right where they’d died.

…

I may have taken all of Oni Lee’s knives. I figure you can never have too many knives. And it’s always good to have backups. They were nice knives too. Not as nice as the one Tattletale had gotten me, but still pretty nice. One was even serrated.

I was careful not to leave my fingerprints on anything. No such thing as too careful with that kind of shit. Bakuda’s lab had a box of small/medium latex gloves, presumably for when she was
handling the really dangerous shit, and I’d liberated a pair for my use.

My phone vibrated, and I pulled it out.

Lisa: What floor?

I responded with “Second” and then put it back away.

Within thirty seconds, I felt a presence enter my range.

“Taylor?”

Sighing, I slightly regretted my decision to get her involved. But I was between a rock and a hard place. I didn’t want to leave any evidence I’d been involved here. It was a mistake Bakuda had made, and I wasn’t going to make the same one.

Her head poked around the door-frame first. Her body followed as her green eyes widened, taking in the carnage. “Wow. Okay. That’s… Yeah, that’s pretty gruesome.”

I shrugged. Death was messy, and my ability made it about as messy as you could get. Only thing worse would probably be making them explode at point-blank range, but at least this way I could avoid getting my clothes dirty.

She stepped over the pile of steel fragments from when I’d cut the door apart and edged into the room.

“So. Oni Lee and Bakuda. And you just… killed them. Just like that.”

“Yeah?” Pretty much summed it up. “You… you heard what they were gonna do, right? They said they were going to blow up a bunch of people if I didn’t go to them. And then they kidnapped some of my best friends…”

A look of dawning comprehension appeared on her face. She nodded. “Alright then. I’d probably be pretty fucking upset about that, too.”

I nodded in return.

“So, let’s do this.” The blonde laced her fingers and turned them inside out, cracking them as she walked towards where I sat, stepping around the puddles of blood and viscera. She eyed the gloves on my hands. “Where can I get a pair of those?”

I pointed the box out and she changed directions, heading for it to pick out a pair of her own and then walking back as she put them on.

“Mind if I…?” she started.

I stood up, rotating the chair towards her. “Go right ahead.”

She sat down and turned to the screens. “So we want to nuke the security footage and anything else with personal identifiers. I’ll check for any other building sensors and erase those records too if they exist.” Lisa said, bringing up a set of windows and a terminal. She honestly moved too fast for me to keep track of what she was doing, text moving up the screen non-stop. But it evidently meant something to her, because she didn’t even pause in her work.

“Alright, I found the security stuff, and it looks like it’s all here.” Lisa glanced at me. “You got lucky.” She went back to the screen. “Removing all footage in the last twenty-four hours… I think
I’ll completely zero out those files just to be on the safe side.”

The terminal stopped, just a blinking cursor below the most recent command, some ‘dd’ thing.

“It may not look like much, but there’s not exactly a progress bar for a process whose entire purpose is to write unknown amounts of data between two places,” she said, spinning to look at me. “Now we need to deal with the rest of what this means.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“Taylor. You killed the leader of the ABB. Do you even realize what’s going to happen because of this?”

“I… was more focused on just stopping her,” I answered honestly.

Lisa leaned back in the chair, looking up at me. “Okay. Let’s go over this. The ABB has no capes now. They stand no chance against the Merchants or the E88. Most likely, the E88, being better coordinated, will move in and take over this entire area, the Merchants only getting a consolation piece of the proverbial pie that is the ABB’s territory in order to keep them satisfied.

“The E88 are white supremacists. Now, imagine what will happen when they take over a predominantly lower-income and minority-populated area.”

Oh. Shit.

“Right. Nothing good. There’ll be more hate crimes, the entire area’s economy will get upset, people might even be forced out of their homes. And of course, the Empire gets a lot stronger.”

I sunk to the floor, my back against the desk as I stared at Bakuda, ten feet to my left.

First Lung, and now her. I kept doing things and then things would happen because of them. When I’d killed Lung, I hadn’t even planned on that, but it’d still upset the entire city. And now I’d killed Bakuda and Oni Lee, and while I had known what that was going to do to the ABB, I was more blinded by my anger and didn’t think about what I was doing meant for everybody else.

I cradled my head in my hands. All I’d wanted to do was get my friends back and keep anybody from getting hurt because of Bakuda. But even doing that, I still managed to screw everything up.

Fuck, this wasn’t what I’d wanted at all.

“W-what am I supposed to do?” I asked, turning to look up at Lisa on my right.

The blonde grinned, her smile going from ear to ear.

“You’re going to take over the ABB.”

…

“What?”

I’m pretty sure I was looking at her like she was crazy, because that’s honestly all I could think right then.

Her smile didn’t diminish. “You heard me.”

“Take over the ABB?” I repeated.
She nodded. “Listen to me. Lung is dead. You killed Bakuda, the current leader, and Oni Lee, her lieutenant. You’re obviously a cape–” I spluttered incoherently. “Don’t try and hide it, you’d have to be to accomplish what you did tonight.”

“I’m not a cape,” I told her strongly.

She looked at me in confusion. “Of course you ar–”

“I’m just a girl named Taylor who can kill things,” I interrupted, mumbling.

Lisa blinked. “That’s a… unique way of looking at parahuman abilities, I guess. Both simplifies and adds complexity, but I can work with that. Now, as I was saying, you’ve got powers,” she said pointedly, “and the ABB is used to having their leader be a parahuman–”

“But I’m not Asian!”

She gave me a flat look. “At this point, I think they’d take whoever they could get. They’re just going to fall apart otherwise. First strong parahuman who comes to them is going to end up running things. i.e. you. You’ve proven your strength, and if you offer to protect them, the last thing they’ll be thinking about is your skin color, trust me. Hell, you could even get someone Asian to act as your public face instead of dealing with things directly if you’re that worried about it.”

“B-but I–”

“You killed their leaders. And now you have to take responsibility,” Lisa stated seriously, cutting off any protest I could make.

Fuck. I heard what she was saying but… urgh.

The fallout of this was potentially very, very bad. The ABB didn’t have any capes now, which meant they wouldn’t be able to fight off the other gangs. The independents I could think of either wouldn’t want to get involved or would majorly fuck things up in their own way.

Like Lisa had said, this was my fault, and Mom had always said to take responsibility for what I’d done…

I must have been just as crazy as Lisa, because I was actually starting to consider what she was saying seriously. “How the hell am I supposed to run a gang!? I’m still in highschool for fucks’ sake!”

Lisa smirked slightly. “You do what every other leader does when they can’t handle everything. You delegate.”

“But I don’t know anybody who could even help me!”

“Really?” she deadpanned, giving me a capital ‘L’ Look. “Really?”

“You?” I said incredulously.

“Yes, me. What, do you think I couldn’t?” she asked.

I thought about it. The impression I got from her was honest and trustworthy, loyalty if you gained it, calculating, but not in a cold way, observant and extremely intelligent.

“Okay, yeah,” I conceded. “But don’t you have other stuff to do too? Online classes and work
and stuff.”

She seemed to grimace. “Yeah, well. I… My boss is kind of an asshole. I’ve been looking for a good reason to quit for a while now, and this is the perfect opportunity.” I got the sense she held some serious animosity towards this person.

“Why haven’t you quit already if he’s so bad?”

Lisa stared at me painfully. “I didn’t exactly have any other options until now.”

“And with this you do?”

She nodded. “I’d much rather help you out with this than work for the bastard. It’s just… like, he doesn’t want to let me go.” She seemed to feel almost… scared. Fearful.

“You’re afraid of him?”

Her eyes widened. “How’d you…” And then she shut them tight, rubbing her temples. “Of course you are,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Of course I’m what?” I asked.

She looked back at me. “Never mind. But since there’s no use hiding it, yeah. He scares me. A lot. And he’ll never let me go without a fight.”

“Who the fuck is this guy?” He sounded like a complete dick.

Lisa paused, looking intently at me, appearing to search for something. She sighed, closing her eyes. “Goddamnit, Taylor.”

“What?”

“Fuck.” She massaged her temples. “I’m never going to get another chance like this, am I? I can’t do it myself, and you need help.” Lisa looked back to me, staring me in the eyes. “Okay. Okay. Just… if you’re going to kill me, make it quick, okay?”

“Why wo–”

“Hi. I’m Lisa Wilbourn. But you also know me as Tattletale.”

I sat there, stunned. She wasn’t lying. I could see it. Her eyes. They were the exact same color. And her hair was too, just in a braid instead of free.

My emotions roiled, and I struggled to comprehend them. There was some confusion, anger, feelings of betrayal, hurt.

Standing up, I started pacing around to try and relieve the tension.

Lisa (Tattletale?) sighed. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to–”

I stopped and looked at her. “Why?” I asked, my voice far too level, far too calm.

I saw guilt in her eyes before she looked away. “I wasn’t lying. I thought you were interesting. That you’d be a cool person to get to know. I don’t get out much. I swear I wasn’t leading you on or anything. I was planning on telling you once we were better friends, but I got the feeling you didn’t want to be involved in cape stuff, and I can understand that. So instead I was going to get to
Leaning back against the desk again, I looked at her sideways, my silence saying more than words could. I was simultaneously annoyed that she’d assumed that about me but also understanding that what she’d done probably had been the best decision.

She glanced back at me once more, and then sighed. “And… okay, maybe it was a little selfish too. That you might be able to help me with my employer eventually.” Lisa laughed sadly. “But now it can’t wait. You need help to do this, or everything’s going to come crashing down around our ears, and I can’t let that happen. All of the alternatives are worse. I need help to get away from him, and you’re probably the only person I can think of who might actually be able to do it. He can’t be allowed to win. He can’t.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My… employer,” the word dripped with disdain and disgust, “the guy who backs the Undersiders, is named Coil. He recruited me at gunpoint, when I didn’t even really want to get into the cape scene, much less be a full blown villain. Not that I don’t like it, it’s just… not how I imagined things going when I moved here.

“He’s a complete bastard. No morals. Thinks he’s above them. That he ‘controls destiny’. He’s one of those schemers. Long term planners. Waits for everything to be just right, and then flips over the entire board, capturing everything in the chaos. Doesn’t play by the rules. And this… if he decided to take advantage of this and snatch up the Docks, he wins. There’s no chance he won’t. This is exactly the sort of thing he would take advantage of.”

“And you want out,” I stated.

“I want out,” she confirmed. “I’ve wanted out since the day the fucking slimy bastard got his hands on me. I’ve just never been able to do anything about it, because he seems to know everything. I didn’t tell him about you on Monday, but I have no idea if he knows or not. When he finds out you killed Lung, Bakuda, and Oni Lee, he’s going to come after you, because you’re too dangerous, too unpredictable for him. He’ll want you under his thumb. And if he can’t have you, nobody can.”

Lisa shuddered, and looked me right in the eyes. “And you’re the first hope I’ve had for getting away from him since he got me. You don’t play by the rules either.”

I opened my mouth to interrupt her, but she held up a hand.

“Not in a bad way, like him. I mean you aren’t afraid of getting your hands dirty. And… whatever the fuck it is you can do, even I can’t figure it out. I’m a Thinker, figuring things out is what I do. My power is literally putting the puzzle pieces together to get an answer, pulling relevant facts from almost thin air in order to get to a conclusion. But when I look at you and try to figure out your power, it just fails. Maybe some kind of advanced Trump. If you can do that to me just by existing, then you’re the best shot at getting around whatever ‘destiny’-controlling power he’s got.”

“I kill things,” I told her, plainly. There was no point in keeping it a secret, really. She could see Bakuda and Oni Lee, and she’d seen Lung too.

She blinked. “What… exactly does that mean?”

I took out the knife at the small of my back—the knife she’d given me—and started twirling it around, playing with it. The movement of the metal soothed me, let me concentrate even as I
knew that the smallest slip could slice my fingers off with how sharp it was. “That’s what I can do. I see the… flaws, I guess, of things. And I can cut them. It lets me kill things.”

“What kind of things? Living things?”

I shook my head. “I think… maybe anything? Literally anything. Not just physical stuff. It’s more… abstract.” I paused, the knife’s handle snapping into my palm momentarily as I put my thoughts in order. And then I started spinning the blade again. “…Like the lines are the representation of something’s existence instead of flaws in the existence itself. I thought there were limits, but tonight…” I trailed off. Tonight I’d gone beyond that.

“What happened?”

I blushed a little in embarrassment, my knife halting again as I stared at my dull reflection in the black metal of the flat of it. “Bakuda caught me. Trapped me in a Gray Boy bubble. But I killed it—”

“You killed a Gray Boy bubble?” Lisa looked stunned when I looked up at her, and I took some pride in that. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed, grinning, remembering Bakuda being utterly stupefied. She shook her head. “We’re going to have to talk about that. Go on.”

“I got out, tracked her down with something she’d left behind, and, well…”

I looked over at Bakuda’s body, and Lisa followed my line of sight. “So… this is how you killed Lung without a lethal wound?”

I nodded. “Everyone’s got a little line that’ll kill them instantly. It doesn’t just kill them, like, their body and stuff. It destroys them. What makes them them. I… guess you’d call it their soul? Yeah.” That felt right.

I peered at her. “Yours is right here.” I pointed at the little slightly-slanted line on the lower right of her sternum with my knife. Lisa eyed me, frightened and wary, looking at the jet-black seven-inch blade in my hand like a rabbit in front of a hungry wolf. She swallowed nervously. I blinked. Why…?

Oh. Shit. “Shit. Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you or anything.” I put my knife away and she seemed to relax a little.

“Taylor, you just told me you can destroy people’s souls. That you have destroyed them. That’s more than ‘scary’. That’s pants-shittingly terrifying. Hell, that’s a fucking step-above-Glaistig-Uaine terrifying. You just confirmed souls exist and I can’t even think about that because you told me you can fucking murder them.”

I laughed nervously. “Ah. Um, yeah. I don’t know. I didn’t really like seeing it all before tonight. I kind of hated it, actually. But it’s not going anywhere so I just… accepted it, I guess. That’s how I got out of the bubble.”

Lisa glanced at me for a second and then shook her head. “You are taking this way too casually. Killing a coalesced bubble of space-time? Killing souls?”
“And all of the connections between Bakuda and her bombs,” I added helpfully.

“…” Lisa gave me an inscrutable look. “Please tell me you can help me with Coil. Please. I swear to God I’ll be forever in your debt or some shit. Seriously. Be your right-hand woman, whatever the fuck you want. I just… I really, really want out.”

She was dead serious. I could hear it. She honestly was willing to give anything in order to get away from this guy. She was desperate, and trapped with no escape.

Except for me.

She wasn’t a bad person. She was nice, and she’d been pretty funny that first, second time we’d met. She was sincere, and honest, and she’d helped me out that night with Lung when she had no reason to. Hell, the knife, jacket, and cellphone I had on me tonight were all things she’d given me. And she’d said they weren’t a bribe, and I know she hadn’t been lying.

Seriously, fuck my goddamn savior complex. But I couldn’t even really bring myself to hate it, with all of the good it had done for me so far.

I gave her a small smile. “Yeah, I’ll help you. We’re friends, right?”

Lisa’s mouth stretched into a grin –a genuine one, not one of those sly ones she often had–, and she stood up. She hugged me before I could react, causing me to flush slightly.

“Thank you.”

I pretended I didn’t hear her voice crack.

Chapter End Notes

COIIIIILLLLLLLLL!!!!!

Was going to be a longer chapter, didn’t like the second half, decided to split them up. I learned my lesson from 2.2 about forcing myself like that.
I was planning on waiting to release this until all the different sections of the interlude were done and then squishing it together into a single chapter, but I feel like the sections have significantly more weight when they're independent. So yeah. Here you go.

Claire Hanazawa

A monster.

That was the only thought she had running through her mind as she watched Oni Lee fall apart into cleanly segmented pieces.

A burst of warmth spread across her chest. Lee’s blood.

A monster.

There was no other way to describe it. The thing that took the shape of an unassuming young girl. The thing that claimed dominion over life and death.

She’d foolishly tried to trap it. To capture it.

Now, staring at those iridescent, luminous blue eyes, she knew: there was no capturing something like this.

“The kami are normally benevolent, but when they’re angered…” her dad said, sitting on the edge of her bed as she stared at him, enraptured in the story he was telling.

“What happens then?”

He chuckled, patting her on the head. “There is a good reason the term ‘god-forsaken’ is a curse, Claire. And the kami can be particularly vindictive and vengeful.”

Without fully thinking, Claire armed the black-hole bomb in her arms and threw it at the girl-shaped monster.

The only way to stop something like this was to kill it. And she didn’t even know if that was fully possible.

It didn’t even stop moving. Half a second, and the singularity that had formed mid-air was gone, not having even damaged the knife which had been used to slice through it.

“It’s useless, you know.”

A cold voice. Void of uncertainty or fear. Only dire certainty existed in the sound.

“So what happened?”
“After the fall of the lightning god Raijin and Yomotsu-shikome, Izanami decided to chase Izanagi herself. So Izanagi rolled a large rock to block the path to Yomi, stopping Izanami from following him. Izanami cursed him, and said that if he did this she’d take the souls of a thousand people from his land every day.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“She’s a meanie.”

Her father laughed. “She’s a kami. The gods aren’t human, Claire. Life and death are different things for them than they are for us. You can’t think of them like normal people.”

Bakuda felt a drop of sweat run down her neck as she watched the girl-monster move forward, long legs swallowing up the distance between them.

“D-don’t come any closer! I’ll kill them! I’ll kill them all! Everyone! All of the bombs in the city. A-and if you kill me, I have a dead man’s switch! So you, you can’t do that either!”

A thread of anger and annoyance wove its way through the air, tinged by frustration. The blue-eyed thing raised its arm, the knife momentarily pausing mid-air, and then moving sharply to the right.

Claire’s HUD flickered, the number of active connections to her remote bombs dropping by four.

“H-hey! What the fuck are you doing!? I told you I’d–”

“Shut up.”

