

Bonus Interlude 6.0: Spider's Loom

“Set. Install.”

Thinking about it, this was only even the second time Amy had actually seen Taylor use her powers. It was a much different experience, this time, watching it in the privacy of her room without the threat of gunfire sitting outside and a maimed adolescent girl stretched out on a table, compared to the frenzy of adrenaline and heightened emotions from the first time. She could focus entirely on what she was seeing, rather than giving it half her attention as she kept Vista from bleeding out.

It should have looked creepy, she decided. It should have been discomfoting on a deep and visceral level, because the human body wasn't designed to change that rapidly or that drastically, and especially not both at once.

Maybe Amy's perception of that was skewed, though. With her powers being what they were and all.

It was, at the very least, kind of strange, the way Taylor's body shrunk down and filled out at the same time. It was strange to watch her face smoothly transition from her own appearance to some halfway amalgam, where you could still see hints of *Taylor* if you squinted and looked hard enough, or to watch her chest and hips expand, or her hair change color and length from the roots out, or even the color of her skin shifting like someone was fiddling with the dimmer switch on a light.

It was even *stranger* watching her clothes change, shrinking and growing and flowing into new shapes, colors, and patterns as though it had a mind of its own. The cloth morphed and flexed, stretching out and adding material from thin air. Golden fixings bloomed from the fabric like flowers on fast forward, and precious gems swelled up from nothing like fruits, full and glittering.

The actual transformation didn't really take all that long. A second, maybe two. Quickly enough that it could easily be said to have happened “in a flash,” just without a big lightshow. But watching it, taking it in, it felt like it took much longer.

The woman that Taylor had become now was a Greek beauty about Amy's height. Her skin was a few shades above olive with brown eyes the color of honey and long, dark brown hair that framed her face. Her white gown was pinned at the shoulders by an equally white shawl or cape that hung to about her waist, and it was fastened under her breasts — large ones, Amy couldn't help noticing — by ornamental bands that were shaped like shafts of bone. Humerus bones, to be exact. Three bands in all, with a horned buckle or brooch splitting up the middle one.

Maybe it was bad to judge from a sample size of only two, but Amy thought that it was unfair that Taylor's heroes were so fucking beautiful.

“Taylor?” Lisa asked tentatively.

“Do you have the sheet?” Taylor asked.

Amy blinked and shook her head. That was her cue. “Oh. Right.”

She handed over the old, stained sheet she'd been holding, and the woman Taylor had become took it without comment, frowning. Amy wondered what she was going to do with it. Dunk it in some potion? Meditate with the sheet sitting in her lap? Pull a Tolkien and sing a spell into the cloth?

Taylor did none of those things. Instead, in a clear, decisive tone, she uttered something that sounded like a command.

“Argaleiós Arákhnēs.”

Immediately, the bands around her waist unfurled like the petals of a flower into four long, gangly appendages. They were ungainly and spider-like, with too many joints and too narrow segments that should have collapsed and bent under their own weight. Then the sharpened tips split into five — fuck, those were *fingers*. That meant that those long, gangly appendages...they were extra *arms*.

“The fuck?” Lisa gasped, voicing Amy’s thoughts.

Taylor’s lips quirked up on one side. “It’s not *that* surprising, is it? I mean, there’s only so many legendary weavers and seamstresses out there, you know.”

Lisa’s brow furrowed. “Wait. A legendary seamstress? Does that mean...?”

An eyebrow quirked up, now, too, as Taylor gestured down to her body, and Lisa started cackling. Amy didn’t really understand what was going on, but maybe that was just because she wasn’t exactly an expert on mythology.

“I don’t get it. What do extra arms have to do with a legendary seamstress?”

“It’s the *Spider’s Loom*, Amy,” said Lisa, still laughing. “Of *course* extra arms are involved!”

Which obviously meant something to her, but not to *Amy*. Fucking Thinkers. They got to cheat with their powers.

“I *still* don’t get it,” she said, frustrated.

“There’s an ancient Greek myth about a woman who got into a weaving contest with Athena and won,” Taylor said kindly. “For her victory, and for the temerity of depicting in her tapestry scenes of the gods’ cruelty and capriciousness, Athena cursed her to take the form of a spider and spend the rest of her days weaving.”

