

Sunder 5.3

I woke up Tuesday morning excited for school for the first time in a long time.

It was a strange feeling to wake up, open my eyes, and look forward to the day ahead. For so long, I'd just been getting by, surviving, one day at a time, and then, after the Locker, I was waiting for the school day to end so I could go train my martial arts or waiting for the weekend to come so I could experiment with my powers. To actually *want* to go to school was...it was novel. New.

Refreshing, really.

And still very surreal.

A school where there were no bullies to torment me, no Emma, Sophia, or Madison, or their hangers-on, where I didn't have to worry about being cornered in the halls, belittled at every available moment, where my assignments wouldn't be broken or stolen or ruined in some way, where I didn't have to hide in the *bathroom* just to get some reprieve and eat my lunch...

It was everything I'd ever hoped Arcadia would be.

So far, at least. This would still only be my second day there; it was entirely possible that there was a clique of girls who would single me out, and while this hypothetical group could never be as bad as the Trio, that didn't make it something I wanted to deal with.

On the other hand, I wasn't without friends, this time. I had Amy there with me, I thought I could say. We'd run into a few stumbling points, a few roadblocks, but we'd really hit it off, and...

Well, if I had to put it simply, I would say I was cautiously optimistic.

I hoped to whatever god might be listening that my paranoia would turn out to be just that, but I'd spent almost two years learning that it was well-founded, and a single good day wasn't enough to make me throw away every instinct that had been ingrained — painfully — into my mind. How did that saying go? Hope for the best, prepare for the worst? Yeah.

In the meantime, I was going to try and enjoy the good times for all they were worth.

When my alarm rang, I rolled over and slapped it to turn it off.

With a low groan — muffled by my pillow — I pulled myself up and climbed out of bed. My mouth tasted a bit funny, but that was nothing that couldn't be cured with a glass of water or a good breakfast.

I slipped into a pair of sweats, taking a short moment to admire the tone and definition in my legs that I had spent the last three months earning, then made my way down the hall — making sure the grab my shoes along the way.

Dad was already in the kitchen and cooking breakfast, dressed in his usual bathrobe, by the time I made it there. He looked over at me as I came in, a cup of coffee in one hand and a spatula in the other, and gave me a tired smile.

I *really* needed to get around to enchanting his bed.

“Morning,” he said with exhausted cheer.

“Morning,” I replied.

“I made yours, first,” he told me, gesturing to the table. At my usual seat sat a plate of scrambled eggs and toast, still steaming. A glass of orange juice had been placed above it.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said gratefully.

Dad just smiled, and I sat down to dig in. It was as delicious as it looked, for all that it was simple and easy to make.

“So, I meant to ask you last night,” he began conversationally, “but how was your first day at Arcadia?”

I swallowed a mouthful of egg. “Good.”

“Good?” he repeated.

“Good. I mean, well, it was only my first day,” I hedged. “But the campus is nice, my classmates seemed nice, the teachers were...helpful...”

Unlike at Winslow, I didn’t say, but it didn’t need to be said. Not after it had all come out in the wake of Sophia’s death. Not after Dad had spent the better part of a week shouting Blackwell up and down her office over the miscarriage of my situation.

“I even made a friend, I think.”

“You did?” Dad asked, sounding both delighted and surprised.

I nodded into my orange juice.

“Amy,” I told him. “We met by chance a couple of weeks ago, but we only really started actually talking yesterday.”

I’d never told Dad about the incident at the bank, and I had no idea how I’d gotten away with it. As a minor, weren’t they supposed to have my father around if they took any official statements from me? But the PRT officer had just asked me about the Undersiders’ break-in, thanked me for my time, and left.

Maybe he’d thought I was actually an adult? It wouldn’t have been the first time my height had apparently made me seem older than I was.

“What about that other girl you were telling me about?” Dad asked. “Lisa, was it?”

“Lisa got her GED, so she doesn’t go to school,” I explained. “And, um, last week was kind of hectic, so...”