And then all the connections disappeared, leaving only an obvious ‘0’ sitting at the top-right of her vision.

“W-what did you just do!?” Bakuda said, feeling the last tattered remnants of her composure slipping away. Her last bargaining chip, gone. Days of work and effort.

Of course it all amounted to nothing. It always did.

“No more,” the monster spoke. “No more threats. No more innocent deaths. No more kidnapping. No more hurting the people I love.”

Half-heartedly, Claire armed one of the other bombs in her arms and tossed it towards the advancing nightmare, not truly expecting anything to happen. She wasn’t disappointed when the monster moved like quicksilver, evading the highly-corrosive liquid contents easily, not even breaking step.

“W-wait! We can talk about this! You, you don’t have to do this!” Ice and terror running through her veins, invading her mind, Claire dropped her other bombs and pulled off her mask. “You’ll regret it!” she blurted desperately.

No it wouldn’t, her mind whispered.

Two steps.

One.

And then it was there.
“Yes, I do. And no. I really, really won’t.”

The eyes were so blue. A sharp color. A dangerous color. *Unnatural.*

“Hey Dad, what does the gate to Yomi look like?”

*Her father smiled sadly. “I hope it won’t be for a long time, but you’ll know it when you see it.”*

Claire stood, transfixed, and a half-formed whimper escaped her. She didn’t want to die. This wasn’t supposed to be how it went. It should have been easy, just another person to fall to her art on her rise to the top. How was she supposed to know she was tempting a monster, a *kami*?

This wasn’t–
Sever 2.x.2

Chapter Notes

Sever 2.1 has been revised after more thought and comments from the people over at Sufficient Velocity. Basically, the section with Amy is toned down and no longer has her talking about her family or what she could potentially do.

Li Park-Seong

Li walked towards the front doors of the restaurant, glancing over at the guy leaning against the who was only visible from the orange streetlights and the red glow of a cigarette in his mouth.

The man raised his head in greeting and took the cigarette out of his mouth, flicking a small amount of ash towards the curb.

Li returned the greeting. “’Sup Paul. You got any idea what the hell’s going on?”

Paul shook his head, taking one last draw, and then dropped the burnt filter and crushed it out under his heel.

“Fuck if I know. We all got the same fucking text as you. ‘Chang’s, 3:00 AM’. Nobody knows what the fuck’s going on. Better safe than sorry, with her.”

Li scowled at the mention, the still-healing scar on his scalp pulsing in time with his heartbeat before he redirected attention back to the conversation.

Paul was usually someone you could count on to know what was up, but ever since the bomb-tinker had taken charge that hadn’t been as true. The man pushed away from the building-side, walking towards Li.

Li kept moving forward, reaching the restaurant’s door. “You heard what happened though? ’Bout some new blue-eyed cape who messed up just about everybody over by Ren’s?”

Paul scowled. “Yeah, I heard it. Like we didn’t have enough fucking goin’ on already. That white bitch is going all-out. Like she’s got some sorta personal fucking vendetta against us or something.”

“Shit.” Purity not pulling her punches. Just what they needed.

Li pulled the door open, the little bell above it ringing as they stepped into the building. Soft, low light illuminated the place. Chang’s was one of the nicer restaurants in the territory, and Lung had always had a tendency to use it for meetings. Looked like Bakuda wasn’t breaking tradition.

Old Man Chang was behind the little wooden counter he normally frequented, staring at them with accusing eyes.

What’s his problem?

The short, seventy-year old man snorted and broke the staring match, glancing to the left.
Li followed his line of sight to a girl that stood there, dressed in a white cheongsam. A granddaughter or something, if Li remembered correctly. Chang said something to her in Mandarin, and the girl nodded.

“This way.” She gestured towards the back, and then turned and began leading them towards where Li remembered the last meeting being.

Nice ass.

Before he realized it, they were in front of a set of rice-paper doors. The girl slid one open, and then turned around, gesturing inside but not even lifting eyes from the floor.

Too bad Chang’s girls were probably off-limits. Eh. Maybe he could find someone close enough in the new batch of girls.

Shrugging to himself internally, he followed Paul into the private dining room and looked around as the door slid closed behind him. John, Hayate, Minoru, Hyo-Ju, Evan, Xuân, Yan, Ye-Jun, and a few others he didn’t recognize. All the big names, though.

Li took a seat next to Paul at the edge of the room on one of the cushions. “What time is i–”

There was a loud sound from the front of the restaurant and everybody was immediately on edge, eyeing the entrance to the room.

Speak of the fucking devil.

Without warning, the wooden-framed rice-paper door slid sideways, stopping with a bang. A tall, thin figure stood there, dressed in jeans and a vivid crimson-red leather jacket over a black shirt and pair of black boots.

“Who the fuck are you?” Yan jumped up towards the person, one of the closest seated by the door. Always jumping into things, almost pathetically eager to prove herself.

grk

A hand came up blindingly fast and grabbed Yan’s throat, stopping her cold and out-of-reach.

Around the room others were going for knives, though it was like they were frozen, unable to get up at seeing what was happening.

“Shut up.” The figure’s voice was cold and hard. A high voice, a girl’s voice.

The girl looked around the room, dark, near-black eyes running over all of them. Li had to suppress the shiver that threatened to climb his spine.

Yan’s face was paling from lack of oxygen and after a second more the girl released her grip, Yan dropping to the floor and gasping for breath.

Li could see dark reddish-purple imprints where the girl’s fingers had been, bruises already forming.

“I called you here.”

The room was blanketed in a stunned silence at the girl’s words, which allowed her to cross the room in three steps and reach the front of the room. Slipping off her boots, she placed them to the side and then turned around.
It was only then that Li noticed the objects in her left hand.

A mask, a black gas-mask that was far too familiar in recent days, and behind that, a red oni mask.

Oh god.

With an almost casual motion, the white girl tossed the two objects into the middle of the room and sat down, cross-legged.

“Bakuda and Oni Lee are dead.”

Her voice, clear and strong and final, echoed in the private back room of the restaurant, bouncing off of the rice-paper walls and tatami floor, holding them in place.

The tension in the atmosphere of the room ratcheted higher, and the girl closed her eyes briefly. She took a breath and opened her eyes, and everybody, everybody in the room froze.

It was like staring at an unending abyss of electric blue.

They were beneath her.

Some part of Li rebelled, screamed at anybody looking down on him again, but the thread of superiority that she practically exuded in every way possible crushed the feeling flat.

“Lung is dead.”

And he knew, he knew somehow, that this monster was the reason for it. Her next words only confirmed that.

“I killed them.”

The energy of the room shifted. From wariness and indecision to comprehension. But they remained rooted where they were, hanging on to the girl’s every word.

“From now on, you answer to me.”

She spoke it like a sure fact. Like there was no question.

(of course there wasn’t)

“The ABB, without Lung and Oni Lee, without Bakuda, is dead. Without them, the Empire would take full advantage of an opening like this, and without any parahumans or leadership, you will lose, badly.”

Her voice rang with truth. She’d condemned them all to the most painful deaths imaginable at the hands of those white supremacist fucktards.

Lung had held the their territory through force. Through strength. He was Lung. He could fight and fight and fight and never fall. He had proved it. Lung provided them with some form of protection from the extremist whites of the E88 and the assault of the Merchants. Without that, they were dead meat.

“As much as I hate to admit it, that can’t happen. I won’t let it happen. Too many people have died already, and this… stupid war needs to end.

“Things will be different. I am not Lung. I am not Bakuda.”
I am not a heartless dragon, the girl said without words. I am not an insane, cruel bitch who will throw away your lives.

For some reason, Li believed her. He could tell she wasn’t lying, that she meant her words.

“You can live with the changes, or you can leave,” she spoke. Her eyes moved over each of their faces, momentarily meeting Li’s own, and again he had to repress the shiver that wanted to travel down his spine before she moved on.

Nobody moved.

Her shoulders relaxed slightly, a sense of calmness replacing the tension in the room.

And then Li understood. She’d been ready to kill every single one of them. It just reinforced how absolutely fucking terrifying capes were.

“Good.” The blue in her eyes faded away, leaving behind the dark color that had been there before. “My… advisor will be organizing everything to try and minimize all the damage. There’s a couple things that have to be taken care of first, but it should be finalized by the end of tomorrow. Bakuda’s bombs have been taken care of.”

“Why?” Yan’s voice, hoarse, floated from where she’d propped herself up against the wall. “Why the fuck’re you doing this?”

“Because if I don’t, somebody else will,” said the girl. “And if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”

She stood up and stepped into her boots, moving towards the door that had been open since she’d entered. Nobody said anything, or made any motion. Li figured they must all be just as stunned at what had all just happened as he was.

The girl hadn’t taken more than a single step outside of the door when a ringing came from her direction. A hand pulled out a new phone, the girl looking at it for a second before touching it and raising it to her ear.

“Lisa? What is it–” The girl’s voice cut off.

The next word heard was different, so different from what Li had heard from the girl so far. They carried a note of frustration and despondence. And beneath it all, was helplessness and sadness.

“Shit.”
So, I’ve got good news: I managed to get my primary editor (who has been with me since I started writing) to read this story, and got them interested it despite them knowing only peripheral information about Worm and KnK, so they’ll be helping me out from now on.

In the meantime, they pointed out some problems to me, which I’ll be working on fixing, including:

- Expansion and explanation on Taylor’s reasoning for not killing the gang members in 2.4, which was similarly noted as feeling inconsistent with Taylor’s past characterization by @Splodge, based on the narrative and observations from Lisa in 1.x.
- Her uncomfortable sudden shift in attitude in 2.3, particularly in the three gang members scene, which I’ve never really been happy with in the first place. Taylor is massively OOC, and it seriously needs revising.

Notice: This is Worm. Mixed with Kara no Kyoukai. With all of the implications thereof. If you’ve read or seen them, you’re probably good. For the rest of you, trigger warning for rape.

Ayame Akiyama

Returning to consciousness wasn’t immediate. Wakefulness moved slowly through her fuzzy mind, like water gradually slipping through cracks. There was a cold hardness against her right arm, her cheek, the side of her forehead. A gritty feeling.

She tried to push herself up, but her arms didn’t move from behind her back. Something dug into her wrists, thin cords that were bound tightly.

<What…>

The last moments she remembered came back in frightening clarity. Strong arms holding her as she struggled. Absolute fear as something was placed over her face, and then… nothing.

Kidnapped.

It was hard to think about it like that, about something like that even happening, but there was no other way to put it.

Crushing hopelessness washed over her, and she felt tears tracking down her face to form dark-colored dots on the floor under her face.

She was breathing fast, too fast, and her head was getting fuzzy again. Lightheaded.

What was going to happen? What did they want? Why had they done this? Possibilities ran
through her mind, her imagination providing horrible endings.

She was scared. More than anything right then, she wanted her father and mother. Her sister.

Her sister!

*Sayaka!*

Scrambling to sit up, scraping her shoulder and arms on the concrete floor in the process but finally managing, Aya looked around the room.

…And nearly cried out in relief when she saw another figure to her left. She wasn’t alone.

Moving closer took more effort, and it felt like forever before she was there.

It was her sister.

“*Nee-san!*”

There was no response. She looked so peaceful, like she was just sleeping, completely in opposition to the situation they were in, other than the fact that her arms were tied behind her back like Ayame’s own. Her dark hair splayed across the floor around her head like a halo, and Aya couldn’t help but think Sayaka would hate that.

“Nee-san! *<Wake up!>*” Still nothing. “*<Please wake up!>*”

Why? Why why why why why? A choked sob escaped her, and tears once more flowed over, even more than before.

This… this couldn’t be happening, right? It couldn’t be real. She didn’t want it to be real.

Except she knew it was.

“Nee-san!”

A flicker, eyes behind eyelids moving, and then slowly fluttering open. “Ayame?”

Aya nodded, relief once again running through her. Her sister was here. As long as they were together, it was alright.

Sayaka pushed herself up so that she was eye-level with her sister. “Where… where are we? Where’s mom and dad?”

“I-I don’t know. I woke up… and thought I was alone, but then you were there too, but *<mom and dad are missing and I don’t know what to do and it’s all…>>*”

“Shhhh. It’s okay. At least we’re together, right?” Ayame could tell her sister was still worried, frightened even, but Saya hid it, trying not to show it. Being the strong one, for her sake.

Ayame nodded again.

She knew they were pointedly ignoring the situation. The reality of what was happening, but that was okay because she didn’t want to face it, to think about the hopelessness of it.

“I was talking to Taylor and she’d tell somebody. The police. They’ll find us… and then we’ll get out of here, alright?”
“<O-okay>,” Aya agreed. But she knew it was weak reasoning, that people disappeared without a trace all the time, no hope of being found.

She still held onto that sliver of hope, though. That impossible chance that they’d be found, be rescued.

It was all she had.

Tears started streaming down her cheeks again.

“<Sayaka, I’m scared.>”

For a moment Saya looked like she would start crying herself, but it faded and she just nodded.

Aya wished Sayaka could hug her. That she could find some small amount of comfort from being held by her sister, like she had done back when they were kids and Ayame had been afraid of lightning.

But she couldn’t, and that just made her cry harder.

It was the silence that was the worst. That and the anticipation. Occasionally, there were masculine voices outside of the metal door. But the times in between dragged on into small eternities, times where nothing kept her from thinking about what could happen to them, all the terrible things they could do to her and her sister.

She held on desperately to the fact that her sister was there. She couldn’t bear to think about her mother and father. About never seeing them again, and she’d cried again when she’d first thought about it.

Their arms were fastened with plastic ties with metal strips in them. There was no way to get them off. And even if they had, what could they do? The door was undoubtedly locked, and if it was discovered that they’d gotten out of their bonds, something even worse could happen to them.

Her muscles were sore from sitting in the same position for hours, but she still couldn’t bring herself to move, huddling against Sayaka for the small amount of physical contact.

It was impossible to calm down. She knew something was going to happen. Something… bad. She couldn’t stop thinking about it, stop worrying, stop scaring herself. And then she realized that her thoughts were probably realistic. And that just made it all worse.

She prayed. Prayed to the kami, to God, to whoever would listen. Prayed that they would be rescued. Be found. That the police would free them. That Taylor would find them, because Aya knew that the stubborn girl would never abandon them.

But in the end, all they could do was sit there and wait. Wait for whatever was going to happen.

At some point, she must have fallen asleep, because she woke up against her sister, Saya’s own head tilted forward and resting against her chest.

“Nee-san?”

Sayaka looked up, smiling slightly at her sister. “<Good morning>”

“<Good morni->”
The sound of metal scraping on metal cut Aya off and drew both of their eyes to the door on the other side of the room as her heart started beating faster. A number of indistinct male drifted through the metal.

The door opened, five men standing in the doorway, blocking the view of the hall, though it appeared to be just as dark as the room was with its single bare, dim orange bulb.

That was all she saw before the door was closed again.

The men moved towards them. Ice ran through her veins.

Ayame pushed herself closer to the wall. Tried to make herself smaller.

Don’t look. Don’t think.

“Get up.”

She didn’t know which one said it. But he had an accent. The same Tokyo accent as her parents. An accent she hated hearing from him.

Neither of the twins moved from where they were. Ayame pressed herself further against her sister.

“I said get up!”

A hand grabbed her right arm and pulled her up forcefully. She cried out from the pressure.

Ayame didn’t look up. Couldn’t look up. Didn’t want to see.

Her sister was struggling, twisting and trying to kick out.

It didn’t work. They just tossed her against the wall. Her head knocking against it made a muted ‘thud’. Saya slumped to the floor. And then she was just grabbed and pulled back to her feet.

“Bakuda never said you had to be in perfect condition, and you know, I’ve always wanted to try twins.”

Ayame knew. She knew what they wanted.

She started shaking.

Aya couldn’t stop herself from looking up at the man holding her arm. She instantly regretted it. There was a look on his face that made her shiver. His eyes ran up her body.

Just that alone made her feel unclean.

A hand (his hand) grabbed her right breast, squeezing it. Hard. Tears welled in her eyes.

No.

Ayame whimpered.

The hand reached under her shirt, roughly grabbing at bare flesh. She tried to twist away. To stop it. Anything.

A body pushed up against her, hot and unyielding. A hard hand against her shoulder. Pressed against the wall. She couldn’t move. Trapped.
A sob escaped.

“<Please, stop!>” The words ran out of her mouth without thought.

“I was waiting for this ever since I saw you yesterday. You must be a fucking slut with a body like this.”

Whispered words. Hot breath ran over her ear and the side of her face. She tried to turn her face away. To get as far away as possible.

Fingers moved across her cheek, and then trailed off.

No.

Her shirt was jerked upward without any care. Her bra was pushed away. It didn’t slow anything. His hand reached out and grabbed at her left breast, again squeezing it hard.

“<Stop!>”

Tears welled in her eyes and then rolled down her face. She tried to push everything away, but there was too much. Fingers and breath and hands and unable to move.

The sound of tearing cloth came from her left. Ayame looked over at Sayaka. Her sister stared back. Hands moved over her body, squeezing and grabbing and grasping. Tears streamed down Sayaka’s face, but she closed her eyes, stopped Ayame from looking at them.

A third hand grabbed at Ayame’s shorts. Somebody different. Different from the one still painfully grabbing her chest. Different from the one that was holding her against the wall.

It didn’t give the barrier of cloth any notice. Pushed down past the waistband. Grasped her.

She tried to push away. To stop it. It did nothing. Nothing to stop the hand. To remove the weight pressed against her.

Her shorts and underwear were pulled down. They didn’t bother with the clasps.

Aya couldn’t stop the sharp cry that came out of her mouth as the rough denim waist scraped over her hips. It felt like her skin was being ripped like a metal grater. And they were around her ankles.

No!

There was too much. Too many. Too many hands, too much weight, too hot, too warm, too many things, running over her, touching her, violating her. She wanted them gone.

NO!

Something hard and warm and stiff pushed against her stomach, pressing against her.

