

Sunder 5.7

It was almost six by the time I finally made it back home, with Amy in tow. Dad's old pickup was sitting in the driveway, parked and empty and the engine already long since cooled. He must've been home for at least an hour, already, maybe more if he left work earlier than usual.

I hoped he hadn't worried about me too much.

Behind me, I could almost feel Amy's head swiveling as she took in the neighborhood. When I glanced back at her, she was looking up and down the yard with a puzzled expression on her face, brow drawn and furrowed and mouth slightly open.

"Huh," she said.

"What?"

"Well, I mean, I guess I was expecting some kind of...sign or something?" she hedged. "Like maybe...something you'd miss if you didn't know it was there? Of your Dragon's Teeth, I mean."

I smiled a little.

"I'm afraid not. It would kind of defeat the point, you know, of having secret defenses if they weren't secret?"

Faint spots of red formed under her freckles.

"Well, when you put it like that... Just makes me feel kinda stupid."

When we made it to the door, I stopped, hesitated, as I realized that we may in fact have a very serious problem.

In hindsight, I really should have considered it earlier, but today had been a long and trying day.

"Is something wrong?" Amy asked.

I turned to her, worrying my bottom lip. "Um, Amy, my dad... My dad doesn't *know*."

She raised an eyebrow. "About?"

"About me," I said. "Being a cape."

Understanding dawn on her face. "Oh. *Oh*."

"Or about the thing at the bank," I added.

Both eyebrows rose. "You didn't tell him?"

"And I don't want to tell him about *this*, about what happened today, either."

“Taylor, you could have *died*, today,” Amy protested. “Don’t you think that’s kind of an important thing to talk to him about?”

“Which is exactly why I don’t want to tell him,” I said. “He’s... He’s got enough on his plate as it is, and I don’t want to add to it.”

I’d told myself that I *would* tell him, at some point. After things calmed down, after I wasn’t jumping from Lung to the mess with Sophia to helping Lisa to dealing with Bakuda to trying to get used to going to Arcadia. When things weren’t so crazy or hectic, when there was just a... a *moment* where it felt like my life had calmed down enough that it wouldn’t make things difficult for either of us to hash it all out. When I felt like it wouldn’t add to the pile of problems we were facing, *then* I would sit down with him and tell him.

It just...hadn’t happened, yet. Maybe after this business with Coil was done... No, *definitely* after this business with Coil was over and done with, I’d sit down with him and explain.

Just not right now.

“So...don’t mention any of that stuff? And if he asks, we met at the Boardwalk in a...a coffee shop.”

Amy looked like she had something she wanted to say about that, and she even got as far as opening her mouth to do it, but before she did, she seemed to think better of it, scowled, and instead told me, “Fine. But this isn’t something you can keep from him forever, you know.”

I wondered, was that experience talking, or just common sense?

“I know,” I assured her. “And I *will* tell him, once this whole thing is over with and things have calmed down. Just not now.”

Amy let out a sigh through her nose, and I could tell by the expression on her face that she wasn’t entirely convinced, but she chose not to make an issue out of it. “Okay. Alright. So, if he asks, we met in a coffee shop on the Boardwalk.”

“During one of my morning runs,” I added for good measure.

“During one of your morning runs,” she echoed. “Okay. We met in a coffee shop on the Boardwalk during one of your morning runs. And then we hit it off later at Arcadia?”

Colonel Mustard in the library with a candlestick...

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay, then.”

I turned back towards the door and took hold of the handle, hesitating a second time. I glanced back over my shoulder. “And Amy?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Sure,” she replied simply.

I twisted the doorknob, pushed open the front door, and as I stepped through, I raised my voice and called, “Dad? I’m home!”

“I’m in the kitchen making dinner!” Dad yelled back from down the hall. “Lasagna, tonight!”

I wondered, briefly, at the coincidence that he’d be making lasagna when I hadn’t called to tell him Amy would be coming over — I hadn’t even told him I had a cellphone, yet, come to think of it, and *that* was its own kettle of fish — before deciding that it was probably just because it was easier and less expensive than going out to buy something else to make. Still a strange coincidence, though.

Then, a moment later, a familiar head blonde hair poked out from the living room and my brain stuttered to a halt.

A big, Cheshire grin pulled at Lisa’s lips. “Welcome home.”

I gaped. “Lisa?”

“Lisa?” shrieked Amy from behind me.

What the hell?

“What are *you* doing here?”

How the *fuck* did you even know where I *lived*?

Lisa flinched and her hand shot up to her chest, her *heart*, and — were those *bandages* on her hand?

What the *fuck*?

Dad chose that moment to walk out of the kitchen, drying his hands on his apron (it said, “I’m Irish,” on the front, and I hadn’t gotten the joke until halfway through middle school), and when he saw me, he smiled.

