

Sunder 5.2

Despite any worries I might have had, Victoria Dallon did *not* come over and try to start something by the time lunch had ended. Amy and I — who had, kind of disappointingly, said no to my offer of martial arts training — got to talk completely and entirely uninterrupted for the remainder of lunch, which, when the bell finally tolled for us to go back to class, seemed suddenly like it was much too short.

Funny how that worked.

We parted ways for our afternoon classes on fairly good terms. Things were still a little awkward, and I didn't think either of us had quite figured out how to stay off the topic of powers, just yet, but I left the cafeteria with an overall good feeling. Now, I not only no longer had a reason to *avoid* the cafeteria, I actually had a reason to *eat there*.

It wasn't perfect and it wasn't easy, like it had been with Lisa, but then, neither Amy nor I had any kind of power that made it child's play to skirt around touchy subjects or find places of common ground to bond over. We had to do it the crude, old-fashioned way, which meant sometimes stepping on the figurative landmine.

My afternoon classes were just as normal as my morning classes. Well, normal for regular people, anyway, which meant no bullies, no pranks, none of the things that had been my everyday life for nearly two years.

It was a strange feeling, not having to watch my back every second of the day, but not an unwelcome one. It was also going to take a lot of getting used to, though — the habits I'd formed and the instincts I'd honed at Winslow would be hard to break from, but I was looking forward to it.

When the bell announcing the end of the day finally rang, I was, for once, among the students getting ready to leave, rather than already at home, and I found that I couldn't really remember the last time I'd stayed the whole school day since the Trio's tender mercies first started. It was another odd feeling, and it carried with it a faint note of pride at having lasted the whole day.

Mom would be happy with that, I found myself thinking. It was a bittersweet thought. She'd be happy that my education was getting back on track.

I made my way through Arcadia's hallways at a sedate pace, completely unlike the brisk walk at which I'd left Winslow two weeks ago. There was no rushing to leave and escape before the Trio found me, no hurry to get out before they could play one of their pranks. I didn't have to go any faster than I wanted to.

When I left through the front doors, it was to find Amy waiting on at the top of the steps, a backpack slung over one shoulder and the fingers of her other hand playing with the hem of her red cardigan restlessly, like they were used to holding something that wasn't there.

The moment she saw me, she smiled a tired little smile. "Hey."

"Hey..." I replied uncertainly.

I glanced around, but there was no sign of her sister. I wasn't sure what that meant, exactly.

Had they had a falling out? I hadn't asked during lunch.

"Headed my way?" she asked.

"Your way?"

"The bus stop," she clarified. Her jaw worked a little nervously. "I, uh, figured we could...talk some more. On the way, I mean, and while we waited. But if you don't want to, that's totally fine, I can go by myself —"

"No, no, it's fine!" I rushed to assure her. "I, uh, was actually going to run home, today, but I can walk to the bus stop with you, first. It's just, uh..."

I hesitated. Her brow furrowed.

"Just what?"

"Where's, uh, Vicky?"

Amy snorted.

"Vicky's *grounded*, on account of the stuff at the bank," she said like that explained everything. "That means something a *little* different when you live in a family of fliers. She's not allowed to go on patrol, she's not allowed to go on dates with her boyfriend, and except for taking me to and from the hospital, she's not allowed to *fly*."

I blinked, surprised, and in hindsight, surprised that I was surprised, because it *did* make a degree of sense. "What, really?"

"Yes, really," said Amy. "Grounded for a month. Then, when she tried to sneak out to go see Dean and got caught by Carol — uh, my mom, I mean — she got another month added to it. So, since she won't get to see her boyfriend outside of school for the next two months, she's taking every chance she gets to spend time with him — including having him drive her home."

Well, how did you punish someone with superpowers, except to forbid them from using those powers? I could only imagine would it must be like for her, told she couldn't fly for two months. It must have been torture.

I didn't feel *too* bad, though. That broken arm hadn't been fun, by any stretch of the imagination.

"Huh," I said. "And she's just left you here to take the bus?"

"I volunteered," Amy told me dryly. "Kissy faces, remember? You can just bet they 'conveniently' get lost, once or twice, just so they have an excuse to pull over and make out for a few minutes. In the choice between watching that and public transportation, I'll take public transportation."

I would, too.

I could only imagine what it would be like, to be stuck in the backseat of a car while your sister sucked face with a boy. How awkward it would feel. Especially if they were *Frenching*, ugh. I wouldn't want to be around that any more than Amy did.

“So,” she said, “we going?”

