

Sunder 5.1

Let there be Five-fold Perfections upon each Repetition.

Class was over in five minutes, and all I could think was, *An hour is way too long for lunch.*

I had no idea what I was supposed to do with that much time when it would only take me ten or fifteen minutes to eat my food. How was I supposed to spend all of that extra time? This was my first day at Arcadia, and I didn't know anyone here, so it wasn't like I had any friends to talk to. That girl who had shown me around this morning had been nice enough (what was her name? Chloe? Claire? Kim?), but it wasn't like we had exchanged friendship bracelets and promised to be BFFs or anything like that.

How ironic. I'd finally gotten into Arcadia, the best school in the city, and even with the Trio nowhere in sight, lunch was *still* my least favorite period of the day.

I let out a breath through my nose as I watched the teacher, Mister Zimmerman, a stocky black man with close-cropped hair and a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard, babble on about whatever the topic was, but I wasn't really paying him any attention. The notebook spread open on my desk was empty, but for a few doodles I'd absentmindedly drawn earlier.

It wasn't like I wasn't grateful to Armsmaster and the Protectorate and the PRT, or whatever combination thereof, for fast-tracking my application. Being bored at Arcadia was a thousand times better than dodging bullies at Winslow. It was just that...it didn't *feel* all that different, in some ways. Even if one was a thousand times better, I was still alone, either way. The only thing different was the reason why.

"As a show of good faith, we'll be fast-tracking your application to Arcadia," Armsmaster had told me, just before I left for home that night. Dad had apparently put one in before the whole fiasco with Bakuda, but those normally took weeks or months or even until the next school year to be *considered*, let alone accepted, so at the time, to hear that they were going to push mine through as fast as possible had been a silver lining to an otherwise horrible day.

Except, now that I was here, it didn't really feel like something to get excited about.

Maybe that was just me complaining, though. School have never been...fun, exactly, ever since Emma and her flunkies had decided I was their own, personal verbal punching bag, so I'd kinda gotten used to just...dealing and surviving and getting through the day. There'd been nothing to enjoy, not when I had to always be prepared for whatever prank was waiting for me just around the corner.

I was at Arcadia, now, and Emma could never bother me again, and even if I knew that intellectually, I couldn't help but feel like it was only a matter of time until the other shoe dropped.

The bell rang suddenly, jerking me from my thoughts. Around me, everyone started shutting their books and their notepads and stacking them for easier carrying. Belatedly, I began to follow suit, and up at the front, Mister Zimmerman raised his voice.

“All right, class!” he called. “Remember, there’s a test on this next Monday! I expect you to finish the reading assignments on your own time, because we *will* be going over everything for the rest of the week!”

The words hung in the air for a moment, and everyone in the class waited impatiently to see if there was anything else, then he smiled, gestured to the door with his head, and said, “Okay, get out of here.”

As my classmates surged to their feet and started the stampede for the door, he added, “And have a good lunch!”

I got up a little more sedately. It felt weird not to be rushing to be one of the first ones out, so that I could lose Madison or one of the Trio’s other, peripheral flunkies and find somewhere to eat where I was least likely to be disturbed. As I slung my bag over my shoulder, however, I decided that even if it was weird, I much preferred it to the alternative.

I was just about to join the throng of students when I heard Mister Zimmerman again. “Miss Hebert, if you could stay behind a moment?”

For an instant, I froze and my heart skipped a beat, before ratcheting up several notches. I was suddenly reminded uncomfortably of Mister Gladly’s half-hearted, abortive attempt at “help” two weeks ago, of his offer of assistance and the subsequent *abandonment* not ten minutes later. Every instinct honed at Winslow told me I should pretend I hadn’t heard and keep going.

It was a conscious effort to remember that this was *Arcadia*. Not only was it the best school in the city, but I’d only been here a few *hours*, and I didn’t know anyone here. There were no bullies (yet) for him to offer his help with. More likely, he just wanted to discuss classwork or my test scores, and that...that was easy .