“God, you’re so fucking hot.”

NONONONONONO!

They circled a massive blue orb. Two things larger than anything she’d ever seen, vast beyond belief. There was no sense of scale, only that somehow they still managed to be small compared to the blue thing, the star they traveled around. Pieces folded and unfolded, layering over each
other and somehow seeming to become more real than possible, distinct parts that were separate yet all whole, all one thing.

The conglomerates, the collections, the entities orbited the star lazily, tendrils of ionized gas drawn towards them, circling before finally being absorbed. Energy was drawn from across the boundary of dimensions, from the multiple realities the entities moved through, stored and saved in a number of those more-real-than-real parts.

They orbited again. And again. More and more brilliantly circling light absorbed.

Placement, one entity broadcast, not words, but a concept layered with more nuances and subtleties than could ever be decoded, ever be understood and comprehended in a lifetime. Location.

Patience, the other responded, this one more predisposed towards planning than action, thinking and searching for a solution, the solution, than the other. Collection.

They were small, young, and this was one of the few ways they had to gather the necessary energy that would be needed to maintain them for the next cycle.

The orbiting continued, a hundred, a thousand times, until the star was barely a marble compared to its previous size, dwarfed by the entities now, and then even that disappeared.

Completion, the Thinker sent. Satisfaction.

Agreement, replied the Warrior. Preparation.

Destination, the other returned.

They moved away, folding and rippling, pulling and pushing, accelerating away towards the target of the next cycle.

Something was inside her. Hard. Forced. Moving back and forth. Tearing. It hurt. It was wrong.

NO!

Whiteness. And there was heat, unimaginable heat, but it didn’t affect her, only feeling warm.

A ring of light circled her. Rotated. Spun.

She felt it in her mind as it expanded outwards. As it tore at the men in front of her, ripped them apart, their flesh bubbling and internal liquids boiled in their bodies. As they were flayed to the bone, the muscle so much as tissue paper.

She felt her sister at her side. Knew she was there through the light they both had, an almost magnetic link between them.

And then it all stopped.

Charred, smoking masses lay a yard and a half away. It would be impossible to call them bodies anymore.

The scent of burnt meat permeated the room, like overcooked pork. Ayame was unable to stop herself from falling to her hands and knees and vomiting what little she had in her, her stomach trying to force up what wasn’t inside it at the smell.
She heard a retching behind her, and knew that Sayaka had done the same.

It took minutes before the need to throw up abated, leaving her throat raw and sinuses burning, scoured from the acidic fluid. Ayame collapsed sideways, panting, shivering. But it wasn’t from the cool air that she couldn’t feel anymore against her exposed skin.

She couldn’t even bring herself to try and fix her clothes, to pull her panties or shorts up or fix her shirt. Her mind was blank, void, and she felt detached, like everything was far away, at the end of a tunnel.

A body collapsed next to hers, and she felt warm arms surround her, hold her, and it was only then that she realized her hands were free.

Everything that had happened descended on her, and she rolled into Sayaka’s grasp, crying freely and shaking as her sister hugged her tighter.

It was the sound of the door unlocking that jerked them back to awareness, both of them jumping at the sound. Adrenaline shot through Aya, and she rolled over to watch the door, unnatural sharpness and clarity taking over her mind.

White light appeared, circling her midsection, and she felt more than saw it pass over to Saya, moving around her in the opposite direction before returning, the energy transferred between them increasing rapidly. Ayame instinctively prepared to unleash it, to direct it at whatever threat would appear.

The door swung open, but instead of what she had expected, a blonde girl stood there, dressed in a form-fitting purple suit. The girl’s green eyes flicked rapidly between the bright white light moving around the near-naked sisters, the carbonized bodies, and the scorch marks on the floor.

Her gaze moved back to Ayame and Sayaka.

“Oh, god.”

Chapter End Notes

I am not trivializing rape. It is horrible, traumatizing, and absolutely one of the worst things that a person can go through. I am very aware of the different kinds of damage that it can do to a person’s psyche, and that not all rape victims act or react the same. I really hope I managed do this justice, to get across all just how terrible it can really be.

The parallels to Asagami Fujino were intentional.
**Chapter Notes**

New chapter time~

So… uh, Armsmaster’s no longer a complete tool and is much more like his canon personality. I got annoyed with that representation of him and decided to try and do him actual justice. Just something to be aware of. I’ll probably go back and rework Dissociation 1.X to match his characterization here, make things more subtle and less over-played.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Hannah Johnson**

The action of snapping the armor vest over her fatigues was comforting. It served a purpose, kept her safe. She had her standard light armor underneath her clothes, of course. But the past few days had shown it was better to err on the side of caution.

The chemical agent from one of the bombs they’d discovered had eaten all the way through her shirt before she could even get it off, and things like that tended to leave a rather strong impression.

Hannah checked that everything was in place and secure, and then wrapped her scarf around her face.

“Ready?” she asked, looking up at her partner.

“As I’ll ever be,” Dauntless returned, a small smile visible despite the spartan-like helmet he wore. “PRT’s tagging along on this one, right?”

Hannah gave a sharp nod. “We’ll be taking point, but they’ll be coming along and bringing up the rear, moving up as we make sure everything’s safe.”

“Good. Some of those bombs… ugh. More eyes on something like this can’t hurt,” he said. “What’re we taking to get over there?”

“One of the vans. I don’t think you’d want to ride on my bike with that armor, would you?”

He grinned and shook his head. “I’m good.”

Hannah returned the smile as they walked down a corridor of the Rig to the small garage. “I thought so. We’ll be meeting them there. The reports came in for a building around Jefferson and Maple.”

“Out in the center of the Docks?” Dauntless asked, swiping his access for the door and then holding it open for her.

“Mhm. Right in the thick of things. So keep your eyes open and let me know if you see anything that looks suspicious,” she said, moving towards one of the generic vans they used for moving
around the city.

“Will do, ma’am.”

The trip took a good twenty-five minutes. It was easy to tell once they were in the area by how gradually the buildings became more and more neglected, streetlights out with only the second or third actually lit. Graffiti and gang tags littered brick walls and the fronts of abandoned shops, weeds pushing their way up through the sidewalks and parking lots.

There were less people out in green and red than Hannah expected, with the gang war in full swing. Eventually Hannah pulled up along the curb half a block from the intersection and got out of the van, looking around for any sign of what could have caused the disturbance that had been called in.

It was only a minute later that a PRT van pulled up and parked on the other side of the street, five men piling out of the vehicle dressed in black equipment and helmets similar to Hannah’s own, with pistols holstered at their hips. The man she assumed was the leader crossed the street with the rest following behind.

He gave a polite nod to her. “Miss Militia. Good morning.”

“Good morning…”

“Sergeant Davis,” he provided.

“Sergeant,” she continued.

“It’s my understanding that you’ll be taking the lead on this one, ma’am?”

Miss Militia nodded. “Myself and Dauntless, yes. Just as soon as we find whatever it is that was the source of the noises we got reports of. It would probably be best to separate until we do to cover more ground. Dauntless and I will go east at least four blocks and then move north and start looking through the other streets.

Davis looked back at the men behind him and then returned his focus to Miss Militia. “Understood ma’am. We’re on channel five. We’ll head west and contact you if we find anything. If that’s all?”

“That’s all,” she confirmed.

He turned around and began speaking to the other men as Hannah took a moment to tune the radio on her belt to the proper channel before walking over to where Dauntless was, still looking around.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“We’re splitting up to try and find whatever happened as quickly as possible. You and me are going east while Davis and his group go west.”

The side of Dauntless’ mouth quirked upward. “Onwards then?”

She smiled behind her scarf. “Yep. Time to do some searching.”

Four blocks and they didn’t see anything. It was just as they were about to turn onto the next block north that Miss Militia’s radio crackled. “Miss Militia, ma’am? We think we’ve got
something,” Davis’ voice came through.

She and Dauntless paused, Miss Militia unclipping the radio. “Where are you?”

“About two and a half blocks west of our origin and one south,” was the response.

“Alright, we’ll be there in ten minutes or so,” she replied.

“Roger, ma’am.”

The radio went back on her belt as Miss Militia looked over at her partner, and the pair began moving forward in a comfortable silence, the only sound around them being the eerie buzz of the dying halogen lamp-bulbs in the streetlights.

It actually took twelve minutes before they saw the group of PRT officers and moved to meet up with them. The PRT van had been moved across the street, and three of the officers now had carbines in addition to the rest of their gear.

“Ma’am,” the sergeant greeted.

“You said you found something?” Miss Militia asked.

He nodded, looking at the aged and seemingly-abandoned apartment building in front of them. “Windows on the second and third floors are blown out. The glass shards are all the way out here beyond the fence, and that means it was pretty violent. Recent too, with how much of it’s out in the middle of the sidewalk and not pushed to the side or anything.”

Now that she looked, there were indeed shards of glass. Unlike the normal green or brown glass that was typical to see it was all clear, and every shard was the same thickness and flat.

“The other thing is there’s an electronic lock on the gate, and it looks pretty new,” Davis added. “Definitely out-of-place in an area like this.”

Miss Militia nodded. “Dauntless? If you would?”

Without a word, the short pole-like object in his right hand flared up, white energy running over it and crackling in the air. The gate’s lock was no match for Dauntless’ Arc-lance, which cleaved through the metal easily. Without anything holding it closed, the gate swung open.

Miss Militia moved forward, the small .22 pistol holstered at her back transforming into a green ball of energy that whipped around to her hand and solidified into an M1911.

Dauntless looked over at her, and she motioned with her head to move towards the front door of the building.

The two of them moved up, the squad following behind them. Dauntless reached out and tried to open the door, and found that it wasn’t locked. Another thing out of place. Why have an electronic lock on the gate and then not lock the main entrance?

Dauntless held the door open as Miss Militia moved forward, standing to the side of the hallway and pulling out a flashlight with her left hand. Clicking it on, she swept the light across the dark hall. Nothing appeared out of place, only that the lights were out.

The group moved through the first floor, checking every room, which all turned up empty. The only strange thing was a roundish hole in the ceiling of one of the halls, and a corresponding hole in the floor. On the second floor, however…
“That… is a lot of stuff,” Dauntless said softly.

Miss Militia nodded, staring at the crates and parts all over the place. Coiled wire, bins of electronics. It looked like a storage room for something. “Let’s keep going. There’s nobody here.”

They both backed out of the room, rejoining the PRT officers that had stayed in the hall.

As soon as they turned right into the next hallway, the two capes halted in shock.

Halfway down the hall, a trail of destruction began. Pieces of the walls on the floor, areas melted, places glittering like they had been turned to glass.

*Definitely Bakuda’s work.*

And at the start of it all, pieces of segmented steel laying on the floor with an opening to the left.

They moved forward extremely cautiously, but nothing happened, nothing triggered before they reached the opening. Miss Militia eyed the strange cuts in the inch-and-a-half steel door that had left oddly-angled sections still hanging on hinges, and began to have a sinking feeling.

The light from her flashlight trailed over tables covered in glass and electronics scattered haphazardly, with four screens on the wall at the back of the room. Miss Militia stepped over the steel, and then froze when she ran the circle of light over the floor, the blood draining from her face.

“Shit,” Dauntless cursed behind her. “What the fuck?”

The scene… it reminded her of her memories of her childhood. The bad memories.

A man she could only assume had been Oni Lee based on his outfit was cut cleanly into separate pieces, just like the door had been, the parts splayed haphazardly across the floor and blood creating a large glistening, pool, a dark red that had caught her attention in the first place.

4.7 to 5.5 liters, she couldn’t help but remember. Nearly a gallon and a half. The amount of blood held in the average human body.

His arms were in separate places, like they’d fallen with no direction, and his torso half a foot to the right of his lower half.

A stench clung to the air, and she heard Dauntless gagging.

Her light ran over the floor, trying to make out anything else, and halted as it alit on a young woman, earlier twenties at most, but distinctly Asian and wearing the same outfit they’d seen Bakuda in just yesterday.

“I don’t think… I don’t think Bakuda is going to be a problem anymore,” Dauntless commented, sounding like he was trying to keep the contents of his stomach down. “I… I’m just gonna step out and call this in.”

“Alright,” Miss Militia replied absently as she holstered the gun she was still holding. Hannah moved forward, drawn towards the macabre view, but careful not to disturb anything, trying to understand what had happened.

Stepping carefully around the puddle of blood, she took a closer look at the odder of the two bodies: Bakuda, who on first glance didn’t have any wounds. Examination, though, showed blood had seeped out into the dark jacket, and a small stab wound below the woman’s left collarbone.
A place that should have only left a punctured lung, unless it had hit a subclavian artery.

And yet… and yet much like Lung, Bakuda was dead, with no clear reason how.

Poison, maybe? That was something they couldn’t know without a toxicology report.

Suddenly, the lights in the building came on. One of the men in the PRT squadron must have gone down to the breakers that were likely in the basement and switched them on after Dauntless had told them what they’d found.

Clicking off the flashlight and putting it back in the holder she had for it, she looked around and immediately noticed something she hadn’t seen earlier. Dark, dried blood on the concrete floor.

Bootprints.

Almost identical to her own, in fact, coming out of the pool of Oni Lee’s blood and moving purposefully towards Bakuda. They then meandered around the room, towards various chemical setups and electronics on tables, every so often picking up new blood before leading to the swivel-chair in front of the four screens at the back of the room with only faint tracks from the chair towards the door.

Hannah blinked, and her mind latched onto the oddest fact in that group of thoughts: Switchblade wore combat boots.

She didn’t doubt for a second that anybody else had done this. Everything fit, from Bakuda’s ultimatum to the “one who killed Lung”, the way Oni Lee’s body had been cut apart much like Lung’s, to the death of Bakuda by a seemingly non-fatal wound.

Already, though, Hannah was raising her threat estimates of the new cape in her mind. They’d cut through the steel door, easily if going by the evidence. By appearances, they’d completely avoided all of the traps throughout the halls and after killing one of the most difficult opponents that Miss Militia knew of –Oni Lee–, had killed a Tinker in their own workshop and then somehow disabled all of traps and bombs still in the building.

It was nothing short of insane. And yet, they’d managed it.

…it was going to be a long night, she could just tell.

“So what do we know?” Colin asked, sitting at the table along with everybody else as an emergency Protectorate meeting had been called.

“Lee’s sashimi and Bakuda’s deader than a doornail,” Assault quipped, Battery giving him a half-hearted scolding look.

Armsmaster rubbed the bridge of his nose, his helmet removed and next to him on the table. “You’re not wrong.”

The sound of flipping paper echoed in the room as Triumph leafed through the report they’d each gotten. “This reads like a professional hit from a mystery novel. They died within minutes of each other, which means Switchblade killed Oni Lee and just… moved on to Bakuda. And why was he killed? Without his arms, he wouldn’t have been able to do anything. But Switchblade killed him anyway, and then just kept going.”

“Maybe they couldn’t have done anything else? ‘Act first, ask questions later’ sort of thing?” Dauntless offered. “When you’re in the middle of a fight, you’re usually more focused on staying
“Yes, but killing someone? Wouldn’t that make you stop? Shock you out of whatever adrenaline rush you’ve got going? I can’t… I can’t even imagine how I’d deal with something like that. I definitely wouldn’t have been able to just keep fighting.”

Hannah thought Triumph should be glad he’d never been in that position, that he hadn’t had to face realities like that. Miss Militia had. She’d lost that sort of innocence long ago. Where it was kill or be killed. Where you didn’t have time to think that you’d just put a .45 slug through the eye and skull of a man before turning and gunning down another with a pair of SMGs as he rushed you with a machete.

“Well, clearly they didn’t have a problem with it, since they stuck around long enough afterwards to mess with other stuff in the room.” Dauntless countered.

“And… unfortunately, the majority of the devices in the room are irrecoverable. The hard drive of the main computer simply didn’t work when we tried using it, even though there was only superficial damage to the computer itself. Even when we opened it up, the platters were completely wiped. It’s the same for everything else. Only basic things like a soldering iron and the Bunsen burners still function. The chemicals Bakuda was working with are all fine, but nothing you couldn’t make in a university chem lab,” Armstamped said.

“So no idea what was on it at all?” Battery asked.

“No clue,” Colin replied. “All we know is everything was either cut up or stabbed similar to the door and the bodies themselves. Effective, if destructive. We’ve got no idea how Switchblade seemingly disabled and disarmed all of her bombs, especially considering the dead-man’s switch connected to Bakuda’s sinoatrial node, her pacemaker nerves.”

“Well… what do you think’s up with them being unmasked? Why would Switchblade want them?” Dauntless asked.

“Maybe, they were caught off-guard?” Battery offered. “Not wearing their masks?”

“But all of Oni-Lee’s knives were also missing, even though he had his bandoleer on,” Hannah added.

“Likely trophies,” Armstamped stated. “But we really don’t know, since Lung still had his mask on when I found him, and you’d think that would be even better as a trophy. The knives were likely practical, based on our current theory of Switchblade’s power.”

“Alright, look. Since everybody else seems to be avoiding it, I’ll ask the question of the hour.” Assault said, cutting in. “What the hell are we going to tell this girl…” Assault looked at his report. “Claire’s parents?” He looked back up. “Yeah, she was a villain, but I’d still want the people I was close to to know what happened to me. And if I was a parent, I’d rather know my kid’s dead than just holding on to hope that she was out there somewhere.”

Assault’s statement hung in the air, weighted by what he wasn’t saying and the knowledge of who he’d been in the past.

Everybody in the room looked slightly uncomfortable, but eventually Armstamped spoke up. “The local PRT branch in Syracuse will be visiting Mr. and Mrs. Hanazawa to inform them of the situation.”

Assault nodded, leaning back in his chair and appearing satisfied with the response.
Dauntless cleared his throat. “Back to the discussion of Switchblade’s abilities. I assume that their threat rating is changing?”