“Hi, Honey.” He glanced for a second in Lisa’s direction. “I see you’ve noticed our surprise guest, huh?”

I blinked at him dumbly. *What?*

“Surprise guest?”

“I found her on the front porch, exhausted, a little bruised, and skinned up pretty bad on her hands and knees.” He gave her a sympathetic look, and my eyes shot to the knees of her leggings, where I could see quite a bit of gauze — some of it stained red — and large tears in the fabric. “She said someone tried to kidnap her and she fell while she was running, so she came to the only place she thought she’d feel safe.”

“I didn’t want to be alone,” Lisa picked up, doing a very good job of looking insecure and scared. I wasn’t sure how much of it was real and how much of it was put upon for Dad’s sake. “And...and he knows where I live and he knows my routine and...”

An idea sputtered to life in my brain. *He*, she said. *Someone tried to kidnap her*, was the story she’d sold to my dad. Except what if it wasn’t just a story? She hadn’t mentioned any names, after all, and Lisa was plenty good enough to avoid a regular kidnapper that she probably could’ve done it even *without* the training I’d given her.

But... would he really... both of us on the same *day*?

“I told her she was welcome to stay for a few days,” Dad said, dragging my attention back to him. “If you don’t mind sharing your room with your friend, Taylor?”

“Um...”

I looked back over at Lisa, and she mouthed something at me. I wasn’t a lip-reader, so it wasn’t like I could read her lips like that, but even still, it wasn’t that hard to figure it out.

“Sure.”

We need to talk.

Dad smiled. “Great.”

“Um, Taylor?” a voice said from behind me.

I startled. I’d almost forgotten she was even there.

“Oh,” I bumbled, stepping out of the way. I gestured to Amy, who was still halfway through the front door. “Um, Dad, this is Amy. Amy, my Dad.”

“Danny Hebert,” Dad said, stepping forward to offer his hand.

Amy took it and gave it a polite shake. “Uh, Amy Dallon.”

“Dallon?” Dad asked curiously. “That’s, um... Hm. You’re not related to Carol Dallon, by any chance, are you?”

Surprised, Amy nodded. “Um, yeah, actually. She’s my mom.”

She’d probably been expecting him to recognize her as Panacea, but even if he’d had the inclination, Dad didn’t really have the *time* to follow the cape scene as religiously as some of the people on PHO seemed to.

“Huh. Small world.”

They let go and their hands fell back to their sides.

“Uh, how do you know her, exactly?” Amy asked.

“Oh, I’ve never met her, personally. But she works at the same law firm as Al...” Dad flinched, and his smile flickered and fell, “Alan Barnes. He’s told me about her, a couple of times.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lisa twitch, and I wondered if she’d made the connection. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever told her Emma’s full name, but she’d made accurate conclusions on less information before, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she had even if I’d never mentioned it.

“Anyway.” Dad plastered a smile back on his face, but I probably wasn’t the only one who could tell it didn’t reach his eyes. “I’ve got to get back to making dinner, so I’ll let you girls be, huh?”

“Uh, sure,” I said. “We’ll be up in my room, okay? Figure out where Lisa is gonna sleep.”

“That’s fine. I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“No problem, Sweetheart.”

Dad turned and went back into the kitchen, and I turned and addressed Amy and Lisa. “Um, so, my room is upstairs...”

Lisa grinned. “Lead on, Macduff.”

Amy just pursed her lips, like she wasn’t entirely happy to be in the same room as Lisa, let alone breathing the same air. She really didn’t like her, did she?

I didn’t really have a response or anything, so I just led them up the stairs and down the hallway to my room, where the three of us crowded into between my desk and bed. After the door clicked shut and I turned to face her, it was to find Lisa scanning the room like she was looking for something.

“Huh,” she said mildly. “Did you ever do anything like soundproof this room, Taylor? Something so we have a little privacy?”

“No...?” I answered slowly. “It wasn’t something I was ever really worried about, up here. But, um, as long as we’re not too loud, Dad shouldn’t hear us.”

“Okay. That’s fine.”

Then, without warning, she whirled about lightning fast and whipped her hand across my cheek with an echoing *CRACK*. I staggered back a step, stunned, as my cheek stung from the impact of what was very likely a superhuman smack. My hand rose of its own accord to cradle the spot she’d hit.

I half expected to find blood.

“What the hell was *that* for?” Amy demanded, trying to interpose herself between Lisa and me. There wasn’t really the room for it, though, so she wound up kind of halfway wedged between Lisa and the corner of my desk.

Lisa ignored her.

“Why the hell did I even buy you that phone if you’re not going to *fucking answer it?*” she breathed shakily, chest heaving.

She spun back around towards the window, raking a hand through her hair. “God!”

“Arcadia is surrounded by a Faraday Cage,” I found myself telling her, “so I always turn my phone off before I go to school in the mornings.”