So, I stepped away from the throng and back into an empty row of desks, waiting until the crowd had pushed its way through the classroom door, until the last few stragglers had finished asking whatever they needed from him. When at last even those handful had gone, he turned to me and gestured for me to come closer.

I hesitated for a moment, then walked up to the front of his desk, where he had sat down. He folded his hands as I approached and looked up at me, an expression of utter seriousness on his face.

“So,” said Mister Zimmerman.

I swallowed nervously. “Yes?”

He worked his lips, as though considering how to phrase what he wanted to say.

“I’m not sure anyone has informed you, yet,” he admitted at length, “but I and your other teachers have already been told about your situation in Winslow.”

...I had no idea how to react to that. “What?”

“When the school was asked to accept your application as swiftly as possible and get you settled in as soon as we could,” he clarified, “the principal — who forwarded it to all of your teachers — received a report regarding the...occurrences at Winslow that led to your transfer. Not all of the fine details, of course, barring the January incident —”

Something in my stomach squirmed. He was talking about the Locker.

“— but we’re well aware of the broad strokes regarding your circumstances.”

“O-oh.”

“So we understand that this transitionary period might be a little rough for you,” he went on. “To help make it as smooth as possible, Principal Howell has asked that we keep an eye on you and give you a little slack, where possible. So, if you’re not comfortable taking next Monday’s test, I’m willing to let you skip it.”

I blinked, surprised, and more than a little thrown by an offer like that. At Winslow...I didn’t think I’d *ever* had a teacher do something like this.

It was *surreal*.

“O-oh. Okay. Um, thank you.”

“*However*,” he stressed, looking me in the eye, “I *do* expect you to take, *and* pass, the final exam at the end of next month. In the meantime, if you need anything or you have any concerns, feel free to bring them to me and I’ll do my best to help you. Okay?”

I felt myself nod.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’ll do that.”

“Okay, then.” He nodded, too. “Now, I think I’ve kept you from your lunch long enough. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Uh, right.”

I hesitated for a moment, waiting for him to say something else or drop another bomb on me, but he turned away and started organizing his papers, so I readjusted the strap of my bag, turned to the door, and left.

The dream-like haze that swam about my head followed me all the way to the cafeteria. It still didn’t feel quite real, to have a teacher actually, honestly offer me aid. I’d gotten so used to teachers never lifting so much as a finger to help, and on the rare occasion one of them *did*, it was often like Mister Gladly’s — half-hearted, ineffectual, and utterly useless.

But now, there were no pranks waiting around every corner, no tittering girls do their best to ruin my day, no personal attacks or attempts at stealing or sabotaging my work — *no Trio*. And the teachers were helpful and nice and actually seemed to care about doing their jobs rather than just collecting a paycheck or being popular...

I honestly didn't know what to think. A part of me believed this had to be a dream, that I would get through the day at Arcadia, a normal, bully-free day where I didn't have to worry about spitballs or juice being poured over me or snide comments in the halls, only to wake up in my bed and realize it was time to go back to Winslow.

The cacophony of voices that filled the cafeteria was audible long before I got there, and at the last stretch, the final corner I needed to turn, the feeling surreality faded and I hesitated, biting my lip, as long-honed habit stayed my feet.

It had been almost two years since I'd last eaten inside a cafeteria, and with good reason: it was too open and I was too easy a target. More than once, in those early days, had Emma or one of her friends "accidentally" spilled their trays all over me, or they sat down at the same table and loudly talked about how I was a loser as though I wasn't there, and when the indirect method wasn't fun, they insulted me outright.

It hadn't taken me long to start eating in bathrooms or on the roof or in empty classrooms, where I wouldn't be noticed and they couldn't easily find me. It had become so ingrained that I probably would have done it here just on instinct, if I had known the school better than I did.

But...this was Arcadia, I told myself. There was no Trio here to torture me. No bullies to ruin my lunch. I could eat wherever I damn well *pleased*, and I wasn't about to let the mere *memory* of my tormentors drive me away from *anywhere*.