Armsmaster turned in his direction. “Yes. The PRT haven’t finalized the assessment yet, and it’s still awaiting final sign-off by Piggot in the morning, but… It’s looking like Striker five for being able to cut through anything—which is an assumption we’re making, but a fair guess based on what we’ve seen so far—and being able to kill using non-lethal wounds. Thinker/Tinker two for somehow disabling Bakuda’s bombs. And finally, Mover/Brute six.”

Hannah saw Velocity, who had been silent so far in the conversation, frown in the edge of her vision.

“Six? Where’s that coming from?” Assault said, looking at Armsmaster.

“I agree, isn’t that a bit much?” Triumph asked.

Colin grimaced. “Despite having mostly been destroyed, we’ve gotten a look at the various components of some of the bombs that exploded on the second and third floor. They were on very precise hair triggers, remotely enabled or disabled. And yes, there is evidence of a person running very fast, with bootprints on a few walls and corners.”

“But six?”

Armsmaster eyed Ethan. “The average explosion velocity of modern gunpowder is above the speed of sound. Guess what it is for nitroglycerine.”

“Oh, Mach two?”

“Try Mach twenty-two,” Colin said. “And a heat of 9,000 °F. Bakuda was a bomb tinker and messed with a variety of explosive compounds, including nitroglycerine, HMX, and TNT, just to name a few of the less exotic ones. There were much slower compounds used in most of the bombs in the hallways, but at least nitroglycerine residue has also been found. And Switchblade survived that.”

Most of the table stared at Armsmaster, though Hannah wasn’t surprised as she’d already put the conclusion together from having read the report. It was still a serious matter, since they didn’t know exactly how Switchblade survived the explosions, just that he or she had.

“Mach twenty-two?” Assault mouthed. “What the fuck?”

“So what do we do?” Dauntless asked.

Armsmaster shrugged. “Nothing. They’ve done absolutely nothing wrong or against the law yet. Lung had a kill order. Oni Lee had a kill order. Bakuda got one and was killed by Switchblade only hours later.”

Triumph in particular looked dissatisfied with the response.

“If you do see them, don’t engage him or her unless they’re actively hostile.” Armsmaster continued. “Unfortunately, we have no idea what they look like, only that they’re around five foot ten. It’s unlikely we’d know who they are unless they came to us or made it obvious. However, Switchblade isn’t the biggest problem we have right now. The real problem is the Docks.”

Suddenly the back wall of the room lit up with a map of Brockton, with patches and concentric areas of green, yellow, and red. Most of the color was around the edge of the Docks, but there were also random dots scattered around the rest of the city, with clusters of yellow and red in
Empire and Merchant territory where Bakuda’s bombs had gone off. There were significantly more in the Empire’s area.

“This is a heatmap of the fighting so far. The ABB were holding off the Merchants –in the north– and the Empire Eighty-Eight –in the south and west– simultaneously, while also counter-attacking inside their territories. However, it was only because of Bakuda that they could do that.

“Without leadership, the ABB is going to fall apart. I estimate a maximum of four days if they have a stockpile of Bakuda’s bombs they can use. Otherwise, much quicker. The Empire will likely be spreading out its capes to try and gain the most ground they can once they realize the ABB doesn’t have any of their own capes anymore. We can take advantage of that.”

A number of looping lines running through and around the Docks area appeared on top of the map.

“These are the new patrol routes, based on the data we’ve got so far. It should only be for a week or so until the dust has settled, but these routes should help us in dealing with the gangs. Patrols will be in groups of three instead of pairs. And yes, the extra hours will count as overtime,” Armsmaster said, causing Assault to close his mouth before he’d even said anything.

The red-suited man shrugged innocently. “Hey, it’s a valid question.”

Battery rolled her eyes as Colin sighed. “Anything else?” he asked.

When there were no immediate responses, Armsmaster nodded. “Alright then, that’s everything. Velocity, you, Assault, and Battery have the first patrol. Everybody else, you’re free to go.”

Miss Militia stood, mechanically leaving and walking back to her own room.

The gang war was terrible, especially considering the casualties so far, and yet Hannah couldn’t stop thinking about Switchblade. About what kind of person they were. What drove them. Whether they were a hero or a villain.

Honestly, she hoped that Switchblade wouldn’t be showing up again. That they wouldn’t feel the need to act again. Because when they did, it was clear they took care of things permanently, which could seriously upset the balance of power in the Bay, even more than it had already.

Unfortunately, new capes almost inevitably ended up dragged into the fighting in some way or another, and it was unlikely that it would be any different here.

Miss Militia sighed, with a foreboding feeling that this was only the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, but Hannah, the fun's just starting.
…I was super excited to write this chapter. The interludes were fun, but fuck were they emotionally draining. From Claire’s death and daddy-flashbacks to that chapter. This actually starts moving the plot forward again, with real, solid character development.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

3:06 AM EST, Thursday, April 14, 2011

For a second, everything froze as Lisa’s words echoed in my mind.

“I… I found them. Fuck. Taylor, you… you need to get here. Now.”

All I could think, all I could say was, “Shit.”

Lisa laughed shakily, like she was trying to keep calm. “Yeah. Yeah. Shit is right. Look, just… get here. Please.”

“Lisa, what happened?”

“I… I can’t. They’re alive, but… you really need to get over here,” she said. “I… I’ll text you where we are. Just click it and it should open a map and tell you how to get here. Taylor…” She paused, and I waited for her to continue. “Just… make it fast.”

The line went dead.

I turned around, staring into the dim room where the twelve people I’d met sat on the floor.

It had been a test, Lisa said. I had to act the way a leader would. Be assertive. Act like I was in charge, because the person who does is often the one who ends up there. Be ready for everything.

She told me what to say: that I had to prove myself as the one at the top, and accept no quarters. To let them know exactly who had killed their leaders, their fighters. To let them know that there was a new order coming into place.

I’d been a bundle of nerves going in, fretting over what I had to do, how I had to present myself. That girl attacking me had given me exactly the feeling I needed, though. That feeling of tension and anticipation from adrenaline running through my body. The same feeling I’d had when I’d confronted Bakuda.

I’d held onto that. Channeled it. Wove it in with the confidence that I’d learned I had from my friends.

And it had worked.

I’d worked this group from attention and fear to respect. From wariness and distrustful apprehension to acceptance. And it had felt fucking awesome.
I’d established myself, said what I needed, and then gone to leave, with them hanging on to my every word.

Until… until this call.

My phone buzzed in my hand, with a text from Lisa. Following her instructions, I opened it and then clicked the location she’d sent me, opening the map. Which then offered to provide me with directions from where I was to wherever Lisa was.

I hit the ‘okay’ button immediately, and swiftly moved to the hall and then out the front door of the restaurant, not paying any attention to the old, wizened man who’d initially stopped me from entering.

The phone said it would take me twenty minutes walking.

Yeah, no.

Lisa had been acting frantic and wanted me there now. And it had something to do with Sayaka and Ayame.

Lisa and I had split up, after leaving Bakuda’s apartment building. She’d taken the tablet, insisting that she work on finding the twins while I dealt with the upper group of the ABB. Her power would be the fastest way to find them, and handling both simultaneously gave us more time to deal with everything afterwards.

But… something had gone wrong.

I started running, my feet pounding the pavement. I didn’t notice how fast I was going. Didn’t care. My friends needed me so I needed to be there. It was as simple as that.

It felt like a long time, an eternity as I followed the instructions of my phone until I reached my destination. But it could have only been minutes, instead of the hours I had seemed to experience.

It sprawled out in front of me, a two story building surrounded by a ten-foot concrete wall. The paint on the sides of the building was peeling, revealing whitewashed brick. What I assumed was the front gate had almost completely rusted through, still hanging likely only due to the rust itself freezing up the hinge and holding it in place. All of the windows were barred, with most only being small slats.

I walked though the gate towards the entrance, reaching the heavy door. I could feel a person standing on the other side and with a huff, I pulled the door open, waiting to see whoever would be on the other side.

“‘Sup.”

I blinked. It was that boy. The ren-faire boy. Uh… “Regent?”

He nodded, smirking. “That’s me.” He turned and motioned his head down the hall which matched the outside decor. “Come on. TT’s down here.”

He walked leisurely, like he had nothing to worry about. I envied him. Our footsteps echoed loudly in the barely-lit hall, bouncing off of the walls and back to us.

“ Heard you killed Oni Lee and that bomb bitch,” he commented. “Nice. Wish I could have seen it, but I was kind of asleep. You get it.” He laced his fingers together and put them behind his head. “At least, I was until Tats got us up.” He looked over at me. “No worries though. It’s all
good. Hearing what you did to those two was more than enough.”

Being around him felt... weird. Like something was missing. Like he said the words, did the actions, but had no feeling behind it. No emotion. No personal investment.

I felt a person’s presence enter the area around me that I was now even more aware of, up and to the right. Two more were closer, more to the right than in front.

Regent and I kept walking and then turned into another hallway. Lisa stood there, in her Tattletale outfit, ten feet away from us and biting her thumb’s fingernail.

She looked up as soon as she heard us, visibly relieved. “Thank god. Okay. Um. Regent, you go back and keep looking out, okay?” she said.

He gave a two-fingered salute and then turned to go, but paused and turned back, reaching in his pocket.

Pulling something out, he tossed it to me. “Here. Figure you might want this back.” It was my original knife. From Monday. “I was just holding it onto for you.” Regent grinned. “Oh, and... good luck.”

Good luck?

With that final cryptic statement he turned around, walking away back in the direction of the door.

I looked down at the switchblade in my hand, and then simply put it away in my pocket before turning to Lisa.

“What is this place? And where are my friends?”

She grimaced. “Brockton Penitentiary. The Bay’s first prison. Abandoned back in the seventies, but apparently now used by the ABB. There were others being kept here, but we already got them out.” Lisa took a breath. “Taylor. I... I want you to know that I didn’t mean for this to happen. And... and no matter what we had done, it had already happened before I even met up with you.”

Those two people I could feel hadn’t moved an inch, only two meters away in front of us. A cold feeling started spreading through me. “Lisa, where are they? Where are my friends?”

“Look... just, just... fuck. Here.” She stepped forward and grabbed hold of the metal handle of the door right next to us. It creaked open slowly. Ominously.

There was no light in the room, and I had to step inside to see, my eyes adjusting to the darkness almost instantly.

I froze.

Nothing ran through my head.

A single beat. An infinitesimal second.

And like a dam had burst, a million different thoughts cascaded, poured through my mind.

The first one I truly registered and latched onto was shock. Sayaka and Ayame, two of my best friends, sat curled up at the back wall of the cement room, the former wrapped around the latter like a drowning man clutching a raft for life, practically naked.

Ayame’s bra was out of place underneath her shirt which barely covered her, the hem clearly
having fallen down only due to gravity. Her shorts and underwear down around her lower legs, her ankles. Sayaka’s own shirt was torn in half, her bra the same. Her shorts were in place, though the button on them was undone, broken.

In front of them, only feet from me, were black, charred… things, scorch-marks and a darkness burned into the cement floor. I ignored the unknown objects in the face of far more important matters: my friends.

I stumbled forward, moving towards them and then falling down on my knees barely half a foot away.

They stared at me blankly. Their eyes tracked my face, saw me, but were empty. Lost.

Sayaka swallowed, and I immediately focused on the action. “Taylor?”

Water started gathering in my eyes as I reached out towards them, but hesitated when I was about to touch them and pulled back, unsure of how they would react.

They made the choice for me, Ayame slipping out of her sister’s arms and practically falling against me. Sayaka followed her sister’s lead. I could feel them shivering against me, and I knew that it wasn’t because they were cold.

It was pure relief. Comfort. Happiness.

I… didn’t even need to see them to know. I could just tell.

It was like they were two bright flames that were so much dimmer than they should be, than what I was used to.

My hands bunched in their shirts as I held them tighter.

I didn’t need to ask what had happened. I lived in fucking Brockton Bay.

The state of their clothes, the empty dullness of shock, the little amount of blood, everything pointed to one conclusion.

I wanted to scream.

You read stories in the paper about things like this. Heard it on the news. But actually happening? To someone, to people you knew?

You never expected that. Never considered it.

So when it did happen, you were left lost, adrift, not knowing what to do next. That was where I was.

But right then, the twins needed me, so instead of thinking about it anymore, I pushed away all of my other feelings, the ones that wouldn’t do any good right now, and focused on my own relief at seeing them. My own thankfulness at the good parts of the situation: They were alive, and they were with me.

We were there, on the floor, for at least fifteen or twenty minutes. I didn’t really know. Time didn’t particularly matter, and the moments between breaths and shivers blended together. At one point Lisa left, and then came back, but other than that the time was spent in silence, spent simply holding my friends and focusing to their relief and slowly growing tiredness.
They were going to fall asleep soon.

Calmly, gradually, I drew back and stood up, carefully pulling Ayame up with me by her armpits until she was standing, allowing me to fix her clothes as much as I could. Sayaka followed her sister up, hugging herself and her shirt together.

I looked back at Lisa, and noticed she had changed from her purple and black catsuit back to the T-shirt and jeans she’d had earlier, but with her hair free instead of in the braid.

“They went home and brought the car back. I can drive,” she said quietly.

I nodded, and felt a pair of hands search for and grasp my own on either side.

The first step forward was mine. Saya followed, and then Aya. We made it out like that, stepping and shuffling step by step, past the carbonized masses, through the door and the halls, and out of the abandoned building.

The blue sedan Grue had driven me home in sat outside the gate, and instead of separate myself from the twins, I managed to open the rear right door with Sayaka’s hand still in mine. I nudged her towards the seat and she sat down, sliding over and letting me sit down similarly, also sliding over as Ayame stepped in.

She looked over at the door, and closed it herself, immediately putting her quq head on my shoulder and scooting closer. Saya simply gripped my left wrist with her other hand holding it in what I knew was reassurance.

Lisa got in the front seat, and glanced at me in the rear-view mirror before turning the key and starting the car, smoothly pulling away from the curb.

I didn’t pay attention to our surroundings. It passed quickly, streetlights blurring as they flickered past the windows. Soon enough, Lisa pulled into a parking lot, next to a nice apartment building I didn’t recognize.

She turned off the car and got out, shutting her door and then moving to open the one on Sayaka’s left.

Saya released my hand, her left going back to her torn shirt to hold it together, while the right reached out to the door to steady her as she stood up on shaky legs, wincing on the first step.

For a moment my emotions flared again, but then I pushed them down. Not then. Later. But not then.

Ayame had lifted her head when the cooler outside air had entered the car, allowing me to extricate myself as she followed, gripping her sister’s arm once she’d gotten out. Lisa shut the door and led us towards the building and up two flights of stairs. Only then did I hear the sound of a car locking, the normally loud sound dull, and understood why Lisa had waited.

We arrived in front of a door, Lisa pulling a different key and unlocking the deadbolt and then the knob separately, opening it and letting us enter first. I let the twins go in front of me and they seemed to run on automatic as they slipped their shoes off, but then were soon lost for what to do once they’d stepped onto the wooden floor.

Lisa stepped around them, not bothering with her shoes. “I’ll get a bath going. Um. If you can follow me?”

Sayaka nodded silently, leading her sister in trailing after Lisa as they went further into the
apartment and turned into a hallway that I assumed led to bedrooms and the bathroom.

I took my own shoes off, and walked forward towards the living space I could see around a kitchen area and small dining table.

Falling onto the couch, I put my forearm over my eyes, blocking my sight. Lisa and the twins were moving around twenty-two feet behind me, the sound of running water audible from the hall.

After a few more seconds, Lisa broke off and I heard the sound suddenly quiet as she closed the door and milled around doing something in other rooms for a minute before returning to the hall and walking towards me. Once she reached the couch, she bent down and started removing her shoes.

My self-control finally broke, all of the emotions I had pushed back for the past forty minutes rushing through me.

“Lisa.”

She froze at the sound of my voice. “T-Taylor?”

The lines rose, and I didn’t even try to fight it, feeling them crawl and crackle over and through everything, the room, the furniture, Lisa, me.

“Why? Why?” I asked, my voice thick. “Give me one, one fucking reason, why I shouldn’t call this all off right now.”

“Taylor…” she said, her words wavering. “You… you can’t…”

I could sense the worry in her. The desperation. How shaken she was. The fear.

Whether it was of me or for me I didn’t know.

I moved my arm away from my eyes, and she froze as soon as she saw them. I knew they were glowing. Bright blue, with shifting shades like the embers of a fire and that unearthly violet ring. I knew how unnerving it was to other people. But right then, I really didn’t fucking care.

“What happened?” I asked, hoping, praying against all logic that my all of my thoughts and assumptions had been mistaken. That maybe what I thought had happened hadn’t. That it hadn’t gotten that far.

She swallowed.

“What happened, Lisa?” I repeated, my own worry and anxiety rising, running through me. “How far did it get?”

Lisa looked she was at a cross between breaking down and being sick as I stared at her. “All the way,” she mumbled, so quietly even I couldn’t hear.

“What?”

A tear dripped down her cheek as she said exactly what I was afraid to hear. “All the way. They were raped, Taylor.”

I lost control, not even fully aware as I pulled out my combat knife, flipped it around, and stabbed it up to the hilt into the table in front of me. Not even through a line, just driving it straight through the solid inch-thick wood. “FUCK!”
Lisa flinched as I shut my eyes, both my hands curled into fists in front of them. My eyes felt like they were burning, heat and wetness rising easily until it overflowed. My jaw was clenched so tight it hurt.

“You… you need to know,” she whispered. “… they triggered.”

I moved my hands and stared at her, completely uncaring of the tracks that had to be on my face. “What.”

Lisa rubbed her arms. “They triggered,” she repeated. “Those black things in the rooms with them? Those were bodies. That’s all that’s left of the ones who did it. They tore them apart and burnt them to charcoal in seconds.”

For a moment, I was silent, my thoughts going to dark places. “Good,” I finally said, though the effect was slightly ruined by how I sniffled and then wiped at my eyes.