Lisa let out something between a sob and a chuckle, shoulders shaking. “Of fucking course. A Faraday Cage. I-I really must be slipping, i-if I forgot about that.”

I wanted to ask her, to confirm the suspicion percolating in my brain, that it was Coil who had tried to “kidnap” her, and that that was the reason why she had come here instead of hiding out at her team’s lair. I wanted to ask why she hadn’t gone to the castle instead, where nothing except maybe Leviathan could have gotten to her.

But the words wouldn’t come, and I stood there, watching as Lisa cried quietly in front of us, back turned so that we wouldn’t see her tears.

“Taylor? Everything all right, up there?” Dad called from down the stairs.

“Everything’s fine, Dad!” I answered. “I just, uh, smacked my hand off of my desk!”

“Okay, then! Just making sure!”

My room returned to silence, and after another minute of no one talking, Amy finally broke it with a tentative offer of, “Um, I could...heal you, if you want. If I have your permission.”

Lisa let out a hiccuping sob and sniffled. “Y-yeah, I-I think I’d like that. Just... Just gimme a sec, okay?”

She turned back around, eyes red and puffy, then, slowly, she peeled off the bandages Dad had swathed her in, and I recoiled.

“Holy fuck!” said Amy. “What’d you do, get dragged along behind a speeding car?”

The entirety of Lisa’s knees and a large portion of her palms had been very badly torn up. They were ragged and red and inflamed and still bleeding sluggishly, or maybe bleeding again because she’d taken the bandages off, and they looked like someone had taken a cheese grater to them. It was all surface damage, there wasn’t any sign of anything worse, but there was no way in *hell* it didn’t hurt like a bitch.

“Tripped while running away,” Lisa said, offering a watery grin. “Unfortunately, the pavement is still the undefeated champ.”

She winced and held out one hand. “But these really hurt, so, uh, if you could, Amy...”

Amy startled and reached out to grasp the offered hand, then stopped, seemed to think better of it, and gingerly pressed her fingertips to Lisa’s forearm instead. A moment later, before my very eyes,

Lisa's wounds stopped bleeding and started to shrink, giving way to perfect, healthy pink skin, like nothing had ever happened to it.

It was my first time watching Amy heal something like this. My broken arm had been largely intact, if misshapen — no bone shards jutting out and making me bleed all over the place — and the only immediately visible thing she'd done for Vista was stop her from losing all her blood. It was quite another thing entirely to see the flesh actually knit itself back together, like this.

It was...different from how Medea's spell worked. No less wondrous for the lack of a lightshow and incantations. Magic of another kind, I might have said.

When it was all over and Amy drew her hand away, Lisa let out a loud sigh and some of the tension bled from her body. "Thanks, Amy."

"Uh, sure," said Amy. "You're welcome."

She seemed like she didn't know how to feel, like she wasn't supposed to like Lisa and didn't know if sympathizing with her and healing her wounds made it wrong to keep disliking her.

Lisa plopped down on my bed, throwing out her hands and leaning back to look up at us. "Right," she said. "I'm guessing you figured out some of what happened to me?"

"Coil?" I asked.

Lisa sighed. "Yep. I was meeting Brian and Alec for... Fuck, I don't even remember what we were supposed to talk about. Anyway, I was meeting them at this coffee shop on the Boardwalk, or I was supposed to — only they never showed. And while I was sitting there, sipping my coffee, waiting for them, someone *shot* me."

"*What?*" Amy demanded.

Lisa reached up and stuck her hand down her shirt, then pull a familiar golden amulet into view. "If it hadn't been for this," she jiggled it demonstrably, "there'd be a hole the size of a softball in the middle of my chest and I'd have died in silent agony."

My hand moved of its own accord to touch the spot where the sniper's bullet had hit me — almost exactly the same place as it would have hit Lisa. And Lisa noticed.

"Fuck." Her lips pursed. "You too, huh?"

"In the middle of an empty street," I confirmed quietly.

"Wait, what?" Amy demanded again. "Taylor, you were *shot*? And you too, Lisa? What the *fuck*?! *How*?!"

I reached into my hoodie and pulled up my own amulet. "Protective charms," I answered simply. "They stop bullets and other projectiles. I made one for myself after a gun scare at Winslow, then one for Lisa to protect her from Coil."

A complicated expression twisted her face. “That’s... Seriously?”

“You’ve seen me restore a missing arm out of thin air,” I pointed out. “I don’t get why this is less belie —”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on, *what?*” interjected Lisa. “Restored a *missing arm?*”

“Vista confronted me about Shadow Stalker’s death,” I told her. “The sniper’s first bullet took her arm off instead of hitting me.”

Lisa blanched. “Fuck,” she muttered, “he’s even willing to risk killing a *Ward?* He’s gotten *that* desperate?”