I blinked, then realized that we'd just been standing around the whole time. The other students had long since left, save for the handful that were probably in some sort of club or another.

“Oh. Yeah. Right.”

Amy turned and started down the steps, and I fell in line next to her without a word. The nearest bus stop was a few blocks over, but it was still close enough that it wasn't that far a walk.

We went the entire first block in awkward silence. Neither of us, it seemed, was very good at holding a conversation, or starting one, for that matter, which I could blame on the last two-ish years of Emma and her friends and Amy... Amy, I guessed, just wasn't very good with people.

I had to wonder how she dealt with the people she healed, in that case. That sounded like the worst possible field you can be in, when you weren't that great at interacting with others.

Finally, at length, she spoke. “So...”

“So...” I repeated.

“I guess...” She cut herself off and let out a self-deprecating laugh. “Fuck, I'm terrible at this, aren't I?”

I made an amused sound in the back of my throat. “No more than I am.”

“I noticed,” she said dryly.

Well, I have Emma Barnes and two years of hell as my excuse, I almost said, what's yours?

But that was unfair to Amy and it opened up a can of worms I wasn't ready to discuss, just yet. I'd learned my lesson with Lisa.

“Well, let's start with something simple,” I suggested instead.

“Like what?”

“Like...favorite color, hobbies, that sort of thing?”

Amy snorted. “That's a little cliché, don't you think?”

I frowned at her. “Well, unless you've got a better idea...”

“No, no, I didn't mean it like that,” she rushed to explain. “Cliché doesn't mean *bad*, just...you know?”

“I guess...”

I wasn't sure I did, really, but admitting it probably wouldn't be very helpful.

“So, um, let's go with that, then. Favorite colors and stuff.”

“Um, okay...? Do you...want me to start?”

“If you, uh, don't mind, I guess?”

“Okay,” I said. “Um. My favorite color is, uh...”

...I wasn't sure. Nothing really jumped out at me when I thought about it.

“...Purple, I guess.”

“You guess?” Amy asked skeptically. “Like you're not sure?”

“Well, I mean,” I replied a little defensively, “I haven't thought about it in a while, and lots of stuff changed after... Well, *after*.”

I made a vague gesture with my right hand, but Amy seemed to catch on.

“Oh. After your...*trigger*.”

“Yeah...” I trailed off. I didn't want to get onto that particular subject. “But, um, the hero I use the most is Medea of Colchis, and she wears a lot of purple, so...I...guess it's kind of grown on me?”

“Medea of Colchis?” There was a note of confusion in Amy's voice. “I think I remember her from one of my literature courses. Wasn't she, like, a *massive* bitch? Did a whole bunch of awful stuff?”

“No,” I told her, perhaps a little harder than necessary. “She was a victim. What happened to her was like...like one of the women *Heartbreaker* kidnaps. Everything she did after that came from the fact that she was forced to obsessively love Jason. You can't blame her for stuff she did when she was basically *Mastered*.”

“Oh.” Amy cleared her throat. “Right. Anyway. Uh, favorite colors. Mine is...blue.”

I glanced at her.

“Any particular reason why?”

She smiled. A soft, bittersweet, barely there thing that did nothing to hint at her inner thoughts.

“No. No real reason, I guess.”

I didn't bother calling her on the lie. If she didn't feel like sharing, I wasn't going to pry.

“Okay,” I said. “So, um, hobbies. Well, I...like to read. Um, if you couldn't tell by the book I was reading earlier.”

Amy smirked. "I noticed."

"My mom was a literature professor, so it was kind of inevitable."

"Was?"

"She, um..."

"Oh." A wince. "Sorry."

"It's okay." It wasn't. But I was better about it than I was three years ago. "I read a lot of stuff, but fantasy is my favorite."

"Like?"

"*The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* — the Aleph versions, at least. When I was younger, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, too, although I kind of fell out of them, after *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*."

"The staples of any childhood," Amy said dryly.

I laughed.

"Mine, at least," I said. "I've read the classics, too, of course."

"Of course."

"*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*. I never could get into the movies, though."

"Why not?"

"Too much Hollywood nonsense."

"Too bad, because I've only ever seen the movies."

I sniffed and lifted my nose in the air. "Plebeian."

I worried that I might have gone too far, for a moment, but Amy laughed, so I let myself grin.

"Seriously, though, most of that is stuff I've only read for class," she told me. "Although I'll admit to liking *Frankenstein* more than I expected. In a weird way. I mean, if you count shouting at the book that that's not how biology works, anyway."

I gave her my best confused look. "It's not?"

She snorted. "No, Taylor, it is most *definitely* not. I promise you that. You can trust me, I'm a doctor."