If those men hadn’t died, I would have searched until I’d found them. From there… I don’t know what I would have done. I’m not sure I want to know.

Lisa finally moved from her position to the left of the couch I was on and sat in a chair to the left of her, perpendicular to the couch I was on.

My thoughts swirled, twisting and looping until finally arriving on something important. “When? When did it happen?”

“Just before you killed Bakuda,” she said softly.

My eyes widened in shock at her answer, before shutting tightly. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!!”

“Taylor. You couldn’t have…”

I glared at her, feeling the tears starting to come back. “Yes, I could. If I hadn’t gotten caught in Bakuda’s stupid fucking trap, if I’d tried to find them first instead of that fucking bitch—”

Lisa shook her head. “Bakuda would have still gotten you. You couldn’t have found them without any information, and everybody was told to point you towards her or die. You’d still have gotten trapped.”

“But after!”

“No. You couldn’t have found them, Taylor. You got lucky finding out Bakuda’s actual location on the first try. But those men would have had no idea where two specific girls were being kept. Bakuda was holding a lot of people captive in different places in the Docks, not just your friends. You would have had to search every single possible building. You never would have found them in time.”

More tears gathered in my eyes in frustration—not yet running over, though—and I hated how much sense she was making. I wanted to hate her for it, but I couldn’t.

“Do you know what Bakuda was doing?” Lisa asked. “She was collecting every single Asian in the Bay and implanting bombs in their heads. If they didn’t do something she wanted, they died. If they failed her, they died. If she just wanted them to, they died.

“If Bakuda had died any other way, if she’d been captured and gotten a single chance she would have set every single one of those bombs off. You saved so many people by dealing with her the way you did.”
“But at what cost?” I asked, at the edge of crying. “Lisa, I don’t know if you noticed, but two of my best friends got raped.”

Her lips twitched like she was trying to control herself, but the bottom one trembled, betraying her. “I know. And I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but there was nothing you or I could have done.”

“If I’d called you right after getting the tablet…” I started.

“No. You can’t do this. You can’t play ‘what if’. You’ll destroy yourself. I… I know, trust me,” she said, fighting her own sadness. “And even in that case, it’s unlikely that we would have found them, because I also used information from Bakuda’s computer, and we wouldn’t have had that.”

God. Why? Why was everything going to shit so fast? This week. This entire fucking week. Three months of peace, of a normal life, and then this. Where did it go wrong?

“…Lung. If I hadn’t–”

“Taylor! Fuck, stop it! If you hadn’t gone out that night, Lung would have killed us. *Me.* If you hadn’t fought him, he would have killed you *and* us. Do you really think that would have been any better? Leaving your friends and dad behind because you died?”

I swallowed, thinking of what that would have done to everybody around me, how that would have absolutely destroyed Dad. “…no,” I mumbled.

“So stop it. Please,” she pleaded, worry and turmoil running throughout her, all directed at me. “The only thing we can do is move forward.”

And immediately, my thoughts went to all of the things I had to still deal with. Coil. The other gangs. All on top of–

“The ABB,” I ground out, my thoughts circling right back around to where this conversation had started.

Lisa’s eyes went wide. “Taylor. No. You can’t just throw away and abandon leadership of a gang. Especially the one you just took over.”

“Fuck that! And fuck them! As far as I’m concerned, that–” I pointed back towards the bathroom where the twins still were, “cancels out everything.”

Lisa shook her head. “We can’t. The ABB is the only thing keeping a power vacuum from occurring and making everything worse. And yes, it would be worse. What happened to them will happen to even more women –and men– than it did before if the E88 get in here. With control of the ABB you can stop that.”

“But there could be others like the ones that did that to them! In ‘my’ gang. Fuck, there probably are, aren’t there? What about them?” I asked angrily. “You going to say we can’t do anything about that, too? Just leave them alone and let them get away with it? Because that’s fucking bullshit, Lisa.”

She looked hurt. “No. I wouldn’t do that. But Taylor, this is exactly the reason why you should take control. You can make those judgments. You can deal with people who do things like this. Make an example out of it. Make it clear how you won’t accept things like rape anymore.”

“And what about everything else I don’t like? The drugs? Prostitution?”
Lisa shook her head. “Prostitution is a valid business. We can stop forced prostitution, stop the forced sex-trade system Lung was running, but prostitution in general is something that you can’t stop, only try to control. If we don’t regulate it, somebody else will, and we can’t have that. That and the opium distribution.”

My emotions roiled, and I wanted to argue, wanted to say that was completely unacceptable, but I didn’t.

In a moment of clarity I realized it was late and I was way too emotionally compromised right then. I couldn’t think clearly at all.

“Lisa… I can’t. I can’t deal with this shit right now,” I told her, my thoughts swarming back on the twins. “The ABB, the other gangs, everything. Not with…”

She nodded slowly. “Alright. I can keep things going for a few days. Don’t worry about it. Just… focus on everything else, okay? They need you, right now. I didn’t find their parents, but I’ll keep looking and see if they made it home tomorrow. Well, today.”

And then Lisa winced, and I knew what she was going to say even before she said it. “But there’s still one thing…”

“Coil,” I said, frustrated by how everything felt like it was closing in on me. I couldn’t leave the twins alone, not now, but if Lisa’s concerns were well-placed—and I’d had no reason to doubt they were—he literally could not wait. He was a guillotine hanging over our heads, ready to drop at any moment.

The things Lisa had told me about his power after I’d agreed to help her… they weren’t good.

Probability manipulation, manifesting in a way that she said Coil believed allowed him to split the timeline and take two different actions simultaneously, only choosing which one happened after he knew the outcome of both.

She said there was probably more to it than that, that there had to be some sort of catch because splitting time was ridiculous, but she didn’t know.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “Coil. The sooner the better. I’ll collect everything I’ve got to make it easier. And… I’ll stay here with them. He doesn’t know about this apartment. …I hope.” She bit her lip. “Fuck. Okay. I’ll… be driving around the city. Take them to a park or something, okay? Something he’d never expect. He shouldn’t have any reason to suspect anything yet, so as long as we can keep it that way, everything will be alright.” Lisa grimaced. “But it has to be tomorrow. I’m sorry Taylor, but even a day…”

I sighed. “I get it. I don’t have to like it, and I really, really don’t, but I get it.”

She nodded, her sadness and own frustration clear to me. “I told you I’d help you with anything to get away from him and… that still stands. But even if you don’t get him tomorrow, I’m still with you. I promise, alright?”

I nodded, and she gave me a sad half-smile. Her eyes flicked towards the hallway she’d taken the twins down. “You should probably go check on them. I’ll get the guest room ready for you guys. You… should stay with them tonight. If they have any nightmares it’ll be better if you’re there as something familiar to remind them they’re safe. They might flashback if it’s just them. But ask first. Make sure they’re okay with it. I can pull out the couch for you if you need it.”

“Putting those psych classes to use?” I asked bitterly.
“That and experience. Trust me,” she said, not reacting to my barbed question. “I left clean clothes for them outside the bathroom door.”

I didn’t respond, just pulled my knife out of the table, sheathed it, stood up and began walking towards the bathroom. I picked up the clothes off of the floor next to the door and then paused, taking a deep breath.

I knocked. “U-um. Hey. It’s me.”

A soft “come in” drifted through the door, so I opened it and stepped in, closing it behind me.

Ayame was helping dry Saya’s back and looked up as I entered, her eyes still slightly vacant, though I could tell how tired they were and suspected that exhaustion played more than a small role.

“Ah… Lisa had some extra clothes she wanted me to give you,” I said.

Sayaka walked over to me, away from her sister, and took them from me, managing to smile slightly. “Thanks, Taylor.”

I nodded, Saya putting the clothes on a table next to the sink and starting to go through them and pull things out to put on. I looked away out of politeness as she began dressing, my eyes landing on Aya half-heartedly struggling to dry her hair, and I walked over and took the towel from her hands, helping her as she slumped tiredly forwards against my chest.

Sayaka finished up, bringing the other clothes over to where we stood and handed them off to Ayame. Aya started dressing, pulling up underwear and pajama bottoms and then lifting the medium-sized t-shirt above her head and lowering it once I pulled back from drying her hair.

Both she and Saya practically swam in the clothes, as the shirts reached all the way to mid-thigh on them, but I had a feeling the clean clothes were a much better option than their other ones right now.

Aya yawned as we migrated out of the bathroom towards where I’d felt Lisa moving around a couple minutes ago. The door was open when we got there, revealing a guest room with a queen-sized bed and clean sheets on it.

Ayame didn’t even hesitate in drifting towards it, crawling onto the bed and falling against the pillows.

I looked over at Saya. “Do you mind if I sleep in here with you guys? Lisa said she could pull out the couch—”

Sayaka cut me off with a shake of her head. “Can you stay here? Please?”

I nodded, smiling slightly. “Yeah.”

I’d slept with them before, as they refused to have me sleep on the floor whenever I was over at their house for a night, alternating between their beds each time I visited, so it wasn’t wholly unusual. After what had happened, I could have understood not wanting to be with other people. But it seemed Lisa had been right.

I went over to a desk by the window on the far side of the room and stripped out of my jacket and shirt. The now extremely-populated (and slightly heavy, though I hadn’t even noticed) knife harness followed, and then my bra.
If Saya noticed the harness as she got under the covers, she didn’t say anything. My shirt went back on and pants came off, placed with my other clothes on the chair by the desk. I kind of wished Lisa had gotten me something to wear for the night as well, but considering she was a bit shorter than me —by two or three inches— and much slimmer, it was unlikely anything of hers would fit me without being uncomfortable.

Instead, I made do with turning off the lights and looking back at the bed, where Sayaka had conspicuously left a very Taylor-sized gap between her and Aya.

I climbed into bed via the end, careful not to wake Aya who was already asleep, crawling to the head where I could get under the warm covers. Once I was settled, Ayame immediately rolled in my direction, instinctively searching out the new nearby heat source while Sayaka just scooted closer so that she could rest her head on my shoulder.

I sighed, and closed my own eyes, resolving to try and get as much sleep as I could in the next few hours.

It was the sense of terror that woke me. It was like a live current running through me, shocking me awake. Aya was shaking, gripping my arm tightly. Her eyes darted around underneath their eyelids.

And then, out of nowhere, she started screaming.

“Ayame!” I yelled, trying to get my voice heard over hers. When she didn’t respond, I shook her, even as Sayaka lifted herself up on the other side of me to look at her sister.

Aya’s eyes shot open, her breathing short and shallow as her scream cut off, still shaking.

She gripped my arm tighter. “Kurai. Totemo kurai. Itakattayo.”

I couldn’t understand her words, though I got the general impression from her voice and her feelings nonetheless. She’d been scared. Terrified.

She still was, but it was starting to slowly subside. Saya on the other side of me radiated concern, tinged with worry and her own slight fear.

“Shhh. It’s okay. You’re safe,” I said softly, not quite sure what to do but trying to calm her down.


Aya nodded slowly, light returning to her glazed eyes for a moment. Almost immediately, though, her breathing slowed, and her eyelids fluttered closed as she snuggled into my side. Saya sighed, and lowered herself back down, relaxing her muscles.

I closed my own eyes, hoping I could fall asleep again.

I did, in fact, manage to sleep more. It was the light in the room that woke me up, and I instantly noticed the lack of a small twin on either side of me. I pushed myself up, blearily looking around the room. Nothing.

Swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, I worked myself to my feet and hobbled over to the desk where my clothes were, managing to get myself dressed without any major incidents.
As soon as I opened the bedroom door, wonderful smells wafted through. Slowly walking through the hallway towards the main room, I was greeted with the sight of a rather subdued Ayame and Sayaka with her ink-black hair fluffed around her head, standing nearly on end, sitting at the counter of the peninsula that bordered the kitchen.

Lisa drifted around around the kitchen, tending to a pair of skillets.

“Morning, Taylor,” she said, her back to me as she rumbled through the fridge.

“Did you even sleep?” I asked incredulously.

She turned around and gave me a half-mouthed smirk. “Nope. But I’m used to this by now. Plus, I got to sleep before you called.”

Sayaka slumped onto the counter, revealing that the hair behind her head was in just as much disarray as the rest. Aya simply sat there, a haunted look in her eyes. They both felt so tangled. So many different things, but tempered and repressed under a layer of uncertainty and pain.

“I’m making eggs, pancakes, and bacon. You want some?” Lisa asked.

“Please,” I told her, moving around and taking a seat so that I was sitting to the left of Sayaka at the counter.

She nodded. “I thought so.”

Lisa gave me a speculative look, raising an eyebrow and then moving her head slightly in the direction of the twins. I shook my head. She huffed, rolled her eyes, and turned back around to the stove.

Saya raised her head, propping it up on a fist, seeming more alert and aware than her sister. And she was, to a degree, but I could also tell that it was partly faked. That she was just as uncertain and uncomfortable as Aya.

“I’ve got some stuff for you after breakfast,” Lisa said. “Abou–”

She was cut off by the sound of a phone vibrating. I blinked, and then dug around in my jacket pocket for my new cellphone. Pulling it out, I glanced at the number.

…Oh fuck.

It was my dad. And fourteen missed calls.

I looked up at Lisa worriedly.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” she said. Well, great. Thanks for throwing me to the wolves.

She grinned as I gave her a dark look. “…I’ll just go deal with this,” I told her.

Getting down off the stool, I headed back to the guest room, simultaneously pressing the green circle to accept the call.

“He–” I started.

“Taylor! Thank God. Where are you?”

I winced at the sound of worry and panic in my father’s voice.
“I’m fine, Dad. Everything’s fine. I’m… I’m with the twins.” I neglected to say that I wasn’t at their house, but there was no point in him knowing that and making him worry more.

“What were you thinking? Going out now of all times!? What if something had happened? If you’d gotten caught up in something or in one of those weird bombs that have been going off?”

…Um. Yeah. Well, about that, Dad. I didn’t just got caught up in all of that, but I also killed the one behind it and her sidekick/lackey, who you might know better as Oni Lee. And I somehow dealt with all her bombs too.

Did I mention I’m now head of the ABB? Uh-huh. That happened. This new girl I meant only four days ago is going to help me run it so that Nazis don’t take over the Docks.

Oh, right! And I have to kill this one guy who’s apparently some sort of insane megalomaniac with delusions of grandeur. And he’s amoral. So he wouldn’t even hesitate to try and kill me just because I’m too unpredictable and would be an obstacle in taking over the city. Cool, huh?

…Back in reality, I wisely kept my mouth shut.

“Look… just, just,” my dad stumbled out. “Just stay there. At least I know you’re safe there. I’ll come and get you as soon as they say it’s safe to go out on the roads.”

“Okay,” I replied, crossing my fingers and praying that it would be at least eight hours before they did that.

“Is everything else alright? You’re good?”

“I’m fine, Dad. Everything’s okay.”

“Alright.” He sighed. “I love you, Taylor.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and ended the call. That had gone much less painfully than I had anticipated. Turning around, I left the room, heading back towards the kitchen where Lisa was just starting to serve breakfast. As I got to my stool, she scooped a couple pancakes onto my plate, and I reached for the syrup to liberally coat them and begin eating.

Breakfast was mostly silent. The twins didn’t say anything other than thanking Lisa for the food, and as much as it hurt to see them like that, I couldn’t even begin to think of what to do that could make any of this better. Neither of them asked about their parents, and I got the sense that they were afraid to ask.

…I would have been, too.

After breakfast, they wandered back down the hall towards the bedroom we’d slept in – presumably to sleep more–, Lisa and I cleaning the kitchen and then sitting down in the living room.

For a minute, we didn’t say anything, until Lisa broke the silence with an explosive sigh. “Fuck.”

She rubbed her eyes and then looked over at me. “Okay. First. We need to talk more about what
you did last night. You said you ‘killed’ the connections between Bakuda and her bombs, what
does that mean? How did you do that?”

I pushed my thoughts of the twins aside and focused on Lisa. “Um. Well…. She wasn’t always
with the bombs she was blowing up, right? And when she caught me in that bubble she didn’t
have any wires or anything that would have let her detonate the bomb that made it. So I figured
she had to have some sort of remote control over each one. And I killed that. If she couldn’t
control them, they couldn’t ‘go off, right?”

Lisa stared at me. “So you didn’t just kill the connection between her and the bombs, you killed
her *control* over them. …And de-armed them all by doing that.”

I nodded.

The blonde dragged her hand down her face, and I could barely make out a muttered ‘What the
*fuck.*’ She looked back over at me. “Okay. How did you kill a Gray Boy bubble? I can’t believe
she even *made* something like that.”

“Well, it’s a barrier, right? Like a force-field, or a wall, just different. And I can kill doors and
walls and stuff, so−”

“So you killed the bubble,” she finished, sounding exasperated.

“Well, it wasn’t *that* easy,” I told her. “I couldn’t even see the lines for it at first, because I didn’t
want to. I didn’t want to see *any* of them. And when I finally *did* see them I wasn’t cutting
through anything normal. The bubble was just all these folds, twisted and turned in on themselves.
Like someone had a sheet of dough and twisted off a little tiny sphere in the center, and then
flattened that sphere and made it a loop, and I was running on that loop and had to cut it to get
out.”

“…you’re talking about space-time,” Lisa said. “About *cutting* a four-dimensional manifold that
Bakuda managed to separate from the normal continuum into its own isolated segment, in order to
fix it and put everything back in place, *including you*.”

Huh. I hadn’t thought of it like that. “I think of it more like a weird glass bubble that had me and
everything in it, and everything would go back to normal if I got rid of that,” I explained. “I mean,
normally everything wouldn’t be like that, so I just had to kill what was keeping it from being
normal.”

Lisa sighed. “Okay. Okay. It’s your power, if that’s how it works then that’s how it works. God
knows most powers don’t make any fucking sense when you try looking too closely at them.”

Well, it made sense to *me*. I just killed things.

“Why is any of this important, anyways?”