“Oh.”

“I’m meeting up with her this afternoon, after school.”

It would be the first time I’d seen her since Bakuda. Not the first time we’d talked since then, but the first time we’d be face to face.

Dad was smiling as he brought his breakfast over to the table and sat down. “Does that mean you’ll be out later than usual?”

“Um, probably.”

“Home in time for dinner?”

“Maybe?” I hedged uncertainly. I usually was — for a certain value of “usually,” since I’d only had the one training session with her — but at the time, I hadn’t had classes to go to, first. “I mean, probably? I’ll... Actually, I’ll try to be. Promise.”

“I’ll have dinner ready for you.” He perked up suddenly. “Oh, that’s a great idea! Why don’t you invite Lisa over to dinner, tonight? I can meet one of your new friends. I’ll even make you...” He faltered for a second, then ploughed on. “I’ll make your mother’s lasagna.”

For a few seconds, I stopped and looked up at him.

He hadn’t made lasagna in nearly three years. Not since Mom died. It was the dish she was most famous for in our house — *had been* most famous for. He’d tried, once, after the funeral, to cheer us up, if I had to guess, but all it had done was make us miss her more and neither of us had been able to eat more than a few bites before losing our appetites.

“I’d...I’d like that,” I said. “Yeah. Okay. Yeah, I’ll ask Lisa if she wants to have dinner with us, tonight.”

Dad smiled, a fragile little thing that looked like it might break if I reached out and touched it. “I’ll get the stuff for lasagna today after work, then, and I’ll see you around six-thirty?”

“Yeah. Six-thirty.” I hesitated. “Um, Lisa might have some other stuff going on, tonight, but I’ll let her know she’s invited.”

“Oh.” The smile wavered a little. “Then I’ll just have to make it again when she *does* come over. I’ll buy enough stuff to make it twice.”

“Um, sure. That sounds great. Thanks, Dad.”

“Of course, Sweetheart.”

I went back to my food, and the rest of breakfast was eaten in relative silence. When I was done, I got up and washed my plate and glass, then made my way towards the side door that led out into our yard.

Dad stopped me on the way.

“Got your pepper spray?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Be safe, Taylor.”

“Always, Dad.”

I left out the side door, and once it was closed behind me, I took off.

— o.o.O.O.o —

The rest of my day went basically the same way the day before had. No Trio, no bullying, and no pranks. No one was putting glue on my chair or dumping orange juice all over me or tripping me in the hallways. No one was stealing my homework. No one was cornering me after class and letting loose a stream of vitriol. No one went out of their way to make my life miserable.

Instead, my day was entirely without incident. I wasn't exactly making tons of friends, but I wasn't the pariah I'd been at Winslow, either. I was fine with just Amy, for now.

It was still kind of surreal, though. I kept looking out for people making a beeline towards me in the halls, or people coming back from sharpening their pencil with shavings to dump in my hair, or groups of girls who were heading in my general direction. It was almost disappointing when nothing happened at all, when none of those things occurred and no one bothered me. A relief, more than that, but still kind of disappointing.

Man, was that going to take some getting used to. In a good way, but still.

Also like yesterday, Amy was waiting outside on the front steps, again, playing with the hem of her shirt, this time. She looked over at me as I came out the front doors and jerked her head towards the road.

“Ready to go?”

“Sure,” I replied. “Taking the bus, again?”

“For the foreseeable future,” Amy said dryly. She started walking, and I fell into step beside her. “As long as Vicky's taking Dean's car home, I'm slumming it with public transportation.”

I smiled a little. “Makes sense. Oh, I'm meeting up with Lisa, later, though.”

“Lisa?” she asked, then scowled a moment later. “Oh. Right. Tattletale. You're still...” She trailed off and shook her head. “You know what? Fuck it. I'm gonna give her the same courtesy. I don't

know her as Tattletale, I'm not gonna treat her as Tattletale. As far as I'm concerned, they're two different people. Just don't ask me to like her or be her friend, okay?"