I blinked, surprised. "You are?"

“Um, well, honorary,” she admitted. “I didn’t, like, go to school for it or anything, but they gave me an honorary medical license so I could heal people. Makes it harder for people to sue me because I didn’t make their boobs bigger or fix a mole they didn’t like.”

“Does it really?”

She shrugged.

“I don’t actually know? Carol — um, my mom, I mean — is the one who handles all of the legal stuff. I know that I could get in trouble for practicing *without* a license, but hell if I know what that means for parahuman healers. Better to have all your t’s crossed, though, I guess.”

“I guess.” We rounded the last corner, and the bus stop was coming into sight. “So, what are your hobbies, then?”

Amy frowned.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I *do* read, a little. A lot of stuff by Edgar Allan Poe, although *The Raven* is definitely my favorite.”

“Once upon a midnight dreary,” I recited, “while I pondered, weak and weary...”

It got me a little smile.

“Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,” she continued. “Yeah. *Quoth the raven, Nevermore*. Always gives me chills.”

“A little dark, though.”

“As opposed to how bright and sunny the hospital is? Always healing people, always another person who wants this thing fixed or that thing removed or —”

She cut herself off.

“Sorry,” I said quietly.

Amy sighed. “No,” she told me, “*I’m* sorry. I can’t just shut my fucking mouth about cape stuff, can I?”

“If you...want to talk to me about it...”

She started to smile, then grimaced, like she was remembering something she didn’t want to.

“Thanks, but...maybe another time.”

We lapsed into another awkward silence, and a minute or two later, we were standing at the bust stop, beneath the sign that stretched above our heads. I turned to her and she turned to me.

“So.”

“So,” she repeated.

“Do you...want me to stay with you until your bus gets here?”

Amy gave her head a little shake. “No, don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. The bus’ll be here in just a minute or two. Besides, you’re *running* home. That takes a *little* bit longer than riding the bus.”

I hesitated. “If you’re sure...”

She offered me a tired smile, then wagged her hand. “Go on. Shoo.”

“All right. I’ll...see you tomorrow?”

“Same time, same table.”

“Okay.” I waved to her shortly as I turned, and over my shoulder, I threw, “Bye!”

I took off at a more sedate pace than I would have normally taken, to keep my bag from bouncing all over the place and the books therein from stabbing into my lower back. At first, I thought about taking the straightest route I could back home, but even though that was fairly long, it wasn’t anywhere near as long as the way I usually took in the mornings.

So, to stretch things out a little, I decided I would go around and swing through the Boardwalk, instead of going the quick and easy way. I took a right at the next corner and began the long, semi-circular path that would cut through the Boardwalk.

It would take be about an hour, at my current pace. Shorter, if I was running at my usual speed. Even shorter than that, if I sprinted all out, but not only was that bad for endurance, I had a feeling that it would probably, at this point, out me, if Amy’s comments about my strength and speed were at all accurate.

Once I reached the Boardwalk, however, I had to slow to a jog, and then to a walk, because it was absolutely *crowded*. Seriously — there were more people milling about than I could *ever* recall seeing in all my time in Brockton Bay, and I’d grown up, here.

What was with all these people?

I kept a steady pace as I walked along, looking about and trying to find some common thread to all of the men and women around me. A school trip of some kind, a vacation day at the local university, a particularly busy weekend — those things I could, with a few grains of salt, believe. It would still be strange, but not quite *as* strange, so I’d be able to shrug and brush it off.

But there was no indication that any of that was really the case. Nobody here was apparently here as a group. They were not all wearing uniforms, they were not all roughly the same age, and they didn’t

walk together as one, gigantic mass. They were just...there, going about their afternoons like they came here every day. Or like the carnival was in town and today was the last day.

Weird. Kind of freaky, too. There was a *reason* Brockton Bay wasn't exactly a tourist attraction. Hard to pull people in when the ABB and the Empire were cutting out sections of the city to fit into their little fiefdoms.

Well. *Used to be*. I hadn't heard about anything but some skirmishes between the unpowered thugs since the fiasco with Bakuda.

I kept going, walking a little more briskly — as briskly as the crowd would let me — so I could get out of there as soon as possible.

“You!” a voice suddenly shouted.

I came to a sudden stop, and one of the people behind me bumped into me roughly (“Watch where you’re going!” he hissed, but I paid him no mind). I looked to the source of the shout, and there was a woman, dressed in robes, pointing directly at me. She sat behind a table in a small, open tent decorated with patterns of stars.

I blinked and gestured to myself.