“Because I need to know exactly what you can do before I send you into a bunker with twenty-
five trained mercenaries and Coil,” she told me. “You might have gotten away with just rushing in
and taking care of Bakuda without any planning, but *you got lucky*. Really fucking lucky. With
Coil, you can’t rely on that. He has all the cards, including the ones we don’t know about.”

She was worried–

Lisa glared at me. “Yes, Taylor, I’m fucking worried. Because everything is riding on this. If it
fails, everything gets worse. The Docks, my situation, your friends’ safety, our lives in general…
 fuck, you could *die*. And not only that, but right now I’ve also got two ridiculously powerful
Blasters in my apartment who are ready to go off at any moment and could probably level this entire building if they wanted. So yes, I am worried.”

She slumped forward, her head in hands, a good portion of her pent-up emotional energy and tension having slowly drained out of her over the course of her rant.

“Feel better?” I asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.” Her voice was muffled by her hands, but I could tell she meant it.

I shifted uncomfortably, my thoughts back on the twins. “I’m just… I don’t know what to do, other than what I know how to do. I mean, what can I do?”

Lisa looked back up at me. “You can be there for them. You can watch them. Keep an eye out…” Her voice grew thick. “And make sure they don’t do anything stupid.” She swallowed. “Just you being here is helping. They adore you Taylor. You should have seen them before you woke up and came out. It was… It was like…” She swallowed again and shook her head. “Just… don’t be afraid to reach out.”

There were so many things threaded through her voice. Guilt, and longing, and pain, and frustration, and self-hatred, all along with worry and hope. It was so complex.

“But,” she said, laughing bitterly, “none of that will matter if you don’t live through the day. And I like you, Taylor, so I’d hate to see you die.”

I heard something, soft, something I couldn’t identify.

Lisa twisted to the left, surreptitiously wiping her eyes as she reached down for her laptop and then turning back once she had it, opening the lid. “So, to keep you alive, here’s what you’re going to need to know about Co–”

I heard it again. A sound that was quiet, barely there.

“Do you hear that?” I asked, interrupting her.

“What? No. What is it?”

Soft, suppressed sobs under another sound, something that I wouldn’t have even noticed normally.

_Fuck._ I stood up and rushed towards the hall, hurrying towards the bedroom. When I got there, though, the door was open, and only Ayame was there, sleeping peacefully. The other… in the room behind me, where I could hear water running.

I spun around and moved a few feet to the right and then hesitated in front of the bathroom door. I knocked lightly, but there was no response, so I slowly opened the door, Lisa a few feet behind me.

I felt something in me nearly break.

Sayaka sat in the corner of the tub, the shower on as she weakly scrubbed her arms with a sponge. The water around her and draining out of the tub was a light rose, her skin a darker shade.

“Oh, _fuck_,” I heard Lisa say behind me.

Another choked sob came out of Sayaka’s mouth as I grabbed a towel off of one of the rods and moved closer to her. Once I got near enough, I shut off the water, though she didn’t even seem to
notice. I had to take the sponge out of her hand, noticing that the side she’d been using was also tinged pink and that it wasn’t just her arms, but her whole front as well.

Saya…

She’d scrubbed herself raw.

I didn’t know what I should do, so I did the only thing I could: wrapped the towel around her, and then carefully held her as she kept crying.

Sayaka always acted like she was less affected by things that happened to her than Aya was, when in reality, she was just as sensitive, if not more so. She just didn’t like other people seeing her vulnerable, especially her sister. Didn’t want them to know how bad things were for her and worry about her.

Even when she needed help the most.

And now… now that had backfired completely. She’d kept internalizing and burying her emotions, ignoring them. Until this had happened. Until it had gotten to be too much and completely overwhelmed her.

Carefully, I adjusted Saya’s position and got my left arm under her knees so I could lift her.

Lisa held the door open for me as I carried Sayaka back to the guest bedroom, her crying having subsided by the time I reached the bed. Placing her down on it, I didn’t even need to look to know she had fallen asleep again like her sister. I left her with just the towel covering her, unsure if the sheets and blankets would be worse or not with what she had done.

When I left the room I closed the door behind me, Lisa staring at me from where she leaned against the opposite wall of the hall.

Everything was running through my head in flashes, thoughts of my dad, my friends, Bakuda, Lisa, the ABB, Amy, the twins, Coil, the Docks, the Empire. How bad everything was, how it was all balanced on a knife’s edge, threatening to fall into chaos.

All I could think was I can’t leave things like this.

I looked up at Lisa. “Tell me what I need to do.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter: Taylor is so fucking terrifying it isn’t even funny anymore. Welcome to Conceptual Bullshit 101, where it doesn’t need to make sense to you, just to the one doing it.

Or: in which Lisa is not a bitch, because QA knows what the fuck she’s doing, yo. …And because her guilt-complex around her trigger event is flaring up big time.

Next Chapter: Indivisible 0.1 (March 2011)
If Sayaka had to describe Taylor in one phrase, it would be as a force of nature. She was like a typhoon.

Or, perhaps something even grander, like a star that captured planets in its orbit and refused to let them go.

Because certainly, that’s what it felt like.

Taylor didn’t have to do anything special. Didn’t have to draw attention to herself or be in the popular crowd or anything, she simply was. When Taylor entered a room, people had a tendency to notice. When she spoke, they listened.

She didn’t just have charisma, she had gravity. The things she said and did had weight behind them in a way you couldn’t ignore.

But it was also like she didn’t even realize it. Taylor went about her life like anybody else, completely oblivious to the effects she had on others, how she brought together the people you’d least expect, tying them together effortlessly.

People like Aya and herself.

They’d never quite fit in well in school, and the one friend they’d had their freshman year had ended up leaving with her family because of work. What that meant though was that come sophomore year, Sayaka and Ayame were on their own without anybody else. And by then… well, everybody had their friends and place in school. The cliques and circles were already formed.

They’d drifted a bit, usually just sitting by themselves and eating on the benches on the roof of the school.

Aya hadn’t taken Elise’s departure well at all, becoming more irritable and easily annoyed than she had been before, withdrawing slightly from everything, even Saya.

It hurt to see her sister like that, knowing that there really wasn’t much she could do about it. Five months, nearly half a year, and it was still a struggle.

Until Taylor.

Taylor, who noticed, who didn’t care about the fact that Aya had a hint of an accent. Who laughed with them when they watched old Super Sentai episodes or K-dramas. Who tried their
parents’ weird food without comment, not even blinking when she found out about the eel or sea urchins in the soup they’d had last week. Who drank traditional green tea and agreed that _matcha_ ice cream was amazing.

Taylor, who made them feel welcome and loved, like they were simply puzzle pieces fitting into a place they hadn’t known they belonged, where seeing her felt like coming home. Who brought back the Ayame that Saya had missed.

Sayaka might have been a bit infatuated, she knew, but just about everybody else in the group seemed to be as well. Taylor was their glue, the star that they orbited around, holding their little solar system together, giving them light and warmth and belonging. She never made any of them feel left out, seeming to always know _exactly_ the right things to say and do.

And Sayaka loved her for it.

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Saya was sitting on the sofa, watching an episode of the latest drama they’d been into, Aya on the floor next to her legs eating banana chips, when she heard the front door open and close. Muffled voices drifted from the front hallway, particularly a voice they recognized.

Ayame turned around to face Saya, and then blinked, looking at her questioningly.

*Did you know Taylor was coming over?*

Sayaka shook her head.

Footsteps moved towards them, approaching from the hall until they were right behind Saya.

Sayaka tilted her head back, looking up at the tall brunette behind her, and smiled. “Hey Taylor!”

The girl in question gave a half-hearted smile in return. “Hey Saya. Hey Ayame.”

A muffled sound that seemed vaguely like “hello” was made around a mouth of banana crisps.

“What’s happening?”

“Ki-Joon’s ex-fiancée just came back from France,” Sayaka explained. “So now there’s a love triangle and Ah-Jung and Yoon-Jun are rivals.”

“Oh,” Taylor responded.

“Wanna watch?”

“Please. I need the distraction,” she said, moving around the end of the couch and sitting. “You mind if I lie down?”

Sayaka shook her head, scooting down a little towards the end and then easing Taylor’s head so that it was on her lap. “Did something happen?”

“The hearing was today.”

Both Saya and her twin froze, Aya looking particularly humorous with a slice of dried banana half-way to her mouth.

“…Are you okay?” Sayaka disliked that Taylor was facing away from her towards the screen, because it made it so much harder to try and figure out what she was thinking.
“Yeah. It just sucked. Having to see them again.” The larger girl let out a sigh. “Emma’s face when she saw me was priceless, though.” Sayaka could hear the slight smirk in Taylor’s voice. “She totally didn’t expect me to change as much as I have.”

“Mhm,” Saya murmured, running her fingers through Taylor’s hair. It was so nice. Nothing like the boring straight inky-black that she and her sister had.

She’d heard a little about how much Taylor had changed from Alex and Emily. How she’d gone from being this quiet, slightly out-of-shape girl to the Taylor they all knew and loved, one of the strongest and best players they had on the soccer team and friends with everyone.

The mildly vindictive feeling she got at the fact that the people who had made Taylor’s life a living hell for over a year, her best friend at that, was finally getting what came to her. She still didn’t know quite what had made Taylor leave Winslow, just that it had been Bad. But she knew that Taylor would tell them when she was ready, when she felt safe and comfortable enough.

“It’s just… it was so anticlimactic. All of that time, and it was over in forty minutes. Sophia’s mom was there, and when the judge asked if she had anything to say, she just said all of this sounded exactly like something Sophia would do and she wasn’t even surprised. She was apparently on probation and she’s going to juvie now. Emma has to go to therapy every week for at least a year. And Madison… when Emma tried to say that the stuff I’d written was just lies, Madison said that wasn’t true and that everything I’d written had happened. Emma looked like she wanted to strangle her.”

Taylor shuddered and hugged herself. “There’s something wrong with her. Sophia at least admitted to what she did, but Emma… something’s messed up in her head. I hope the therapy can do something for her.”

Sayaka sighed to herself. As much as Taylor tried to hide it, she did still care for the redhead. She may hate her as well, but the revelation that Emma was at least mildly mentally unstable seemed to have shifted some of that to pity.

She didn’t like it. Taylor shouldn’t have to feel anything for Emma. As far as she was concerned, the redhead deserved to die and burn in hell for what she’d done to her and her sister’s best friend, the girl who was practically another sister to them.

Taylor cared so much, she gave her whole heart to the people she loved, and what that bitch had done, twisting and turning their ten-year friendship, intentionally using it to hurt Taylor in the worst ways possible, made Saya’s blood boil in a way that she’d only felt for Aya before. The scars of what those three had done to Taylor were still there, if only barely visible, despite how much all of them tried to help and relieve that.

The fact that she’d come over to their house right afterwards, spoke of just how much she felt welcome, a sense that both she and Aya had tried to encourage. Well, her at least. Aya just wanted her around, and Sayaka didn’t think she really had anything else behind it.

“Mom’s making a special dinner because of hina-matsuri tonight, if you wanna stay the night,” Sayaka offered, changing topics, feeling it would be for the best. It would also help make sure that Taylor didn’t slip and get all withdrawn. Not having a cellphone seriously made it harder on their group trying to help her.

Taylor snorted. “You’d think your parents would have gotten tired of me by now. That’s what, three times in as many weeks?”

“I think chichi-ue and haha-ue would adopt you if they could get away with it,” Aya said,
speaking up for the first time. “They keep asking about you at dinner.”

“Yeah, they pretty much love you,” Sayaka agreed. “I swear, they think you’re the best thing to happen since Dad got his job at the university.”

Taylor laughed, and Sayaka internally grinned at the fact they’d managed to get that reaction out of her. “Well, if you think they’d be okay with it. I’ll just have to call my dad and let him know.”

Sayaka nodded, the grin she’d been feeling finally slipping out.

“Alright,” Aya said, and Saya could hear the smile. “I’m gonna beat you at koi-koi tonight.”

Taylor had been on a winning streak since they’d managed to teach her all the rules, and Aya felt like she had to defend her position as the best one at the game in the family.

“You wish,” Taylor shot back, and there was a competitive but excited tinge to it. “I’ll show you.”

And at that moment, Saya swore that no matter what, she’d do anything to keep the happiness that Taylor had given her and Aya.

Nothing was too much for her, for the girl that had become their sun.
Rend 3.2

Chapter Notes

AFHB is now over a year old, the longest time I’ve consistently updated a story on a regular basis.

Originally, this was nothing more than a one-shot tentatively titled Knife’s Edge. A short snippet that was never meant to be anything beyond that. Taylor fought Lung, Taylor killed Lung. It was just a single glimpse into how I imagined Taylor getting MEoDP might play out.

The reason Taylor’s characterization used to feel so inconsistent in the early chapters? Why things were so disjoint? That was me scrambling to cover my ass as I tried to figure out what the fuck I was actually trying to do and where I wanted to go with it all.

Suddenly, I had to come up with why Taylor was fighting Lung. What led to it. How she actually ended up with her powers. I had to build a story both backwards and forwards simultaneously, which in turn ended up meaning I had to revise Taylor’s characterization in order to fit the backstory I created better.

It’s still happening, actually. I’m currently editing 2.2/2.3/2.4 because those chapters are weird.

Somehow, though, I managed to pull off exactly what I wanted, balancing tone and atmosphere, planning out and diagramming certain events and themes to make sure everything evened out, even if I did get carried away at points (*cough* 2.1 Amy and 2.3 Taylor *cough*). Ultimately it’s the work of a lot of thought. Piecing things together, planning out where parts should go so they have the most impact or meaning, emphasizing character traits and then developing them (for better or worse).

So yeah, there’s a peek into how all of this started. I know some of you have been with it since the very, very beginning, and I have to say thank you for that because otherwise this never would have gotten the opportunity to grow into the story it’s become.

Anyways. This chapter’s been in the oven for far too long, and we need to move on. So here. Have some words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ayame Akiyama

10:32 AM EST, Thursday, April 14, 2011

For some reason, it wasn’t as surprising as it should have been to find out Taylor was involved with capes. If anything, it seemed to suit her. There was a certain… larger-than-life quality that Taylor had about her that seemed to approach the way the public saw people like Alexandria or Legend.
So even if it was unexpected, it wasn’t exactly surprising.

When Taylor had appeared in that doorway, it had been hard, so hard, not to break down crying again in relief. Because she would make everything right. She always did.

She’d reached out, held them, like she’d known without even asking that that was what they needed most, to feel someone who cared, someone who would stay, someone who would never harm them, erasing the taint those men had imprinted on them.

In a world where everything was wrong and nothing made sense anymore, Taylor was familiar and safe.

She might not have been able to erase the pain or the bruises, but she made it easier to ignore them.

She’d taken them away from that place, brought them with her to somewhere different, somewhere unfamiliar, a place that didn’t hold any memories, that couldn’t remind them of anything.

They’d been able to wash themselves, and Aya had felt much better afterwards, though she was nearly falling asleep on her feet. Taylor had brought them clothes, new clothes, and then she’d stayed with them during the few hours of sleep they’d gotten, anchoring them in the present, keeping them from slipping back.

Taylor clearly trusted Lisa, the girl who’d found them while wearing that purple and black outfit. But that was enough for her and her sister. Lisa’s sincerity had only been confirmed further when the girl gave them food and new clothes that fit them, offering to help find their parents and asking for nothing in return.

She missed her parents. She wanted her mother and father so badly it hurt. She wanted miso soup in the morning and the stupid jokes her dad made. She wanted to hear about the new books that had just arrived at the store, and her mother’s uncensored opinion of them. She wanted words in her rice on exam days even if she kept telling Kaa-san she was too old for that now. And she wanted to cry, because she didn’t know if she’d ever get to see them again.

She couldn’t handle those thoughts right now. Not now, when everything was still so… raw.

At least… at least Bakuda was dead, according to Lisa.

When she’d asked how, the blonde had only shook her head in response.

Ayame hadn’t quite known what to think of the collection of knives attached to the vest that had been lying on the desk next to Taylor’s jeans when she’d gone back into the room to sleep some more, but it had been clear it was somehow related to how they’d been found the night before.

So Aya hadn’t questioned it, because no matter what, she was still Taylor. It was simply another thing, a new facet that they hadn’t known before. She was still the girl who was stubborn and persistent to a fault, who never gave up. Still the one who laughed and cried with them, who gave them belonging, a home among new friends.

She gave them everything, and up until now, they hadn’t truly been able to return that. But now… now they were no longer helpless. Now they could give back, prove themselves and show Taylor that she could rely on them as much as they did on her.

All because of her powers…
Her powers. She and her sister shared them. It sat there, in the back of her mind. Light and force and heat, variable and controllable. Energy easily drawn out, circling, charging further and further and further until it was released or destabilized.

When they’d run the hot water in the shower to the point where it should have been scalding with the way steam came off it, it hadn’t felt any hotter than comfortably warm, just like how they hadn’t been cold in that room like they had before.

She didn’t know how to feel about that. Had she lost something that was considered normal? Or had she rather gained something that could only benefit her?

She wasn’t sure.

It wasn’t as clear-cut as the light, which was something that made her and Sayaka unequivocally better, something that they’d talked about in hushed whispers and hopeful voices when they were young, the chance to be part of the Sentai, and when they moved to America, the Protectorate.

They’d speculated on what powers they’d get. Sayaka had wanted to be a Tinker. Aya had wanted to be a Shaker or Blaster, and powerful.

She’d gotten her wish, but the cost…

Aya shuddered and shook her head. <Don't think about it.>

She couldn’t help but think of Saya, lying next to her wrapped in a towel when she’d woken up again. A towel that was tinted a faint rose, her sister’s skin looking like it was sunburned.

She hated that.

But there wasn’t anything she could do, because they’d already…

(the smell of burnt pork and charred meat, ash clinging to the air)

There was nothing they could do.

Perhaps that was part of why she wanted to help Taylor so much. Taylor was a distraction, but something known and safe. Someone that deserved it.