"O...kay," I replied hesitantly, because how else was I supposed to respond to that?

It wasn't like I could blame her, either. Lisa hadn't exactly made a really good first impression on Amy, and despite her situation, she *was* still nominally a villain. Amy was a hero who used her powers selflessly to heal people, so it wasn't like it was fair to expect them to get along.

But talking about Lisa was probably a guaranteed path to an argument, so I cast around for something else, anything else, to change the subject to. The only thing I could think of was how we'd met.

"So, um, you never did tell me. What you were doing at the bank, two weeks ago, I mean."

Amy looked over at me. "I didn't?"

"No."

"Well, you never really explained exactly what *you* were doing there, either," she commented wryly.

I flushed. "Oh, um. Sorry. If it's not something you want to talk about —"

"No, it's fine," said Amy. "I don't really know how you could have explained that whole mess to me, anyway. And it's not like it's some big, embarrassing secret or something."

"Oh."

"I was withdrawing some cash for a double date I was supposed to go on with Vicky and her boyfriend, that night," she explained. "Ugh. A *blind* double date, too."

That...I didn't see how that would be comfortable. Hell, I didn't understand the point of a blind date. Didn't you kind of need mutual interest to start dating in the first place?

"A blind date?"

Imagine going on a blind date, only to find out your date was someone like *Greg Veder*. I mean, Greg was nice enough, but he wasn't exactly the kind of guy girls went gaga over.

"Vicky's been doing that for *ages*," complained Amy. "Since I don't have a boyfriend and I haven't exactly gone looking, she takes it on herself to set me up with guys she thinks I'll like and drags us on double dates with her and Dean."

"You didn't like any of them?" I asked.

Amy shrugged. "I just wasn't really interested in them. Some of them were nice enough, sure, but that didn't mean I wanted to date them."

"Why not?"

“Why not?”

“Why weren’t you interested, I mean,” I clarified.

“I just wasn’t,” she told me simply.

I...guessed I could understand? Well, it was different for me, because Winslow wasn’t exactly the best environment for romantic relationships. For one, half of the kids were related to one of the gangs in some way, shape, or form, and I wasn’t interested in that. For another, it was hard to let my guard down enough to let someone in when it was entirely possible he could be in on one of the Trio’s pranks. Thirdly, it was hard to focus on romance when most of my energy was on just making it through the day.

If I’d been at Arcadia the entire time, though, where I didn’t have to worry about any of that, I couldn’t see myself having never at least had a *crush*. Hell, maybe I would even have managed to find a guy who liked me back.

“I guess it’s a bit easier for your heroes, huh?” she asked. “Falling in love at first sight, marrying their one true love, living happily ever after —”

I couldn’t help the laugh that slipped out.

“What? What did I say?”

“You don’t know much of anything about the old myths and legends, do you?” I said between chuckles.

Amy scowled. “Enlighten me then, oh wise one.”

“N-no, sorry, just — heh — that happily ever after stuff is just Disney crap, you know? Like Heracles? He *did* marry Megara, Disney got *that* right, and there *were* twelve labors he had to accomplish. But, like, Hera hated him and drove him insane, and in most versions, he killed his wife and kids like that.”

“Whoa,” said Amy. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Jason, of course, is a total asshole who ditched the wife the gods *Mastered* into loving him so that he could go be prince of some kingdom. The Trojan War started because basically the *same thing* happened, just Helen happened to already have been married beforehand. Cuchulainn was sleeping with his teacher, his teacher’s *daughter*, and his teacher’s *sister*, all at the same time, while he was *supposed* to be proving himself worthy to marry the girl of his dreams.”

“Seriously?” she asked incredulously.

“Oh, don’t even get me *started* on what those famous heroes got up to while they were away from their wives and girlfriends!” I said. “The Irish slept with basically *everyone*, including their foster brothers. Those Greek heroes? They were ‘teaching’ their apprentices all the aspects of being a man — *all* of them.”