“Yes, you!” the woman said, wagging her finger. “Come here, girl, and I’ll tell your future!”

I snorted, turned, and started to walk away.

“Even if it’s about Lisa?”

I froze, stunned, as my heart skipped a beat.

What?

I whirled about and crossed the distance in what felt like an instant, and when I reached her table, I leaned forward and demanded, “How do you know that name? Are you a cape?”

The woman — and now that I was up close, I could see the dark hair and the makeup that had been used to give her skin an olive tone, and if I had to place her features, I’d peg her as vaguely Mediterranean — gave me a crooked smile.

“I would not be much of a fortune-teller if I couldn’t tell even the simplest of things about my customers, now would I?”

I watched her face for any sign of deception or dishonesty, but all I saw were the cold eyes that gleamed beneath heavy lids. She gave nothing away, no hint or clue that would tell me if she was a stalker or a spy or had just gotten incredibly lucky with her guess. And if she *was* some kind of Thinker cape, she was doing a very poor job of diverting attention away from her powers. She wasn’t even wearing a mask.

Eventually, when I found nothing, I had to straighten up and frown. “What *about* Lisa?”

The woman's smile turned predatory. She knew she had me.

"Come, come, sit," she said, gesturing to the chair across from hers. "Madame Simone will tell your fortune. As a show of good faith, it will even be free — as long, of course, as you tell your friends about Madame Simone."

I scowled and took the seat. Oh, I would *definitely* be telling one of my friends about this — Lisa would probably be very interested to know what was happening, here.

"There are many ways to tell a person's fortune," said Madame Simone. She reached out and smoothed down the navy blue table cloth. "For you, I think, we will begin with the oldest method: tarot."

She produced from somewhere a deck of large cards, briefly showing me the bottom one — a jester — before she started shuffling them.

"The numbers will change for more specific readings, such as romance and career, but for this, I will be dealing ten cards. Each one illuminates a detail of your past, present, or future, and each is inextricably linked to the others."

The deck was placed off to the side with a solid *thump*.

"Hold the thought in your mind," she told me. "Hold it tightly. Think only of your friend, Lisa, and how she fits into your life, now."

I rolled my eyes, but did as she said, concentrating on the memory of our last meeting in Ahnenerbe. The awkwardness, the broken trust, and the unwillingness, despite that, to cast her aside.

Madame Simone drew the first card, and in the middle of the table, set it down. It depicted a skeletal figure, swathed in black armor, sitting astride a white horse.

"Death, inverted. There is a great change that you are resisting, and it is the source of all your current troubles."

She laid down another card, this one set sideways across the first. It showed a man hanging upside down by his ankle from a wooden beam.

"The Hanged Man, inverted. You are resisting the great change in your life because of uncertainty, indecision. You cannot make up your mind whether to accept or reject it, and until you do, you can't move forward."

The next card was set next to the other two and depicted seven golden orbs, each with a pentacle in the center.

"The Seven of Pentacles, also inverted. Your indecision stems from your fear of failure, because you are afraid of what will go wrong if you choose poorly. You are afraid of failure because..."

She laid the next card under the first two, and on its face was a man carrying seven swords.

“The Seven of Swords. You are afraid to make the wrong choice, because you chose wrongly in the past and it led to a terrible betrayal that scars you even today. A cherished friendship you thought unshakeable fell apart, and you are afraid to trust again.”

The fifth card was one I recognized from my Arthurian studies, related to the depiction of the goddess of luck, Fortuna, in one of Gawain’s stories.

“The Wheel of Fortune,” said Madame Simone, and on the card she had set above the others, there was a great wheel with four men strapped to it. The one on the bottom suffered, the one heading towards the bottom would soon suffer, the one on the top prospered, and the one rising was finding good fortune. “In spite of your fears, you *want* to succeed, you want to hope that it *will* go well, and it is that desire that keeps you from rejecting the opportunity before you outright.”

The next card showed seven gold cups and was set on the other side of the first two, opposite of the third card.

“The Seven of Cups. The time will come when you *must* choose. It may not be for weeks or months, but there will inevitably be a day when you can no longer wallow in indecision.”

Then, Madame Simone laid four more cards, face down, off to the side and flipped them one by one. The first was of a queen on a throne.

“The Empress, inverted. Your unwillingness to act, born of doubt and fear, only hinders you. You must be more certain and confident. Seize the initiative, rather than following another’s.”

Then, ten golden cups.

“The Ten of Cups. However, your friends and family are an important influence in your life. You should not abandon them in pursuit of your goals. Keep them close and confide in them.”