For now, Ayame simply moved moment to moment, took everything as it came and moved forward, not looking back.

There was nothing else she could really do.

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**Taylor Hebert**

11:26 AM EST, Thursday, April 14, 2011

**SHIIING**

**SHIIING**

The sharp ringing echoed in Lisa’s living room, creating a dissonant sound at odds with the voices coming from the television against the wall.

I knew it wasn’t necessary, to do this. But the action was soothing. Stabilizing.
Taking a breath, I scraped my thumb over the edge of the blade I was working, testing the sharpness. Satisfied, I flipped the knife around and put it down on the table in front of me in line with all of the others.

To be honest, I didn’t know how I should be acting. What I should be thinking. My thoughts were a jumbled mess, my emotions not helping at all.

Coil had to die.

I knew that.

I knew that, but it didn’t make what I was doing any less conflicting.

With Lung, it had been in the heat of the moment. A fight to the death, kill or be killed. There was no time to think, no time to plan.

With Bakuda, it had been an act of passion. I had been angry, and frightened. Angry over what she had been doing, to the city, to innocent people, and especially to my friends, simply because she wanted to, and frightened that I would be too late, that I’d already failed.

Comparatively, Oni Lee had been a side-thought. His death had been a hair-trigger reaction. There was a serious immediate threat. I dealt with it appropriately.

But Coil… Coil hadn’t done anything to me. Not yet at least, and that was the problem. I wasn’t reacting to something now, I was striking first.

I didn’t like it.

I dealt with Lung because I had to. I’d dealt with Bakuda because she’d hurt people I cared about, and nobody else was able to.

But with Coil, I was going to deal with him solely because of the threat he posed.

A very big threat, yeah, but this wasn’t something decided in the heat of the moment, driven by emotions. This was cold, logical, planned annihilation.

And it felt totally different.

I didn’t want to be involved in all this cape shit, and it felt like, by doing this, by taking the initiative instead of reacting, I was only getting myself more sucked into it.

I looked over at the rough map Lisa had laid out, points marked and circled, numbers written places, drawn from what she could last remember of Coil’s main bunker.

“All right, so the main entrance is actually across the street. There’s a cargo lift for the building that goes down to the basement. There’s probably also a couple other entrances, but I haven’t ever seen them.”

I nodded.

“So your best bet is going to be going down the elevator. Now, there’s cameras, so he’ll see you coming unless you can avoid them, but hopefully he won’t expect you to be a problem. Until you are. You’ll have to move fast. He’s slippery, and his power makes it harder for us. I’ll be trying to hack into his computer systems to try and stop him from getting away, but don’t count on it. I’ll at least stay in contact with you providing support so that you aren’t entirely on your own.
“There’s at least twenty mercenaries outfitted with tinkertech in the base, they’ll be trouble if they have enough time to get ready for you. Getting in close to take care of them is probably your best option. It’s the getting in close that’ll be difficult.” Lisa bit her lip. “Anyways. Don’t hold back on these guys. Seriously. They’re trained and know what they’re doing.”

“Mostly, it’s a matter of moving in and down as fast as possible, in and out. Best case scenario you could pull this off in ten, fifteen minutes from what I saw with Bakuda. The best thing to do against Coil is have a plan for every possibility, and it’s even better if your power interferes with his, though we shouldn’t count on that either. We just have to back him into a corner where he can’t get out.” She looked at me pointedly. “Coil is a matter of out-thinking him and matching his every move. You can’t do what you did with Bakuda.”

I understood what Lisa was saying. That this needed planning. That I had gotten really, really fucking lucky with Bakuda. But just…

When did this become my responsibility?

Ugh.

I shook my head, trying to push the thoughts away.

There was no use to this, I was just going in circles and giving myself a headache.

It needed to be done, I was the one who could do it, and I wasn’t willing to let things get any worse than they already were, so it had to be me.

…I should just leave the planning to Lisa.

Sighing, I picked up the heavy female-cut vest laying next to the towel my knives were all on.

“This,” Lisa said, holding up a stiff black object with velcro at the sides, “is a ballistic vest. And you are going to wear it, so help me God.”

“What?”

The blonde sighed. “After our discussion last night I called up the Number Man and got this for you. We aren’t taking chances with this, Taylor. It’s not worth it. So you’re going to wear the fucking vest, even if it’s heavy, because it means that there’s that much of a higher chance of you getting through this without a bullet in your heart.”

She looked slightly vulnerable, at that moment, and I realized that she hated that she was doing this, hated that she was making me deal with Coil, hated that she was dragging me into her problems, and she couldn’t stand the thought that I might get hurt or killed because of it.

So I took the vest.

Examining it for a moment, I started undoing all the velcro straps it had, the sound drawing the attention of the two ink-haired girls sitting in an armchair facing the television that was really too small for both of them to fit on.

They’d woken up forty minutes ago and wandered into the living room, Sayaka halting momentarily and blinking at the sight of all the blades I had out, causing her sister to run into her back. After a few seconds, she and Aya simply continued on towards the chair like there was nothing out of the ordinary, and hadn’t said a word since.

I wanted to talk, to reach out, to take away the pain I could practically feel from them, but I also
knew that right now the best thing was to let them settle a bit, to have some sense of normality even if there really wasn’t in this situation.

I’m sure they’d picked up that something was weird about all of this. Hell, I would have. It was pretty obvious Lisa was Tattletale, so they already knew she was a cape. And Saya had to have gotten a decent look at my knife harness last night. Both of them must have felt all of the extra knives I’d collected from Oni Lee when I’d hugged them.

But they still hadn’t said anything.

Not about me, about Lisa, about their powers, about anything.

I didn’t think it was fear. It seemed more like… they had too much to process, and were only dealing with one thing at a time right now.

Based on the small circle of light between Aya’s hands, I’d say they were on their powers right now.

“How long?”

I looked up at Saya, halfway through undoing the vest. I didn’t need to ask to know what she was talking about. “January.”

“How?”

I sighed. I didn’t like talking about it, but this was exactly the sort of time that I probably should, and besides, if I’d told Amy—who I didn’t even really know—, I could at least tell the twins.

“I was locked in a locker for three days with rotting tampons. Got toxic shock syndrome. Almost died,” I said, unfastening another velcro strap. “Woke up in the hospital. Woooo powers.

“…It’s why I left Winslow.”

I lifted the vest over my head, shifting it and rolling my shoulders a few times until it settled on my body before starting to fasten and adjust all the straps. Lisa had said it needed to be snug, as secure as possible without limiting my movement too much.

“What… are they?”

I grimaced. “I can see things. Well, feel them too, but you know how you can tell where the edge of an object is because of depth perception?”

They nodded.

“It’s sorta like that. I can see the edges where something ends. Not physically, the end of its life, I mean. And I can use them to cut that thing or… or kill it,” I told them, softly.

“T.L.D.R: Taylor’s not just got depth perception, she’s got death perception.” Lisa said, walking into the room from the hall.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or groan. “…That was terrible, Lisa.”

Both of the twins nodded in agreement.

I was grateful for her sudden interruption, though, because it relieved some of the tension I felt about revealing the fact that I literally saw how to kill everything to two of my best friends.
“But, um, yeah.” I rubbed my left arm awkwardly. “That’s what I’ve got. I’ve never used it before this week, though. …Never planned on having to use it, either,” I said sourly, reminded of why I had.

Fucking Lung.

“I can also feel people around me. It’s like this… bubble, about thirty-six feet out from me that I can know where everyone is inside it.” I went back to securing the vest, moving my way up the left side straps. “I can ignore the lines. The edges, I mean. But I can never not know where people are around me. It’s like how you always know where your arm is.”

“I figure things out,” Lisa said. “Put together all the little clues, find out whodunnit, stuff like that.”

I looked over at her in surprise at the fact she was just volunteering that.

“What? Figured we were sharing, might as well just say it. Besides, it’s not like you wouldn’t have told them if they asked.”

Knowing the twins’ curiosity, they probably would have too, sooner or later, and I got the sense that Lisa knew that, which is why she’d decided to preempt it.

Lisa looked back at the twins. “I’m what you call a pure Thinker, my power’s all mental, and I get serious headaches if I overuse it. Taylor’s pretty much a classic Striker, with a bunch of little extras to help her out. And you…” Lisa walked around the side of the couch and sat on the arm, a foot or so to my left. “You two are Blasters. It means you do things at range. Pew-pew lasers and all that. Like Legend. Or Purity, if we’re looking closer to home.”

The blonde bit her lip. “Twin triggers are really, really rare. Getting a synergistic power in a twin trigger? That’s so rare I’ve never even heard of any capes like that before.” She let out a heavy breath. “And it makes you a huge target. I’ll be totally honest: there are a lot of people, a lot of organizations out there that would do a lot to get a pair like you. Staying unaffiliated would be a real struggle …normally.”

Lisa looked over at me, where I had successfully figured out the vest and started attaching all my sheathes to it. “However, the ABB, which would be the biggest problem for you, …isn’t anymore, thanks to our resident Blue-Eyed Devil.”

“What!?” I’m pretty sure my voice was at least two or three octaves above normal.

The blonde smiled at me in a way I could only describe as a mix of self-satisfied, teasing, and mischievous, but also without any real meanness behind it. “That’s what they’re calling you. The ones I’ve talked to, at least. You should probably pick something better before you get stuck with that.”

“No,” I said sharply. “Just... no. I’m not dealing with that.”

Lisa almost seemed disappointed. “Fine, I’ll choose something, then. But you don’t get to complain. Can’t be any worse than Lung. I mean, really? I’m pretty sure nobody over here would get that reference without being told.”

“Uh… what are you talking about?” Sayaka asked.

Lisa turned back to them. “Taylor over here beheaded the ABB last night.”

“Not literally,” I muttered.
I could almost hear her roll her eyes. “Yes, okay, not literally. Pretty close to, though.”

I gave her a pointed look. “Lisa!”

She just grinned. “Fine, fine. However you want to say it, Taylor pretty much tore apart and destroyed the ABB for you two.”

The twins’ eyes widened at the same time, and it was almost comical how synchronized they were in turning to stare at me. “For us?” Ayame repeated.

“Yes, you should have seen how worried she was last night. She probably would have gone right through the E88 and the Merchants too, if she thought she’d had to.”

There was a sense of gratitude and awe coming from the twins, mixed with an overwhelming reverence which was also tinged by another emotion I couldn’t exactly identify in Sayaka.

Lisa was still grinning. “Anyway, they’re not a problem anymore. The next largest threat also shouldn’t be a problem as we’re… going to deal with that today,” she said, biting her lip. “The E88 won’t want you for obvious reasons, and the Merchants might try to forcibly induct you, but I highly doubt it considering the sort of firepower you’ve got.

“So basically, you’re pretty free, as long as nobody really finds out about you and you stay low.”

The twins nodded as I finished strapping the last knife onto me. There was a small Bluetooth earbud and a cheap phone lying next to each other on the table, and the earbud went in my right ear while the phone went in a small pouch on the lower back right of the ballistic vest.

The blonde looked over at me as I shrugged on my red jacket. Once I had, she reached down to her left, and I heard the crinkling of a plastic bag as she pulled something small out and tossed it to me.

I caught it by reflex, looking at her in confusion before turning my attention to the thing in my hands. It was hard black plastic, curved, with a sharp line down the middle and fabric behind the plastic. A pair of straps came off either side and ended in a pair of buckles. It reminded me of something I’d seen on a few motorcyclists on the–

“Lisa,” I said lowly. She shifted in place a little. “What is this?”

“Protection,” she said. “We can’t take any chances with Coil, Taylor.”

“It’s a mask,” I stated, though it would only cover the bottom half of my face and chin.

“Well… yes,” she admitted.

“I don’t need a mask. I’m not a cape,” I told her. “I’m just a–”

“–girl with powers named Taylor, yes, I know,” she said, cutting me off. “But that’s not how others are going to see it. You don’t wear a costume, so for all intents and purposes, you’re just somebody using powers in their civilian identity.”

“Because I’m not a cape,” I repeated, stronger. “I don’t want to be involved like that.”

Capes… being a cape was more than just having powers. It meant having a separate identity, a role, a place that people would suddenly put you in within their minds. It meant getting involved in heroes vs. villains. In becoming part of the average statistical five-to-ten years of lifetime-expectancy for capes before they died. I didn’t want any of that. I’d had enough being “special” at
Winslow. I just wanted to be normal. To have a normal life. To have friends and go to school and worry about what colleges we’d go to and what we’d do after.

Not… worry about whether I was going to have to fight someone the next day. Or if my dad and everyone else would find out. Or what everybody and their mother would say about me, because if there’s one way to instant attention, being a cape was it.

Some small part of me wanted that attention, but just I wasn’t willing to pay the cost of it.

People would think of me as something more than Taylor, when I really wasn’t. I was just Taylor, powers or not.

“Look, without something to distinguish between when you act with powers or not, people will treat your normal identity as your cape one, and it’ll be open season on you. Fuck, Taylor, even New Wave does it; they have costumes!”

My mind went to Amy. How she’d looked in her Panacea outfit in the hospital. How she’d been the same person that I’d gotten tea with the next day. She didn’t have the separation you’d expect between a hero in-costume and out. I heard even Victoria, her sister, acted a bit differently as Glory Girl than she did out of the dress and tiara.

But Amy was just Amy. Being called Panacea didn’t help her at all. Having the costume didn’t either. They created this divide between the girl and the healer when there was really no difference.

Because to people, what would “Panacea” be without her powers? It was an easy answer: she’d be nobody important to them, just another person. But Amy without powers would still be Amy. She would still be well-defined, with hopes and dreams and fears and desires that other people knew.

I didn’t want to be depersonalized like that.

I opened my mouth, but she cut me off. “No, let me finish. Even if everybody knows who you really are under that, even if there’s really no difference between you normally and you acting with powers, it’ll still be enough for the unwritten rules to protect you and the people you care about,” she said, looking intently at me

I shut my mouth and closed my eyes tightly. I hated how much sense Lisa could make, how she knew exactly what buttons to push.

Because I knew, deep down, she was right. I wasn’t willing to risk my friends and family like that. Not when I’d had the reality of just how bad things could get shoved in my face last night.

“Fine. Fine,” I said bitterly, hating that I was compromising my sense of self like this.

Just one more step deeper into the pit, and there was nothing I could do about it.

She nodded, appearing contrite, but also emanating a feeling of mild satisfaction.

“It’s… almost noon, so we should probably get started on this. Um… would you two be okay with going outside for a little while?” she asked, directing the last part to Saya and Aya.

Sayaka nodded first, her sister following a few seconds after.

Lisa sighed, and I could tell her satisfaction was gone, replaced by sympathy, concern, and a little bit of self-loathing. “I’m sorry, I’d honestly rather stay here, but it’s just not a good idea. I don’t
know how long this is going to take, but as soon as it’s over we can come back and I can continue looking for your parents.”

They just nodded again, a bit stiffly.

“Ready Taylor?” she asked, looking at me.

I double-checked, making sure everything was secure, simply holding onto the small mask for now. “Yeah.”

She blew out a puff of air. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

Chapter End Notes


You know it’s true.

It was really fucking hard trying to capture Aya’s headspace. She and her sister are so different at coping, getting the nuances right is a real challenge.

Next up: Rend 3.3, because fuck waiting until after Indivisible 3.0.2 to get to that bit. …Not to mention it would totally mess up the dramatic build and pacing I’ve got going.

You guys know what’s going to be next chapter.
And so we return to the main attraction of this story. Not overpowered emotionally compromised twins, or unnervingly not-irritating Lisas, or even those complex inner thoughts Taylor has that are truly conundrums of philosophy (to her, at least).

No.

We’re here today to see one thing, and one thing only: We’re here to watch Taylor stab a bitch murderize an asshole we love to hate (and assorted others who get in her way).

So let’s get to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Music selection to accompany this chapter (optional, of course):

12:07 PM EST, Thursday, April 14, 2011

The car rolled to a halt at the side of the curb, the sound of tires crunching to a stop seeming loud in my ears along with the faint clunks of Lisa shifting through gears to put the car in park.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I unlocked my seat belt and pulled the handle for the door, simultaneously unlocking and opening it, letting the fresh April air into the car.

Everything seemed… sharper.
More real. More defined.

There was this energy in me. An electricity that had made me tap my fingers on my knee on the drive over just to be in motion, uncomfortable with being confined in the small space of the sedan. A pressure that wanted me to release it, to use it.

(_I could almost taste it_)

I knew what it was.

I just didn’t know what to think of it.

Anticipation. Excitement. _Longing._

(_Aching _Temptiness_J, needing to be filled_)

It’d been less than twelve hours, but the feeling I’d had before assaulting Bakuda’s apartment building was back, greater than ever.

(_I reveled in it_)

It was like the sort of anticipation I’d get before a soccer game, multiplied by a hundred, with an adrenaline high to match.

It was addicting.

(_I wanted more_)

“Hey.” Halfway through standing up and getting out, a hand had grabbed my left one.

I looked back, Lisa sitting there with a conflicted expression on her face, more difficult to read than anything I’d seen before. She swallowed. “Just… be careful, okay?”

I nodded. She released my hand, and I continued getting out of the car, stepping fully onto the sidewalk and shutting the door. The twins looked at me from the back seat, full of… resignation and worry and concern and mild fear, but also… trust?

I put my hand against the glass of the window, Sayaka mirroring the gesture inside the car just as Lisa started pulling away from the curb.

Taking another deep breath, I stood up straighter.

My leather jacket was zipped up despite the warmer weather, to keep my veritable arsenal of knives hidden from sight, the mask in the back pocket of my jeans.

Coil’s base was four blocks away, smack-dab in the center of downtown Brockton.

Technically, it was a sub-basement Endbringer shelter that —on paper at least— hadn’t been finished, but in reality it had, and turned into an almost sadly stereotypical supervillain hideout sitting under an in-progress twenty-story tall office building.

