

Sunder 5.4

The rest of the week passed much in the same way as Monday and Tuesday, and before I knew it, it was Friday, again.

I still hadn't quite gotten used to the oddity of exactly how normal and how much more comfortable Arcadia was. I thought it would probably take me about a month to really settle into it, because it was *that* drastic a difference to Winslow. Even after the first week, I was still expecting Emma and the rest of her group to pop in and smugly tell me that *they* could get into Arcadia if *I* could, or for Sophia to magically appear (even though she was dead) and bump me into the lockers, or even to find my seat covered in juice or glue.

It wasn't rational. I knew it wasn't. In my head, I was perfectly aware that I was finally rid of my tormentors and none of them were at Arcadia with me. I knew I would never be seeing Sophia again, and I knew that Emma had never had the grades to make it into Arcadia in the first place, so she certainly wouldn't be getting in, now. I knew that Madison and any of the hangers-on would think *twice* about harassing me the minute they realized I was friends with *Amy*, and I knew that if they tried *anyway*, I was done cowering and letting them walk all over me.

But the niggling doubts still remained. That Arcadia, for all it looked nicer, wasn't any different from Winslow. That some girl and her posse would get it into their heads to elevate themselves by picking on me and trying to grind me under their heels. That in transferring schools, all I had done was trade one hell for another.

I tried not to listen to those thoughts, but they were persistent. They'd been born from experience, from the paranoia I'd had to develop to make it through the past year and a half. They were products of instincts that I'd have to learn to forget, and they wouldn't disappear just because I wished really hard that they would.

Lunch with Amy helped. It was easier to forget about my fears and my worries when I could just spend an hour focusing on nothing but talking with her and learning about her. Her likes, her dislikes, her hobbies.

For instance, she smoked. Less to worry about when you could modify bacteria in the air to harmlessly process the chemicals and carcinogens with every drag on your cigarette, she'd told me wryly. She got the rush of nicotine and didn't have to concern herself with side effects or long term problems. All the upsides, none of the drawbacks.

(I'd thought, at the time, that there were other, healthier ways to relieve stress, like running or going to the gym, but apparently, it wasn't all that uncommon for nurses to catch a smoke break during lunch, either. It seemed that the healthcare profession was a very stressful field to be in.)

She also liked the color blue, but didn't think she looked good in it, which explained why I only ever saw her in dark colors outside of her costume, like black and shades of grey, with red for a little vibrancy. The only clothes she owned that were blue were her jeans, and those, she asserted, didn't count.

I wondered, when she told me that, what she'd think of Nimue's gown and robes. Nothing but shades of blue, there. Maybe... Probably envious. Nimue had a lot to be envious of, after all, and I couldn't help but imagine that she could wear puke green and *still* pull it off. It would probably take conscious effort for her to actually look at all unattractive, and even then, her unnatural beauty might make the attempt useless.

Just... Fairies. Blessings from goddesses. Completely unfair to the rest of us regular women.

Of course, as much as I was learning about Amy, it was also apparent that there was still a lot of stuff I *didn't* know.

"Wait," I said. "Hold on. Rewind. Run that by me again? You know *the Mayor*?"

Like the fact that she rubbed elbows with some pretty rich and important people.

Amy blinked at me and gave me a quick nod as she ate another french fry.

"New Wave gets invited to a lot of that stuff, as a courtesy, I guess," she explained. "Or maybe they just like being able to say they're on a first name basis with a local team of superheroes, I dunno. Once we got our powers, Vicky and I started getting dragged along, too. And, well, once she started dating Dean," she added. "Dean's family is pretty high society. So even before she got her powers, Vicky was going as his plus one."

That...made a lot of sense, now that I thought about it. Capes *were* basically local celebrities, and they were treated a lot like ones, too. There were some pretty crazy idiots who put themselves in a lot of danger to film or take snapshots of cape fights to post on PHO, which wasn't all that different from the way a lot of famous actors were treated by the paparazzi. A lot more dangerous, yes, but not all that different.

I'd even heard a couple of vague things about teams with corporate sponsorships, who were technically independent heroes that received financial backing from Gatorade or Nike or whoever. Obviously, they weren't as famous as the *Protectorate's* best and brightest, like the Triumvirate, but they *did* exist, supposedly.

"Huh," I muttered. "So, this fundraiser thing..."

"Yeah," Amy said, nodding again. "I heard about it from Vicky, who got told about it by her boyfriend, Dean, and Dean's family was one of the first invited because of their money. Ca — um, my mom got *our* invites last weekend, but Vicky will at least nominally be going as Dean's plus one." She rolled her eyes. "They'll have a big fight if he doesn't ask her, so there's no way he won't."

She took a sip of her chocolate milk, then gestured at me with the straw. "*You* probably would've gotten an invited, too."

I blinked, nonplussed. "*Me?*"

"Uh, well, your *other half*," she corrected. "You *are* the one who captured her, after all. Bakuda, I mean. The only reason they haven't is because they have no idea how to contact you and they don't want to lose face by admitting it publicly."