So, I squared my shoulders, set my mouth into a grim, determined line, and steeled myself, and as I turned the corner, walked down the hall, and entered the cafeteria, I decided that there was nothing in this school that was going to prevent me from eating there ever again. *Nothing*.

The moment I was inside, I cast around the room for a place to sit, an empty spot where I could eat in peace. Really, any empty chair would do, as long as I wasn't running afoul of someone's tightly knit clique.

Halfway through my search, I froze.

...Nothing except that, I amended.

Because floating along a few inches off the ground, chatting it up with a handsome blond boy as she carried her tray, was Victoria Dallon.

Glory Girl.

Who I had not been on particularly good terms with, last time we'd seen each other. Considering we had both tried to punch each other's faces in, that...was probably the understatement of the century.

Would she try and pick a fight with me? I had no idea. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to avoid blowing my secret identity out of the water if she did.

Just as importantly, if Glory Girl was here, then...

A thrill of nervousness shot through my belly.

Amy.

In hindsight, it was really stupid that I hadn't considered it before. After all, New Wave certainly wouldn't send their kids to *Winslow*, of all places. And since it was something of an open secret that the Wards went to Arcadia, it only made sense that the Dallons did, too.

Great. Just great. What was I supposed to do now?

I was halfway through turning around to leave when I caught myself and stopped.

Was my resolve really that flimsy? Was my courage really that easily dispelled?

I had faced down Lung and come out the victor. I had given Sophia and Emma a tongue-lashing that had left them *speechless*. I had fought an Alexandria-style Brute with nothing but my own strength and speed. I had faced a mad bomb Tinker on her own turf and a teleporting assassin who nearly *killed* me.

No, I decided, and I spun back around on my heel, then strode with purpose towards an empty seat. I said that *nothing* was going to stop me from eating my lunch in here from now on, and so *nothing* was going to stop me.

I sat down with a finality, plopping myself forcefully in the chair I'd chosen, and perhaps more aggressively than necessary, I grabbed my lunchbag and started pulling out my lunch. The poor apple that was my first victim had done nothing to deserve the viciousness with which I bit into it, except that it happened to be the first thing I laid my hands on.

In spite of any worries I might have had, no one came to my table to bother me while I ate, not even Victoria Dallon, and slowly, I started to relax. By the time I was halfway through my lunch, I'd eased off of the brisk, savage pace into something more reasonable — and for the first time in nearly two years, I had the chance to really, truly enjoy eating it, rather than wolfing it down as quickly as possible.

I was still done fairly quickly. Old habits were hard to break, after all.

And, just as I'd been thinking in class, once I was finished, I had nearly three-quarters of an hour to spend and not much to spend it on. The empty seats around me were little more comfort than the empty stalls of the girls' bathrooms at Winslow.

So, without anything else to do, I retreated back into a familiar comfort — a novel, a copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, actually, so it also doubled as research for my heroes. I pulled it out, propped it open on the table in front of me, and started to read.

I had to admit, going into it, I'd expected I would like Lancelot or Tristan more than the others, mostly because...well, it was kind of a stupid reason, but because their stories were centered around romance and love a lot. And what little girl *didn't* dream of being a princess swept off her feet by a knight on a white horse coming to slay the dragon?

The reality of it, of what was *really* in those stories, wasn't that neat or clean. Lancelot was an adulterer, and kind of selfish about it, too. It was also strongly implied that Lancelot's affair with Guinevere was one of the major reasons why Camelot fell, and when a lot of versions of the story told of Arthur's kingdom as some utopia on Earth, that made Lancelot...kind of a dick, really. The prosperity of Arthur's benevolent rule, ruined because one guy couldn't keep it in his pants.

To be fair, it wasn't like Gawain was really a beacon of saintly virtue. Sure, he was a lot less selfish than Lancelot was about things like love — at least, in most of the stories, and all of the ones I'd managed to read — but he was also what my peers would call “a player.” So while I much preferred Gawain's more chivalrous, pure-hearted nature, I wouldn't want to be his love interest, either, because that seemed to change in every single story.

For what it was worth, Lancelot, at least, only had eyes for one woman.