“You’re the one who knows him best, Lisa,” I said. “You tell me.”

She looked at me and her lips pulled taut, then she sighed. “Yeah. Okay. Yeah, you’re right. So...given what I know about him, if he’s going to go *this* far to try and get rid of us, either something big happened that we ruined in one of his alternate timelines, or enough little things went wrong because of your powers screwing with his that he’s gotten too impatient to be as careful as he’d like to be.”

“Whoa, wait, hold on a second, here,” Amy interrupted. “Alternate timelines?”

Lisa raised an eyebrow at me. “You haven’t told her?”

I fidgeted a little awkwardly. “It, uh, it wasn’t really something I thought she needed to be involved in?”

Amy was *Taylor’s* friend. Not *Apocrypha’s* teammate. We’d been pretty clear about that with each other, earlier.

Lisa snorted. “Well, I guess there’s nothing to do about that now, huh?”

I scowled and turned to Amy. “Amy —”

“Oh no you don’t,” she said before I could get any farther. “You’re not kicking me out *now*. You do *not* get to tell me *half* the fucking story and expect me to just up and *leave*.”

“It’s... It’s kind of complicated,” I tried.

“Then simplify it,” she told me flatly.

I bit my lip and turned to Lisa. She shrugged. “It’s your show, Chief. I already tried to explain this kind of thing to her, remember?”

“Okay.” I let out a breath. “Okay. So. You know how I’m an Eidolon-style Trump?”

“Something about using the powers and equipment of mythological heroes, yes,” Amy answered.

“So, um, Coil has some kind of power, too,” I went on. “Lisa... Lisa said she isn’t quite sure exactly how it works or what the limits are, but she has a fairly solid grasp on what it can do.”

“It was always gonna be either a Shaker power or precog,” Lisa added helpfully. “In hindsight, yeah, it was always more likely to be precog, but I’m fairly sure of it, now.”

“Right,” I said. “Right. So his power has something to do with following *alternate timelines*. He can... I guess, take different actions in each one and see the results, then choose the one he prefers.”

Because thinking about it, it’d be a pretty useless power if he did the same exact thing in every timeline.

“In real time,” Lisa put in again. “Or, well, I’m leaning more towards that than that he just sees ahead. If he could do *that*, then he’d be an even more slippery bastard, and we probably wouldn’t even be in as good a spot as we’re currently in.”

“And somehow, my power messes with his.”

“It affects the accuracy of his power’s simulations,” Lisa clarified. “No idea about the how or the why, but there are...glitches, you could call them, mistakes in his timelines that can pretty drastically throw off the results. As you can imagine, that’s something he really, *really* doesn’t like.”

I shot her a frown, and she lifted her hands up in surrender. If she was going to ask me to explain, then she could let me explain, damn it.

“So, that’s what the whole fiasco this afternoon was about?” Amy asked.

I chewed on my tongue, then looked back to Lisa, ceding the floor. “Basically? Yeah,” she said. “He wanted to get both of us at once, so that he could have us out of his hair. Unless I miss my mark, *this*,” she jiggled the amulet, “is not only the reason we survived, but the reason we even know he tried in the first place. *And* the reason he went for *both* of us. Since they were made with Taylor’s powers, after all.”

“I didn’t... I thought we’d have a bit more time to figure out a way to handle him,” I admitted. “A few weeks, a month or two... But if he’s going to go this far, I guess...”

It was going to have to be sooner rather than later. As I’d thought earlier today, I couldn’t afford to be passive-aggressive and let Lisa handle this on her own, not after he’d drawn me into it and nearly killed a twelve-year-old girl in the process.

“Days,” Lisa affirmed grimly. “Three, maybe four, on the long end. However long it takes him to come up with another plan. Since he’s failed the direct approach, the next step is probably to start using leverage to force us into the position he wants.”

A jolt of terror shot through my stomach. *Dad*.

Amy’s brow furrowed and her lips pulled into a tight line.

“Alright.” Determination set into her face. “So, what are we going to do about him?”

I blinked at her stupidly. *What?* “We?”

“As useful as having a healer around would be, I don’t think it’s a good idea to bring you onto the frontline of this thing,” said Lisa. “Plus, I *really* don’t want to have to deal with your sister if you get hurt.”

“He just tried to put a bullet in my...my *best friend*,” said Amy fiercely. Something warm bloomed in my chest, and in spite of the situation, I wanted to smile. “You really think I’m gonna sit around and twiddle my thumbs while you go and try to bring his Bond lair down around his ears?”

At that moment, Dad’s voice called up from downstairs.

“Girls, dinner!”

The three of us shared a look.

“We’ll finish this after dinner,” I said. “For now... It’s been a long day and I’m hungry.”

“Yeah,” Amy agreed awkwardly.

Lisa nodded.

“Sounds good to me.”