Well, I guess there were stereotypes for a reason?

I shoved my hands in my pockets and started heading south, towards the building. It was a really nice day, actually. The air was clear, the sun was bright.

A perfect day for an all-out assault on a supervillain base.
A block away from the construction site Lisa had told me about, I sat down at the bus stop, acting as if nothing was out of the normal.

For a moment, I just leaned back, tilting my head backwards and staying like that for a few minutes as I stared up at the blue sky, enjoying the day for what it was worth. Outwards, I probably looked calm and normal.

Inside, I couldn’t have been any more different.

I was ready for this. I could do it.

For Lisa. For the twins. For my dad. For my friends. For me.

The earpiece I had beeped, and I pushed the tiny button on the side of it to answer the incoming call.

“Taylor?”

“I’m here.”

“We’re at a park about four blocks east, next to the Century building, just so you know. You ready?”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“Alright. Let’s start this. I’m probably not going to be much help — Coil’s got the best security money can buy — but I’ll try to do what I can anyways.”

I nodded, though she couldn’t see me, and got up, resuming my walk towards the construction site that held the entrance.

Above towered a skeleton of steel and reinforced concrete that would eventually become covered over and finished into a twenty-story tall office complex for some company, but it was what was below that I cared about.

I moved down the alley on one side of the site until I wasn’t seen easily from the street out front, backed up, and then ran forward, clambering up and over the tall chain-link fence easily, falling back to the ground on the other side.

Debris and construction equipment littered the area: bulldozers, mixers, an excavator. Unlike what one would expect in the middle of the day, there was nobody working on the site, the city still in enough of a state of emergency.

Gravel crunched under my feet as I made my way over to a padlocked metal hatch at the edge of the unfinished building. It sat, set in concrete, surrounded by bright yellow signs proclaiming warnings of hazardous gas and labeled ‘drainage’.

Unzipping my jacket, I pulled out one of the shorter knives I had, pulled the lines towards where I wanted them, and then cut the lock off the latch. The hatch came up smoothly, like it was greased regularly, and revealed stairs leading down to what could only be the storm sewers based on the smell and damp.

“I’m in.”
“Alright, the stairway down, gate, room, door without a handle. Just like I told you.”

I moved down the stairs and closed the hatch behind me, taking a breath in an attempt to calm my nerves before everything started.

It didn’t really work.

At the base of the stairs and ten feet forward was a simple gate with metal bars that I simply cut through the latch of, the door swinging open and letting me continue down the long hallway.

There was a small room at the end of the hallway with a door I could see, and Lisa had told me there was a camera there as well. So as soon as I stepped in that room, I was going to have to start moving.

I stopped right before the room, out of sight of the camera.

“I’m in the entrance hallway, at the room with the door. Moving forward.”

“Okay. I’ve almost got access to the cameras.” Lisa hesitated. “Are you sure you can do this?”

…Really, Lisa? You’re going to ask that now?

“Alright. Just… god. Okay.” I could hear apprehension and nervousness in her voice.

I rolled my eyes even as the tension in my body reached an all-time high. Taking the small mask out of my back pocket, I pulled the straps around behind my neck and head, making sure it was seated properly and covering the lower half of my face. A hair-tie came out of my pocket and collected my hair so that it wouldn’t be in the way.

Taking one last deep breath, I drew my black combat knife.

(A brush to paint the world red)

Squeezing the black rubber handle as I held it at my side, I started forward, walking, my strides gradually speeding up and lengthening until I was running forward, my eyes focused on one thing: that door.

In. Out.

I arrived at it in seconds, and didn’t hesitate in slashing through the hinges, yanking the door off-balance and allowing it to topple open, revealing the interior of the sub-basement.

I was faced with a metal walkway inside a giant concrete room, crates and boxes all over the floor a level below, the room lit up with large industrial lights hanging from the ceiling. A dozen or so of Coil’s soldiers were down on the ground level right below me, sitting on or resting against the crates, just talking to each other.

They all wore the same uniform, shades of gray with a touch of black, with thick vests that had raised collars to protect their necks. Ballistic vests, just like Lisa had gotten me, though mine didn’t have the collar. Each one had an assault rifle within arm’s reach, and Lisa had said that the guns had Tinkertech lasers attached to them. Some wore balaclavas, others didn’t.

The walkway I stood on bordered the large room in its entirety, a staircase down to the first floor at both ends—where I stood and the far end to the right. Doors were at odd places around the walkway, and I could see a couple set in the walls on the first floor as well, though my view of those were mostly blocked by the crates. There were only a few soldiers standing around on the
walkway, and a couple looked to be guarding a door or two.

There were more soldiers in other areas on the floor of the room, but there were also people with clipboards and crowbars (workers?) and even a lady in a suit.

Everything went quiet when the door behind me hit the floor with an extremely loud thump.

“Hey!” One of the soldiers on the walkway had turned to look at me, and was reaching for the gun hanging at his side from its strap on his shoulder.

I felt a grin form on my face behind the mask as anticipation crackled through me, and a sense of release at finally having a target to point it all towards, of no longer needing to hold it back anymore.

(All I wanted was their deaths)

A single deep breath as the muscles in my legs tightened in preparation.

I looked, stepped, and I was gone.

She felt helpless, despite the fact that she was already doing everything she possibly could.

It just didn’t feel right sitting there in the park with these quiet girls, the weather too beautiful and nice, not matching the mood at all, not matching the utter massacre she was watching through multiple camera angles.

Taylor was a blur, an indistinct figure of red accented by the intermittent flash of silver and steel, painting a portrait of chaos and murder with bright vermilion arterial blood as her medium.

The mercenaries didn’t stand a chance.

She’d known that Taylor was good, but not like this, outclassing Coil’s people to the point that they looked comical. She had no training, no real experience, but her speed and utter lethality more than made up for it.

A minute and a half, and the upper walkway had been cleared, bullets starting to fly from those on the floor.

Without breaking stride, Taylor vaulted the rail of the walkway at a point where none of Coil’s soldiers had a good line of fire, and dropped the twenty feet to the floor, rolling to break her fall and bleed off the excess kinetic energy. She didn’t pause for an instant, darting around a corner and running on the side of one of the crates as she approached a group of eight so fast they didn’t have time to react properly.

Twelve seconds later and the eight men were dead, their mangled body parts littering the floor behind Taylor.

No pause, no break.

She simply moved on.

People were screaming by that point, gunfire creating a random percussion, lasers beginning to fire now that they’d charged enough.

All towards Taylor, who just wove through crates and boxes, wood chips and metal flying
everywhere, but unerringly tracking down every single person with that sensing ability of hers.

Lisa held back a shudder. She was more than glad that Taylor was on her side.

Taylor yelled, jumping from a crate corner into the first man of the third group she engaged, plunging her knife into his chest, not even pausing as she swept to the left and sliced through the next’s throat.

Lisa could see the men attempting to adjust their guns, to get a bead on her, but Taylor blurred, crossing the eight feet between her and the next pair in an instant, her knife slicing through gun and fingers alike before twirling around and cutting through the body the fingers had belonged to.

Lisa held back a shudder as the fourth man was cut, falling apart in separate pieces.

The fifth didn’t even have time to react before Taylor gutted him.

A portrait of violence and death. An example of Taylor’s lethality.

A showing of what lengths Taylor would go to for her friends.

The next seven minutes were filled with the same thing, repeated over and over until finally Taylor stopped, every single one of the soldiers and workers who’d tried to attack her dead and more often than not, dismembered.

Some soldiers had emerged from the doors at the sides of the room sporadically throughout the fight, but all on the lower level, and they met the same fate as all the others.

Not one of the civilians had been touched, though vomit was beside more than a few, most frozen in shock and fear sitting on the floor and shuddering. A few had managed to keep their wits enough to run towards the nearest possible exit.

And Taylor, Taylor simply looked around once at the position in the middle of the last squad of thirteen she’d killed—admiring what she’d done, Lisa’s power whispered—and looking up at the ceiling, blood spattered all over her, including her face and mask.

Lisa had a feeling that if that mask hadn’t been there, she would have licked her lips.

After a few moments, though, the girl seemed to regain her wits, looking down at herself and hissing, a muttered “fuck” coming over the phone line.

Taylor reached down and tore off a length of cloth from one of the soldier’s fatigues, one that wasn’t bloody, and wound it around her upper left arm, tying it off with her teeth.

Lisa’s eyes widened as she watched the cloth start to tint red.

“You owe me a new jacket,” Taylor stated calmly, as though she were commenting on the weather, clenching her hand open and closed as though making sure it still worked. All Lisa could do was goggle at the fact that Taylor had gotten hit only once in the bloodbath.

Combat precog, her power whispered. Extremely potent. Instantaneous reaction speed and perfect muscle control. Instinctive understanding of close-quarters combat and total efficiency in movement. Maximum speed bursts at over a hundred miles an hour.

God fucking damn. The girl was built for her abilities.

Lisa laughed over the phone line at the sheer absurdity of what Taylor had just said. “Taylor, I’ll
buy you all the jackets you want when this is over.”

Taylor nodded, and wiped her knife off on the remnants of the guy’s shirt she’d taken her strip from.

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” a smooth voice said, though it was tinged with emotion. *Irritation and anger.* The voice came from nowhere and echoed through the large room. Taylor straightened, looking around.

“Loudspeaker system. That’s Coil. He’s definitely not happy,” Lisa told the girl, and Taylor nodded in recognition. “I’m trying to find where he is, but I don’t think he has cameras in his office.” She flipped through the various feeds, before sucking in her breath. “Taylor, go up to the second level and over to the wall opposite the one you came in from. The door that had a soldier next to it. Go in there. Second door on the right down that hall. Quickly, I’m not sure if he’ll have anybody else going there or not. Probably will.”

Taylor nodded and took off, her boots leaving a trail of wet red footprints behind.

“Would you give me the honor of knowing your name, Miss…?” Coil spoke.

Taylor didn’t say anything.

“I see… Perhaps we could come to some arrangement. I’m sure there’s no need for any further violence or loss of life.” Lisa snorted. The words were just amusing when juxtaposed with Taylor’s blood-soaked state. “I’d be more than willing to offer you a counteroffer to whatever you are being paid. Triple seems reasonable?”

Taylor remained stoic, following Lisa’s directions to the door in the wall.

Lisa saw a balding man coming down the hall, heading directly to the door she’d told Taylor about. “Taylor, there’s someone in the hall, trying to get there before you.” The girl sped up, reaching the door and slicing through the deadbolt, pulling the door open while the man unlocked and entered the room, his figure visible from the camera inside the room now.

“I’m not quite sure what I’ve done to receive such attention,” Coil said, anger beginning to be replaced by concern that he hid well. Considering Lisa’s power and Taylor’s own empathic abilities and natural understanding of people’s emotions, though, Coil might have well been announcing what he was feeling out loud.

“No, no!” High-pitched yelling was audible from inside the room, Taylor speeding up and running the thirty feet to the door, the man emerging with his hand around a small, thin arm as he dragged the girl Lisa had seen in the small room out.

His eyes landed on Taylor, and his face visibly paled. Taylor didn’t even break stride as she stabbed her knife into the man’s chest, the man instantly releasing the young girl’s arm and collapsing, eyes glassy.

The girl latched onto Taylor’s waist, a hurried, teary “thank you, thank you, thank you” muffled by Taylor’s jacket and shirt, but still audible over Lisa’s earpiece.

Lisa flipped through the video feeds some more, paused, and stepped back, noticing how a set of cameras had a deliberate blind spot on a patch of hallway.

“I think I’ve found Coil, Taylor. Down that hall, turn left at the T-junction, right at the first hallway, and then there’s likely a door in the middle of that hall on the right.”
“Okay,” Taylor said calmly, starting to move in that direction.

The little girl tightened her hold on Taylor, still shuddering. “Please don’t leave me. Please. Sixty-seven percent chance I die if you don’t take me. Eighty-six percent chance I live if you do.”

* A precog. A precog that synergizes almost perfectly with Coil’s power. *

Lisa felt more than a little pity for the girl.

Taylor stared at her for a moment, and then nodded and sheathed her knife after wiping it on her left pant-leg, picking up the girl and setting her on her hip with her right arm like she weighed nothing more than a sack of flour. The girl didn’t seem to care about the blood on Taylor at all, and Lisa had to wonder what had made her like that. Shock, more than likely.

Still, Taylor sped up to a jog, and then a run, turning left fifty feet down the corridor and then right after another twenty, coming to a halt where Lisa couldn’t see her after thirty feet.

“Yeah, there’s a door. And I can feel one person behind it, about fifteen feet in.” Taylor said, Lisa hearing a light sound of feet tapping on cement as Taylor put the little girl down. “The door’s locked; I’ll just cut it open.”

Lisa smirked, and then shifted from the video cameras to trying to get into other parts of Coil’s systems. She’d bet her entire savings from working with the Undersiders that Coil had countermeasures and contingencies, and that at least one of those was some sort of self-destruct.

“Be careful. Coil is extremely slippery. I’m trying to get into his system and block anything he does to try and destroy the complex.” And steal everything he’s got at the same time. Well, everything except what was managed by the Number Man. They’d be able to claim that by right of conquest. “I’ll pay attention, but don’t let him talk. He’ll be trying to stall and leverage his power as much as possible.”

“Got it. Slippery bastard, don’t let him talk,” Taylor summarized.

“Yup.” Lisa floundered for what to say next. *Good luck?* Taylor didn’t need that. *Have fun?* that was almost guaranteed, with what Lisa had seen so far. She finally settled on, “Let’s finish this.”

I didn’t give a second thought to drawing my knife and slicing open the door’s lock the same way I had to get into the hall from the giant room. The little girl stood behind me, shivering in a mixture of fear, worry, gratitude, and hope.

It reminded me far too much of the state I’d found the twins in the night before. Cold fury crawled through my veins just thinking about it, only tempered by the fact that the man responsible for her state would be dead soon.

With that thought, I yanked open the door, moving in slowly, cautious of any surprises Coil might have had.

The room was medium-sized, not very furnished; it was bare cement like the rest of the complex, but with two chairs in front of a sturdy wooden desk with a pair of computer monitors.

Behind the desk was a leather chair, and next to that, standing, was a rail-thin —almost skeletal— man dressed in a black body suit with a white snake wrapping around it. The head of the snake started right above two depressions in the costume where his eyes were, and the tail wrapped around his left leg and ended at his ankle.
The right hand sitting on the back of the chair next to him was clenched tightly, and his posture screamed worry and fear tinged with indignation and anger.

I didn’t give a fuck.

His hands rose in front of him in the universal sign for surrender. “Now, please—”

“Ninety-nine point nine repeating percent chance you die here,” the girl behind me said with just a little bit of vindictiveness slipping into her voice.

“Surely we—”

That was all he got out before I let the lines rise up and moved across the fifteen feet between us.

Coil’s life ended with my arm outstretched over the desk and my knife buried in his Line.

The fury and energy in me seemed to calm with his death. I let my knife tilt downwards, his body sliding off of it and landing on the cold, hard floor in a heap.

“Wait, was that it?” Lisa asked. “Did you get him?”

“He’s dead,” I replied.

“Alright, good. I just got done working through his firewalls. It looks like he didn’t set off anything destructive I can see, probably because he was sure he could negotiate and didn’t bank on you getting him before he could talk. There is some sign of him beginning some sort of automated process to start erasing stuff, but that’s easy enough to kill before anything too important gets lost. There’s probably off-site backups I can get to with enough effort as well. Coil wouldn’t start something like that without—”

And then something roared, the floor shaking. The little girl I’d found ran up behind me and grabbed the back of my jacket.

“Lisa. What was that?” I asked, a little freaked out but trying to keep my wits. She’d said there wasn’t anything Coil had done that would cause something like that.

The blonde on the other end of the phone fell silent, and I could hear rapid clicking. “I’m, I’m looking right now, there can’t be…”

There was another roar, the shuddering stronger this time.

“Oh. Oh fuck,” Lisa whispered, and I could hear the fear. “Shit, Taylor, you need to get out of there now.”

“What? What is it?” I asked, already picking up the girl and moving towards the door.

“Coil brought the Travelers to town.”

Chapter End Notes

April 14th really just isn’t a quiet day for my Taylors, it seems. Seriously. Relentless had to deal with Deathwing, coming out to her Dad, and some other stuff that you
haven't seen yet, and AFHB! Taylor had to fight and kill Bakuda, kill Oni-Lee, find her friends, go up against Snake Boy, and now deal with Literal Worst Team.

The description of Coil’s base comes from 7.11, though I’m taking some liberties.

Next chapter is Indivisible 3.0.2, giving us a break to breathe a little before getting back into all this high-tension action. There’s a total of four chapters before the Arc is over and we get to interludes: Indivisible 3.0.2, Rend 3.4, Indivisible 3.0.3, and Rend 3.5.

Now, let me try and preempt some questions I’m sure people will ask. The answers won’t be coming up in-story, so this is really the only way to explain it.

Why didn’t Coil try to run? Well, he did. In his simulations. And in every single one, Taylor chased him down in under a minute, locating him with Lisa’s help from the cameras, and he died. With his death, the simulation ended, and as it was a shorter ‘timeline’ than staying in his office, staying in the office is what happened in reality, trapping him. In the simulated timeline that Coil started when he realized staying in the office was his best bet, he tried to shoot and kill Taylor, which just made her kill him faster, again ending the sim. And thus, Coil died.

Coil sent a message to the Travelers saying there was an attacker trying to kill him when Taylor entered the hall where Pitter was collecting Dinah, and that he would pay them to deal with her. The Travelers got the message after it bounced around some servers, and, well… Noelle’s not exactly happy that someone’s trying to kill her first believable shot at being fixed less than twenty four hours after arriving in Brockton.

As with Zizster and Transposition, this story now has a TVTropes page! Courtesy of Donquill and The Literary Lord over on SV.

Comments and critiques are highly appreciated, as I think you all know by now.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!