Amy looked at me dubiously. “Wait, when you say ‘all,’ do you mean —”

“*All* of them, Amy,” I repeated. “Yes, even *that*. Then you’ve got Guinevere cheating with Lancelot, Gawain, who never seemed to be with the same girl *twice*, Tristain, *again* having an affair with a married woman...”

“Wow,” she said. “I guess...being gay was a much more acceptable thing, back then. The Greeks and the Irish didn’t seem to have any trouble with it, did they?”

“I guess?”

“And you probably have a much more realistic view of romance, huh?” she went on. “Seeing as you know better than most all the ways it can go right and all the ways it can go wrong.”

“I suppose I do,” I replied. “For all the good it’s done me.”

A long moment passed in silence. Neither of us said anything for several minutes.

“So,” Amy said at length, “what about you, then?”

I gave her a sidelong glance.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Any boyfriends? Anyone you’re interested in? Anyone you’ve used that vast knowledge of romance to catch the eye of?”

I flushed a little.

“No.”

“No one? No one at all?”

“No, no one.”

I saw Amy look at me shrewdly out of the corner of my eye.

“Girls, then?”

I snorted. “There’re only two girls I’m on even marginally good terms with, and you’re one of them. Not very conducive to having a relationship of any kind, romantic or otherwise.”

I knew who I could thank for that.

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t even really *thought* about romance. It’s just, well, there wasn’t really a...a *chance* for that kind of thing,” I went on. “At Winslow, I mean.”

“Oh.” Amy snorted, too. “Yeah, I can imagine. Toss a stone, hit a member of E88 or ABB, right? And if not one of *them*, then one of the Merchants’ customers, right?”

“Well, yeah, *that*, and, um...” I didn’t want to get into the Trio and their bullying, right now. “Well, I mean, it just wasn’t something I was focused on, really. And, well, I’m not exactly...a supermodel or something.”

I wasn’t as pretty as someone like Emma, in other words. And I wasn’t cutesy, like Madison. I was just...me. Plain, ordinary, unremarkable. Too wide mouth, too big eyes. Not the kind of girl guys dreamed about dating or taking to their beds.

Although... It wasn’t like all of my heroes were *virgins*, so...

Heh. I had a power that put me up there with some of the best heroes in the country, maybe even the world, and I was thinking about using it to find out what sex was like. What a responsible use of my powers.

For a long moment, Amy looked hard at me, frowning.

“No,” she said after a while. “No, you’re not. But most girls aren’t, you know?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“No, seriously,” she said. “Most girls look pretty normal, once you take the makeup off. Hell, most *supermodels* aren’t that phenomenal without a little eyeliner and mascara and blush and stuff to highlight the things they think look best about their face. Take it from someone who’s had to sit in a makeup chair a couple of times for a magazine spread, makeup? It’s usually, like, sixty or seventy percent of a girl’s looks.”

I pursed my lips, but I wasn’t sure I believed it. Emma... I remembered *always* thinking Emma was really pretty, compared to me. That was why she got amateur modeling jobs and I didn’t.

Amy gave me another long, hard look.

“Didn’t your mom ever —”

She stopped herself as she realized what she was about to say, but the damage was already done.

“Mom died almost three years ago,” I said quietly. “So no. She didn’t. The extent of my knowledge of cosmetics is the messing around I did with a...an ex-friend of mine as a kid.”

And playing dress-up with Emma wasn’t anywhere near the same as actually knowing what to do with makeup. Plus, well, when it would wind up ruined by the end of the day, there wasn’t much point to it, was there?

“Sorry,” Amy apologized just as quietly.

I blew out an explosive sigh through my lips. “Don’t worry about it.”

We fell into silence and didn’t talk the rest of the way. When we came upon the bus stop, there was already someone there — a brunette girl in a hoodie with headphones plugged into her ears and a

floppy, short-billed green hat sitting on her head, messing around with her phone. She glanced up at us as we walked up to her, but went back to her phone without comment.