Then, a king sitting upon his throne, a virtual mirror of the second to last card.

“The Emperor. Above all, what you seek is power and control — over yourself and over your fate. The only authority you want to answer to is your own, and you shun the yoke of others’ power.”

And lastly, six wooden staves, standing upright.

“The Six of Wands. Choose wisely in the future, and the goals you seek will be fulfilled.”

For a moment, as I sat there, looking down at the spread of cards sprawled out on the table, I almost believed her. It would be a clever way, after all, for a precog to pretend she wasn’t really a precog, by dressing herself up as a gypsy fortune-teller and passing her powers off as parlor tricks and “folk magic.” It probably wouldn’t be the strangest thing ever, either, if her powers used cards to predict the future, because apparently there were powers that were like that.

But when I actually gave it any thought, it was incredibly vague. Virtually any other person in the city could have sat down and gotten the exact same reading as me. There was no specificity that told me whether this was about Lisa or Amy or a person I hadn’t even met, yet.

A great change in my life that I was resisting? That could be *anything*. Moving out of the city, going to a new school, my parents getting a divorce, my widower father finding another woman to love — *anything*. And who *didn't* resist big changes like that? Who *wanted* to move away from everyone they knew? Who *wanted* their parents to separate? Who *wouldn't* feel like their dad was trying to replace their mom if he fell in love with someone else? There were enough movies about that kind of thing, after all.

The rest of it wasn't any better. Who *didn't* want to make the right choice? Who *wasn't* afraid of making the wrong one? And *of course* you'd have to choose eventually. For that matter, who *didn't* want to feel in control of their life? Who *didn't* feel like they needed to be more confident in their decisions? And you had pretty even odds of having a family and friends that at least *tried* to support you.

None of it, when I really thought about it, necessarily had anything *at all* to do with me.

Except the mention of Lisa. That was the *only* thing that didn't line up. Except, when I gave that some consideration, too, it was easy enough to realize that she could have been there at Parian's puppet show with us or been nearby when we ate ice cream together, or she could even have heard us in passing at Ahnenerbe. It wasn't like we'd been on the lookout for anyone who could possibly overhear us while we were just hanging out.

Maybe she'd even just gotten lucky.

Or maybe... Heh. Maybe the reason why she was here as a gypsy and not at a cushy job with the Protectorate was because she *did* have a power, but it was so useless that it could only give her the names of the three people closest to the person she pointed at. That would certainly make it easy to reel people in, wouldn't it? Just point at a random person, hook them by shouting the name of one of their closest friends or family members, then promise to tell their future. For a price. Special discount if you promised to tell your friends about her.

"Okay. We done?" I started to stand. "Because I've got to be getting home —"

Her hand shot out, lightning fast, and grabbed my wrist. "Come, come," she admonished, crooked grin in place, "tarot is not the only way of telling the future."

I rolled my eyes, again, but sat back down. I guessed there wasn't any harm in indulging her, but I wasn't about to sit there for an hour or two as she went through every trick in the book to convince me.

She turned my wrist so that my palm faced upwards, then began running her fingers along the lines and crevices with a soft, featherlight touch.

"Sometimes," said Madame Simone, "for the maximum effectiveness, you need to skip the cards and go for something more reliable. The palm is good for that — more direct, less bullshit."

She gazed down at my hand, humming and murmuring to herself.

"My, my," she said. "A life of great success and recognition. You will achieve much in your lifetime, my dear. Much indeed. But...these lines, I see. I see much stress in your life. Much stress. Stress and

conflict. For every success, a failure. For every windfall, a tragedy. You have been cursed and blessed in equal measure.”

She looked up at me, and that crooked grin became almost malevolent. “You will do great things, my dear. Great things indeed. But you will suffer to make them come true.”

A shiver went down my spine. Unbidden, I remembered the prophecy spoken to Cuchulainn: you will find great glory, but die an early death.

I pushed it down and covered up my discomfort with a scowl. “Whatever. Are we done, now?”

Madame Simone cackled and let me go. I stood the moment she did and turned to leave.

“Remember to tell your friends, deary!” she called after me. “Madame Simone told your fortune!”

I ignored her and left, heading back towards home, again. The crowd had started to thin, so I wasn’t held back as much as I was before.

What a bunch of nonsense. A waste of time. All of that hubbub about her knowing Lisa’s name, and it was probably either blind luck or a nearly useless power.

Although...

‘Sometimes, you need to skip the cards and go for something more reliable,’ eh? I’d have to see whether or not that held true.

Maybe something good *had* come of that whole thing, after all.