“Hence the word ‘arachnid,’ from the name of that woman,” Lisa added, still grinning. “The seamstress who beat the goddess of weaving at her own game, Arachne. Right?”

Taylor’s lips twitched. “You might even call her the ‘Orb-Weaving Seamstress.’”

Lisa laughed again, and even Amy couldn’t help a smile and a snort.

“That was terrible,” said Lisa, but her grin belied her mirth. “That was bad and you should feel bad.”

“You still laughed,” Amy pointed out.

“*Any* joke can be funny the first time,” Lisa rebutted. She turned back to Taylor. “Ready to get started?”

“Yeah.” Taylor nodded. “If you can... find some spare change, a few paperclips or something lying around? Bring them here?”

Paperclips, Amy wondered. What did she need paperclips for? Lisa didn’t ask, didn’t even seem to think anything strange of it, though, she just nodded like she understood.

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

And without another word, Taylor turned her attention back to the sheet in her hands, and then the extra arms started *moving*. They looked gangly and unwieldy and like they would clank and clutter and clash, tangling up as they got in each other’s way and tried to all do the same thing at once. Amy had thought for sure that they would be clumsy and nearly useless, although in hindsight, it was a bit silly to think that Taylor would use a hero who was so ineffective and uncoordinated.

Instead, the extra arms moved rapidly and with purpose, picking at individual threads and unraveling them with a speed and precision that boggled the mind. The lower pair grabbed at them, combining and fusing them together as they wound the strands into balls of cotton yarn and set them aside for what Amy could only imagine was future use.

Before her very eyes, the sheet was shrinking one weave at a time.

And Taylor... Taylor simply held onto the sheet with her one pair of real arms, brow furrowed in a look of concentration as the extra sets of arms pulled apart the tiny threads one by one. As though she wasn’t doing by herself what clothing companies dedicated entire *buildings* full of machines for.

A nudge in the ribs tore Amy’s attention away, and when she turned, Lisa jerked her head towards the door. “Come on,” she said. “She’ll be at this for a while, and we have a couple of things to take care of.”

With one last backward glance at Taylor, Amy turned and followed Lisa as she led her out of Taylor’s room and into the bathroom next door. Once the door had clicked shut behind them and they were alone, Lisa checked to make sure the seat was down, then sat on the toilet lid.

“Alright,” she said. “So.”

Amy folded her arms.

“Aren’t we supposed to be looking for paperclips and spare change?”

Lisa snorted. “Even at that completely ridiculous speed, it’s still gonna take her a few hours to get that entire sheet unraveled. It’ll take her even *longer* to put it back together. We’ve got some time. You, however, need to be making a phone call, so that New Wave doesn’t come barreling in here and accidentally get themselves killed on the front lawn like Shadow Stalker was.”

Amy grimaced. She was right, of course. Whatever this...this confusing *mess* of a relationship with Carol was, whether Carol liked her or didn't like her or...*whatever*, because Amy couldn't figure her out or what she wanted from Amy on the best of days, she *was* still a member of New Wave, a part of their team. Eventually, they'd come looking for her, and whether Carol actually cared or just tolerated her out of...of some sense of *responsibility* or something, it would *not* spare Amy the grounding of her life if she ran off for three days without at least *telling* someone.

It was just... Well. Her fight with Vicky had been tense enough on its own, but if *Carol* tried to press the issue, then that...probably wouldn't end well. For anyone.

So, while Amy *knew* she needed to call and check in, to at least nominally get permission to stay with the Heberts over the weekend, it wasn't something she was looking forward to.

"You're going to have to make it eventually, you know," Lisa prodded. "Whether you want to or not. Might as well do it quickly, like ripping off a band-aid."

"Ripping off a band-aid still *hurts*, you know," Amy grumbled.

"Sure," Lisa agreed, "but it hurts a whole lot less if you rip it off all at once instead of dragging things out. You're going to have to make that call eventually, Amy, so it might as well be now rather than later."

The worst part about dealing with Thinkers was when you knew they were right.

"Ugh." Amy grimaced. "*Fine*. I'll make the damn call."

She pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her contacts list.