“So,” I said, turning to Amy.

“So,” she repeated, turning to me.

“See you tomorrow?”

“Um, yeah. See you tomorrow.”

She hesitated, and I waited for her to say something, but she just shook her head and fidgeted with her fingers.

“Fuck, I’m terrible at this,” she breathed.

At least you weren’t tormented for two years by the girl you used to call your best friend, but I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from saying it. Landmines, I reminded myself. Making friends without the help of a Thinker power meant sometimes stepping on landmines.

“I didn’t exactly make it easier for you,” I told her.

“No, but…” She trailed off. “Look, I meant what I said, okay? You’re not ugly.”

I smiled a little, but it didn’t quite reach my eyes. “Thanks, Amy. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She smiled, too. But it was equally half-hearted. “Same time, same table.”

I turned and left, heading back towards the pier where I had first shown Lisa Nimue’s castle. My feet carried me at a slow and steady pace without, it seemed, any input from me. The streets were mostly empty, except for the occasional student walking home, although they got emptier the closer I got to the Docks and Old Town.

It was a bit of a rough start, but one of these days, Amy and I would make this friendship thing work. I had to believe that. I had to have hope it was true, that between me being socially stunted from Emma and Amy never connecting with anyone besides her sister, we could somehow overcome our problems and our fumbling and actually be friends.

The alternative was to decide it wouldn’t work out and spend the rest high school alone, but for the awkward struggle with Lisa, who I *wanted* to forgive but couldn’t bring myself to. That way lied my path at Winslow — doing nothing but getting through the day until I graduated, only without the bullying to make it worse. I didn’t want to go back to that, not ever again, not after I’d had a taste at what I’d been missing for two years.

I was *going* to make it work. I wasn’t going to let a few landmines get in my way.

Halfway to the pier, I stopped as something niggled at the edge of my senses. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I felt, suddenly, as though I was being watched.

I turned and looked around, scanning the street for signs of another person, but I was alone. There was no one else there besides me, and no hasty footsteps to give away someone who had rushed into an alleyway to hide.

I turned back around and continued on. A few minutes later, however, the feeling of being watched tingled at the base of my head, again, and when I turned around to look a second time, there still wasn't anyone there. My hand traveled up absentmindedly to the pendant under my hoodie, the one that would protect me from bullets, as though to reassure myself it was still there.

I was tempted to pull out a hero and check using one of their clairvoyance type skills, but that was paranoid, and it was broad daylight, too. If someone *was* following me, I'd be outing myself right in front of them.

Again, I turned back around and kept going.

The feeling niggled at me another three times on my way to the pier, and each time I turned to look, it was to find no one there and no sign that anyone had even *been* there. The one time there'd been a person, it was a guy walking his dog in an entirely different direction.

Lisa was already there when I arrived, fiddling with her phone, but she looked up and offered me a knowing grin as I came closer.

"Enjoy your walk with Pan-pan?"

"Lisa," I said without preamble, "am I being followed?"

She stopped, smile dropping, then surreptitiously glanced around, then behind me, before she gave a slight shake of her head.

"Nothing, Chief. You think you have a stalker?"

I pursed my lips and glanced back over my shoulder. There still wasn't anyone there.

"No. Yes. Maybe." I made a frustrated noise in the back of my throat. "Nothing concrete, I just felt like I was being watched for most of the way here."

Lisa hummed. "You haven't picked up any sixth sense type skills, have you?"

"No," I told her. "Although it's been something on my checklist for a while, I've just never sat down to do anything with it."

"Then it's *probably* nothing," she said. "*Probably*. It might be Coil, because this kind of slipperiness is his schtick. With his power, though, you'll never know unless he screws up, *big time*, or decides it's time to take you out."

I frowned. "You never did tell me what his power is, or even that you knew what it was."

Lisa frowned, then glanced around again. She leaned forward, close enough that only I could hear her. "You and I have the only ways into the castle, right?"

“Yes,” I replied.