“Uh, hey.”

A timid voice broke me out of my thoughts, and I blinked away from my book to look up into the face of the very person I'd been dreading seeing: Amy Dallon.

My heart skipped a beat. Amy fidgeted a little nervously under my stare.

“Mind if I sit here?” she asked, gesturing to the empty chair across from me.

It was then that I realized she was carrying a tray full of food with her, and when I glanced over, it was to find that the line of people waiting to get their food was only now starting to shrink.

I looked back at Amy. There were dark circles under her eyes, which she hadn't seemed to try hiding with makeup, and her face was drawn and pale, setting her freckles in stark relief against her nose and cheeks. She had the appearance of someone who hadn't slept well in a long time. I found myself wondering if that was new, or if she'd been like that from the start and I just hadn't noticed it before.

Belatedly, as she started to fidget, I remembered that she'd asked to sit with me, and I hurried to answer her, “Um, yeah, sure.”

She hesitated for only a moment, then set her tray down and slid into the chair across from me.

“So,” she said.

“So,” I repeated, for lack of anything better to say.

My stomach churned. Lisa *had* said that Amy would eventually come back, try again, but if Oni Lee had proven anything, it was that Lisa wasn't *always* right.

“So,” I tried, “you're not going to sit with...with your sister?”

I wasn't sure, exactly, what to call Victoria Dallon. “Vicky” seemed rather personal, an assumption of intimacy, and we...weren't exactly on speaking terms.

Amy snorted. “No,” she told me with an undercurrent of disgust. “She and Dean are busy making kissy faces at each other. I wanted to eat, not lose my appetite.”

As though to punctuate her point, she grabbed a single french fry and shoved the whole thing into her mouth at once.

“Oh.” I could understand her position. Emma had broken things between us before I could ever experience that awkwardness myself, but I’d always found lovey-dovey scenes in movies hard to sit through. “So, why sit with me, then?”

“Well, I *did* want to talk to you last week, but I realized when I went digging for your phone number that you never actually gave it to me,” she said dryly. She grimaced. “And, um, I couldn’t find you on PHO, and I didn’t know which Hebert you were in the phone book...”

“Oh.” But still... “Why, though?”

Amy blinked, nonplussed. “Why?”

“Did you want to talk to me,” I clarified. “When you left that Friday, you didn’t really seem...”

Happy? Friendly? Like you even wanted to ever see me again? Was there a way to put it that didn’t make me sound like a jilted lover?

“Oh, um.” Amy looked away, embarrassed. She fidgeted a little with another french fry. “Well, I... I gave it some thought. And I realized that I, uh, never actually gave you a chance to prove any of it? Well, a-as much as you *can* prove the whole...magical oath thing without supposedly cursing someone to die a horrible death. And it wasn’t like you could show me any of the other in the middle of a restaurant.”

...No, tempting as it might be, forcing *Bakuda* to break hers was *not* a viable method of proving my powers to Amy. For a lot of reasons, not the least of which was that it was something *she* might do.

“And I, uh, also realized something else, too.”

I frowned.

“Something else?”

“That I never wanted to know...” she trailed off, then leaned forward, and so did I, “*Apocrypha*,” and then she leaned back, again, “in the first place. Just like you were never interested in Panacea. I wanted to get to know Taylor. So even though that bullshit the Friday before last pissed me off, I decided it didn’t matter, because it’s cape business, and we’re just...just Taylor and Amy, right?”

“Just Taylor and Amy, huh...?” I muttered. Almost against my will, I found myself starting to smile.

That sounded...kind of nice, actually. To have another friend. Especially with things with Lisa being in the state they were in. And it wasn’t like having a friend who knew and didn’t care about me being Apocrypha didn’t appeal in a big way.

There was just, ah, one thing that kind of needed to be addressed, though.

“And what about your sister?” I asked. “She and I didn’t exactly...meet on the best of terms.”

She scowled, viciously stabbed the ketchup on her plate with a french fry.