The trouble with this, and the *big* reason why Amy didn't want to make the call, was that she had no idea what Vicky had told Carol or how much, or whether the PRT had decided to fill her in after the whole debacle with Vista earlier in the afternoon. Any of that by itself could make a drastic difference in Carol's reaction, and that was before Carol had time to think about it and form her *own* opinion about everything.

The game changer would be how much the PRT told her about Shadow Stalker. Whether they told her about the bullying or the attempted murder or even the locker incident Taylor had told Amy about. *That* would have the biggest impact.

Because New Wave was about accountability. The idea that capes couldn't escape justice just by taking off their costumes and going home. That heroes didn't get an automatic pass just because they were heroes. That even the likes of the Protectorate needed to be held responsible for their actions, when they did something wrong or illegal.

And how this entire conversation went would hinge utterly on whether or not Carol agreed that Taylor didn't deserve to be prosecuted for defending herself from a psycho with a grudge.

Carol's name was selected and dialed, and Amy lifted her phone up to her ear as it rang. Her other hand played nervously with the hem of her shirt, and she suddenly craved a cigarette to help take the edge off.

Maybe it was better that she didn't, though, she thought absently. She didn't think Carol even knew she smoked, and Taylor and her dad probably wouldn't appreciate their bathroom smelling of tobacco.

Although it might be worth it just to annoy Lisa.

After three rings, Carol picked up. *"Hello?"*

"Um, it's me," Amy said awkwardly. "Amy. I, uh —"

"Where — are — you?" Carol demanded immediately. *"Have you been kidnapped?"*

"No," said Amy. "No, I, uh, I'm at a friend's house, I stayed for dinner —"

"Are you under duress?" Carol asked, cutting across her. *"Tell me the passphrase if you're okay."*

"No, I'm fine, I..." Amy blew out a sigh and felt her cheeks start to heat up. "Just pick me up some peaches from the store, okay?"

She felt stupid saying it, and Lisa proved with her muffled laugh that it wouldn't have mattered if she really *had* been in trouble, because Thinkers were bullshit and could see right through code words and passphrases like that, but it seemed to mollify Carol, at least. Small mercies.

Great to know that she'd spent all that time when she was younger learning those phrases and memorizing them — *just in case*, as she and Vicky had been told so many times, *just in case* — and a teenage Thinker had them figured out in seconds. Awesome to know that all of that time and effort hadn't gone to waste on pointless codes that would never be used.

Just peachy.

Fuck, she's starting to rub off on me.

"Where are you?" Carol asked again, a little less insistently, this time. *"Victoria said that you were involved in the incident earlier today, but that you disappeared after it was all over."*

"I'm...at a friend's house," Amy repeated. "She...invited me over for dinner, and, uh, well, Vicky and I have been, um...fighting, recently, so I took her up on it."

There was a long moment of silence. Amy's free hand twisted the fabric of her shirt's hem into a wrinkled mess, and chewing at her bottom lip didn't help her nerves *at all*.

"Um, Carol?"

"This friend," Carol began, *"is she the other girl involved in the incident with Vista this afternoon?"*

For an instant, Amy hesitated, unsure of what to say or what Carol mentioning that meant. Her tone was measured and closed off, and it gave nothing away to Amy about her thoughts.

"Uh, Taylor, yeah," she answered. "I'm, um, not...sure what you've heard or what Vicky said or how much the PRT has told you —"

"I've been informed of all the relevant details," said Carol stiffly.

"O-oh. Um... So... Uh... Well..."

Was...that a bad thing? "All of the relevant details" *should* include all of the stuff about Shadow Stalker, right? The bullying, the locker incident, the attempted murder, and all of that. The fact that the whole thing was self-defense. If they'd told her everything, then Carol should, *should*, come down on Taylor's side, shouldn't she?

But if Amy'd been sure of that, this call would have been much easier to make in the first place.

"So... Um... Vicky and I are...kind of fighting, right now." Ugh. She'd already said that, hadn't she. "And, um, I... I need... I just need some time away from her, so... So I was thinking of staying the weekend at Taylor's. Um, if that's okay? If you don't mind?"

There was another long moment of silence. Amy's hand resumed its mauling of her shirt as she fidgeted nervously, waiting for Carol's verdict. This was the moment of truth.

Finally, at length, Carol asked, *"You're safe?"*

"Um, yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

"Everything's fine? You're not under duress or being threatened?"