“Oh.” I fidgeted a little. “I didn’t think... Well, I mean, I guess? But it’s not like I...”

I wasn’t sure how to put it. It wasn’t like I’d done it for the gratitude I’d get doing it. In fact, a lot of it was selfish — out of a desire to protect myself and my dad — rather than something I’d done solely because it was the right thing to do. I... Well, it *was*, and that *had* been a part of it, because I was a hero and that was the sort of thing heroes did, but the big thing had been that she’d threatened me and Dad.

“Taylor,” Amy said slowly, “eighty-two people died in the Medhall bombing alone, and that’s just the bodies they’ve managed to dig out, so far. At least two-hundred more were injured. Bakuda was threatening to do a whole lot *worse*, if she wasn’t stopped. She’s bound for the *Birdcage*. Full stop. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. The PRT *itself* announced that you did all of the hard work and they just brought the mop. Of *course* they want to invite you.”

When she put it that way...

It still felt...really *weird*, though. Good, but really weird. How I’d gone from a no name high school girl to the most famous new cape in Brockton Bay. How I’d gone from just a face in the crowd to in the spotlight in less than a week. How apparently the rich and powerful wanted to *meet me*, if only to get the chance to shake my hand.

It was... It would take some getting used to. Lots of it.

“Well, I mean... I guess?”

Lots of it.

Amy sighed, shook her head, and smiled wryly. “This won’t really help at all, but you get used to it. Eventually. Then, you get tired of it. My advice? Learn to smile like you mean it and practice saying ‘thank you’ in the mirror until it sounds convincing.”

...No, Amy, that wasn’t really comforting, *at all*.

I sighed, too, and let my head fall into my hands.

“I don’t even...”

“I could...take you as my plus one,” Amy offered haltingly. “So you can...see what it’s like without being in the spotlight.”

I pursed my lips. I wasn’t sure that option was much better, because undoubtedly, as Panacea’s “date,” I’d probably get lots of questions, like, “How did you two meet?” or, “Are you here as friends, then?” or even, “Does that mean you’re a cape, too?” That would...be rather uncomfortable, to say the least. And even *if* I went with her...

“I’m not even sure what I’d wear to something like that,” I admitted. “It’s not like I could show up in jeans and a hoodie, and the only vaguely nice thing I own is the clothes I wore three years ago to my mom’s...”

To her funeral. The only formal wear I owned was the modest black dress I'd worn to Mom's funeral. That wasn't an option, not only because it was funeral wear and it would remind me of burying Mom, the worst day of my life, but also because I'd grown a couple of inches since then — up *and* out. There was no way it would fit.

Amy grimaced. "I could...take you shopping, I guess."

She didn't seem to relish the idea.

I shook my head.

"With what money?" I asked sourly. "Half the reason I was going to Winslow in the first place is because things have been a bit rough, financially, since the shipping industry collapsed. And don't tell me *you're* going to pay for it," I added when I saw the look on her face. She scowled. "You've been pretty great, Amy, but there's no way I could ask you to spend a couple hundred dollars on buying me a nice dress."

I could maybe ask *Lisa*. But that felt too much like taking advantage of her, and she'd know better than to think she could *buy* my trust back.

"I'm not good at that stuff, so I'd have to bring Vicky, anyway," Amy muttered. She bit viciously into another french fry.

Right. And that likely wouldn't end well, considering the last time she and I had so much as looked at each other, she'd shattered most of the bones in my arm.

So, again, could *maybe* ask Lisa, although I didn't really want to.

Or...

"I could...make my own, I guess," I suggested as the idea came to me.

Medea was a woman of many talents. And if not her, Nimue would work just as well. If neither of *them* worked... Well, there had to be a mythological seamstress in *some* legend, right?

Amy blinked at me incredulously. "You can *do* that?"

"Well... Yeah."

I reached into my hoodie and pulled up my protective amulet, showing it to her. It was almost funny, watching her eyebrows climb up towards her hairline.

"You *made* that?"

"Yeah," I answered. "Out of some scrap metal. Some rusty rebar. Since I can just *buy* the fabric from a shop, making a dress would be even easier."

"What's this about making dresses, now?"

I nearly jumped out of my seat — actually did lift an inch or so — and twisted around to see a red-haired boy, grinning broadly, as he walked around me and the table to grab a chair next to Amy.

“Thinking of making a change in profession, Amy?” the boy asked as he sat down, uninvited. He had the bluest of eyes, and they glittered with mirth. “Becoming a seamstress? I never knew you were into knitting!”

“Dennis,” said Amy with something like a groan. “We were talking about the fundraiser.”

“Oh.” Dennis scrunched up his face and stuck out his tongue. “*That* thing.”

“You...know about it?” I asked.

“He’s one of Dean’s...*friends*,” Amy explained, giving Dennis a strange, inscrutable look. “What are you doing here, Dennis?”

“I come to welcome yon weary traveler to our humble school,” said Dennis, grinning at me. “And the newest Ward, right?”