“And no one else can get in without our...you-know-whats?”

“Of course,” I said a little defensively.

“Then, let’s get out of the spotlight, first, yeah?” she suggested.

I frowned and looked around, too, but there was no one. No one I could see, at least. “All right.”

I stepped past her and out onto the pier. A thought summoned the bodysuit beneath my clothes, swapping out my underwear. A moment of concentration, pushing power through the other necklace, and I incanted, “Let there be a pathway through the ocean.”

A pattern of lines, symbols, and circles drew itself on the surface of the water, then turned into a disk. I stepped forward and through —

— and landed with a jolt inside my castle. Lisa appeared behind me a moment later.

“So,” I said, turning to her, “Coil’s power?”

“Some kind of timeline-based power,” she answered immediately. “Or, well, precognition of a sort that’s functionally identical. I’m leaning more towards precognition, now, since your power apparently messes with his. He showed it to me, once, asked me whether he was making new timelines or just simulating them. Like I said, I’m leaning more towards ‘simulation,’ now.”

“So...what? He can simulate out to the end of the universe?”

Because that sounded...pretty powerful, actually.

Lisa gave a helpless shrug. “No idea how far out he can go or how many timelines he can make at once. But the way powers tends to work, I think he’s probably a pretty short term precog, like on the scale of hours or days, and he can probably only have a few timelines open at once. In fact, I’d say it’s more likely to be a low number, more like two or three. If he could have an infinite number of timelines going... Fuck, I don’t even want to *imagine* how incredibly powerful he’d be.”

Neither did I. How could you face someone who basically had an infinite number of tries and could be in almost anywhere at any time?

She shook her head. “Anyway,” she said, “point is, this *might* be Coil. But there’s basically no way to be sure. The only way to counter him spying is to be somewhere where he can’t see you. I’d say this counts.”

She gestured out to the castle.

“And what can I do *outside* the castle?”

Lisa gave me another shrug. “Not much, really. Your house is well-defended, right?”

I shifted. “Yeah.”

“Right, yeah, the Shadow Stalker thing,” she said. “Anyway. Precogs aren’t usually built for direct confrontation. That’s why he hides behind paid mercenaries and has the Undersiders to do his bidding. Even if he knows *where* you are, while you’re in your house or here, he can’t come after you. As long as you’re wearing that amulet, he’d have to get *so* overt that there’s no way he could hide his hand in it. And he *hates* tipping his hand before he’s ready.”

I scowled. “So, what?” I asked. “Grin and bear with it?”

“Basically?” Lisa said. “Your only other real option is to take the fight directly to him, and I don’t think we’re ready to try that, yet.”

That didn’t do anything to improve my mood. So, if it *was* Coil, I had to let him keep spying on me, or else go and get rid of him immediately and hope I caught the real thing in the right timeline? Those were *fucking terrible* choices. Not even really choices at all.

I grunted. Great. So while I waited for Lisa to figure out how we were going to beat him at his own game, I had to settle for letting a voyeur watch me twenty-four-seven, following me to and from school and watching me as I hung out with my friends. That was just *fantastic*.

“Fine,” I said grouchy. “Just... *Fine*. If that’s how it is, then let’s just...move on and do what we came here to do today.”

I dropped my bag just inside the gate entrance, then started to walk out into the courtyard proper. Lisa followed behind me, but didn’t seem all that eager.

“I know this is important,” she muttered. “I know it. But I am *so* not looking forward to this. My muscles are going to *kill me*, tomorrow.”

When we had enough space to move around in, I turned back to her and said, “All right, let’s start things off with a spar.”

I lifted my arms up into a boxing stance. Across from me, Lisa groaned quietly, but nonetheless, raised her arms up, too. She was doing her best to mimic me.

I spared a thought to wish Amy had come along, too, then shut out all of the unimportant things and focused entirely on Lisa.

No distractions. At this moment, all that existed was us. Everything else would just get in the way.

I kicked the ground to throw myself forward, and our spar began.