"No, nothing like that. We... We just ate dinner, actually. Um, lasagna."

Another handful of seconds passed. *"Okay,"* said Carol.

Amy's heart skipped a beat. "Okay?"

"You can stay the weekend at Taylor's," Carol clarified. *"But I want you to call if anything happens. If you need anything. Understand?"*

"Uh, sure. Yeah. I got it."

"Have a good weekend, Amy."

It was said in a neutral tone, a little wooden and uneasy, like it was unfamiliar. Amy barely noticed, and even then, only because she couldn't remember the last time Carol had said something like that to her.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks. You, too."

The line went dead with a soft *click*. Amy tapped the End Call icon on her phone.

"Well?" Lisa asked, smiling, as though she didn't already know the answer. Fucking Thinkers.

"She said I could stay."

Lisa's smile flickered a little. "Yeah." She sighed. "I figured she would."

Amy crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t want me here?”

“To be frank?” Lisa shook her head. “No, I don’t. It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’re doing, Amy, I just don’t think you need to be a part of this.”

Well, fuck you, too, Lisa.

“Taylor’s my friend,” Amy said flatly.

“And this is about me,” Lisa replied, “getting free from a megalomaniac. Who has, by this point, by hook or by crook, enlisted the help of what is probably a high level Thinker. There’s no part of this where I either want or need to get you involved.”

Amy scowled. “Taylor’s my *friend*,” she repeated.

“Exactly,” said Lisa. “You’re here for *Taylor*, not *me*. You’ll excuse me if I don’t find that particularly comforting.”

“I’m not going to let you *die* right in front of me or anything,” Amy snapped.

Lisa grinned.

“No. But you wouldn’t mourn me if I *did* die. You don’t have any *investment* in this whole thing succeeding, except how it might hurt Taylor if we don’t. You don’t have a reason to care, otherwise.”

Which wasn’t entirely untrue, *and fuck you, Lisa, for saying so*. Sure, Amy didn’t particularly *like* Lisa, even though they were both Taylor’s friend, and sure, Amy herself wouldn’t shed any tears or lose any sleep if Lisa died during this whole debacle, but... But there *was* more to this than Lisa, wasn’t there? More to this than just Taylor, either.

“There’s a little girl we need to rescue.”

A little girl who had been kidnapped by an asshole who only wanted to use her for her powers — who only *cared* about her powers, who probably didn’t care *what* he had to do to get her to use them for his benefit. Rescuing that little girl... *That* was a good enough reason to care, wasn’t it? *That* was plenty of reason to be *invested* in the success of this thing against Coil.

Lisa’s grin widened. “There we go. That’s not a bad start. Why do you care, though?”

Why *did* she care? Why should she risk her life for some girl she’d never met by going into the lair of a heavily armed supervillain with his own private army?

“Because...” Amy began slowly. Something stirred in her chest. Something she’d forgotten, lost, somewhere along the way. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Because it was the sort of thing a *hero* did. Rescuing the damsel in distress. Saving the princess from the lair of the dragon. In the real world... Yeah. Saving a little girl who’d been kidnapped by a supervillain was just that sort of thing.

And it was something Amy could do, here. Something that it was within her power to do, now. Maybe she wouldn't be punching out the supervillain herself, and that was fine, but rescuing that little girl? *That* was something Amy could do, something that didn't involve sitting in the hospital and curing cancer for the thousandth time.

Amy could finally, *finally* be a *real* hero.

For an instant, Lisa looked bewildered, like she hadn't expected that answer, then, she threw her head back and laughed.

"Wow," she said, still grinning. "I really underestimated you, Amy. I really did. Okay. I *still* can't say I'm really comfortable with this whole thing, but I'll concede, here."

"...Okay. Good."

Amy wasn't sure what else to say to that. "Thank you?" didn't seem like it fit.

"Alright." Lisa stood off of the toilet seat and smoothed out her skirt. "Let's see if we can't find some paper clips and spare change."

"You know, you never did say what those are supposed to be for."

Lisa just grinned and flashed Amy the golden amulet around her neck. "What'd you think *this* is made out of?"

Amy blinked, stunned. "Really?"

"Haven't you been paying attention?" Lisa asked. "Taylor's powers are *bullshit*."