“*Vicky* doesn’t get any say in the matter,” Amy said matter-of-factly. “She got herself grounded for that stunt she pulled at the bank. No patrols, no *dates*, for the next month. She’s barely allowed to ferry me to the hospital and back. So I don’t care if she doesn’t like it, she’ll just have to deal.”

“Oh,” I said simply, for lack of anything better.

Should I say, “Good,” because at least Glory Girl was being punished for what happened, or should I feel guilty that she’d been punished because I had to let Lisa get away? I wasn’t sure I was feeling all that charitable, though, because she *bad* bowled me over, first, even if the broken arm had been as much my fault as hers.

But, uh, I didn’t think that was something I should say to her sister. “Oh, she’s being punished for turning my arm into mulch? Good.” Yeah, that felt kind of mean. And, uh, not...a good way to start off a friendship.

“So,” Amy said into the awkward silence.

“So,” I repeated again.

The silence stretched again. Amy scowled and shook her head.

“Fuck it,” she said coarsely. She shoved a hand over in my direction. “Let’s try this again. Hi, I’m Amy. I hate piña coladas, but I don’t mind getting caught in the rain.”

I hesitated only a moment, then took it. “Hi, Amy, I’m Taylor. I don’t mind long walks on the beach, but I prefer curling up with a good book. It’s nice to meet you.”

Amy smiled, at first, but it quickly morphed into a grimace and she jerked her hand away to rub at her temples. “Fuck, again? Why is it *worse*, this time?”

Oh. Right.

I looked down at my hand, flexed my fingers.

Something about Aife’s martial arts made me...weird, to Amy’s biology sensing power. Gave her headaches or something. And made me — or parts of me, at least — invisible to her.

“I, uh, I’ve been practicing,” I told her quietly.

“*Practicing?*” she asked, face twisting with surprised disbelief. “You mean, you can get *better* at that stuff you were doing?”

I coughed awkwardly. “Technically, I haven’t even mastered it, yet...”

Amy stared, and her mouth flapped several times without sound. Eventually, she managed a weak, “Huh?”

“I guess, where I’m at would be something like a red belt, in regular karate?” I admitted. “Um, maybe? I’m not really sure, it might be first degree black belt. That is, uh, I’ve got the important stuff down, the rest is just expanding my technique? I’m, uh, I don’t really know what the equivalent of that is in regular martial arts, so...”

I was starting to ramble, so I cut myself off.

Amy continued to stare. “You... Where were you at, at the bank?”

I bit my bottom lip and chewed at it for a moment, debating how to put it. It always sounded weird, to me, that Aife’s Aite Laechrad put it in terms of letter ranks, but it wasn’t like I had a better or more accurate system. Replacing it with numbers wouldn’t really make it make any more sense, either.

“If I had to measure it from A to E,” I told her at length, “then C-Rank. I’m still at the upper edges of B, right now. I’d be A-Rank, but I spent all of last week studying and taking placement tests, so...”

“You...” Amy started. “You fought an Alexandria-type Brute and Mover, a girl who can bench-press a *cement truck* and fly faster than a *speeding car*, and you were only *C-Rank* in those martial arts of yours?”

“...Yes?”

She laughed helplessly. “Fuck, what even *is* your power?”

I flushed and looked away, because...well, yeah, when I gave it any real thought, it *did* seem kind of ridiculous. And with Aife, the rate at which I could learn anything I put my mind to would seem completely...

I stopped. A thought occurred to me. Aife’s Noble Phantasm let me learn with incredible speed, yes, but I learned even faster when I was teaching someone, to the point where several weekends worth of training had been finished in an afternoon —

“Would you...like me to teach you?” I asked Amy.

— and if my speed of learning increased so dramatically with just *one* student, how much faster would it be with two?

Amy just stared at me for a moment, like she wasn’t sure she’d heard me right. I didn’t think I could blame her — there weren’t that many capes who had the power to share or give out powers, the only ones I could even think of were Othala and the infamous Teacher, and neither of them also happened to be an Eidolon tier Trump, either.

Meekly, she uttered a simple, “What?”