“*What?*”

Amy just rolled her eyes. “Whenever we get a new student, there’s a whole hubbub about whether or not it’s a new Ward transferring in. Of course, school policy is generally that we’re not supposed to *ask*.”

She shot him an accusatory glare.

Oh. Okay. That made a bit more sense.

Dennis held up his hands. “Hey, if I seriously thought she was, I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“Everyone...really thinks I’m a new Ward?” I asked.

That was still a little alarming, but less... *How the hell does everyone seem to know I’m a cape?* than the alternative.

Amy snorted. “It’s Arcadia,” she said. “That’s the default assumption.”

“No one’s asked you, yet?” asked Dennis.

“No,” I said, because they hadn’t. No one had yet come up to me, trying to figure out if I was a new Ward transferring to Arcadia. In fact, no one had really come up to me yet, at all, aside from Amy.

“Well, that makes *some* sense,” he said. “You’ve got this...”

He screwed up his face in an exaggerated scowl, brow furrowed deep, lips drawn out into a broad, thin line, and eyes crossed, that only served to make him look constipated.

“— thing going on, you know? Total RBF.”

“Dennis!”

What the hell?

“RBF?”

“Resting bitch face,” he explained.

I made a...complicated expression, not entirely sure how I was supposed to react to that. Should I be angry? Flattered? Some mixture of both? Was it something that was supposed to be impressive or bad or...what?

“There!” he said, pointing at me with his fork. “Just like that! Man, you’re good at this. That look that just screams, ‘What rock did you even crawl out from under?’ Oh, man, a look like that could *crush* a man!”

“Dennis,” said Amy, exasperated. She sighed and turned back to me. “Don’t pay this idiot too much mind. He thinks he’s a comedian.”

Dennis slapped one hand to his chest, over his heart, and gave an exaggerated, theatrical gasp. “Amy! How could you? I’m the funny man, I tell you! The funny man! *Of course* I’m a comedian!”

Amy just rolled her eyes, again.

“How do you two know each other, exactly?” I asked.

They shared a look.

“Dean,” they told me in stereo.

“I know Dean, Dean’s dating Vicky,” Dennis explained, “and Amy is Vicky’s limpet.”

“Am not!” Amy snapped irritably.

“And Amy usually sits with Vicky during lunch,” Dennis went on as though she hadn’t said anything. “S part of why I came over. We haven’t seen hide nor hair of Amy all week.”

Amy grimaced. “Vicky and I are...having a bit of a fight, right now.”

He blinked. “Over what? You two have been *inseparable* since the moment we met!”

She glanced at me, and that was all I needed to know that it was about the bank and what had happened there. They were fighting because of *me*.

I felt a little bad about that. More on Amy’s behalf than Vicky’s, but still.

“It’s none of your business,” Amy told him firmly.

Dennis held up his arms.

“Okay, okay, I surrender!”

Then, he grinned. “As my terms for surrender, I request that, if I must be executed, it’s death by snu-snu.”

Amy rolled her eyes *again* (I got the feeling that was a reaction Dennis got from her a lot) and made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat.

I, on the other hand, had no idea what he was talking about.

“Death by snu-snu?”

Dennis blinked at me. “Zap Brannigan?” he offered.

I stared blankly. The name meant nothing to me.

“Futurama?” he tried again.

Still nothing. A tv show, maybe? A movie? I’d watched Saturday morning superhero cartoons when I was a kid, but books had always been more my thing — it came with having a literature professor for a mom.

He made an exaggerated sigh. “Well, that just ruins the joke!”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“She’s not like you, Dennis,” Amy said dryly. “She has this thing called *taste*.”

“Ouch!” Dennis shook his head, pressing his hand up against his heart. “You cut me deep, just now, Amy. You cut me *real* deep.”

I looked at Amy, met her gaze, and she made a show of rolling her eyes skyward for the fourth time. She offered me a little smile, and I found myself smiling back.

“So!” he said, changing the subject. “The big topic everyone’s talking about and no one can make up their mind over — what do you think of that new independent hero, Apocrypha?”

I startled. “What?”

He was asking me about *myself*?

“She’s all anyone’s talking about, these days. She beat Lung, she beat Bakuda, she apparently put Oni Lee through the ringer — and if the PRT knows anything about her, they’re keeping it locked up tighter than Fort Knox.”

“They are?” I asked. “And, uh, how is that significant?”

“PRT threat ratings are a matter of public record,” Amy explained to me. “It’s so the general public knows what to expect if they encounter a particular villain or independent hero, or how far away they need to evacuate if a cape fight breaks out.”

“The PHO wiki actually gets most of their stuff directly from the PRT’s public website, too,” added Dennis. “Which is why it’s such a big deal! The PRT usually has threat ratings out within *hours* of a first official encounter with a cape, and it’s been three *weeks* since she met Armsmaster! It’s like even *they* can’t figure her out!”

“Maybe they *do* know what she can do, and they’re just trying to figure out how the hell to fit it into their system,” Amy said dryly. “What’s the current theory on PHO, again?”

“Some kind of Breaker-Blaster combo,” said Dennis. “I dunno about that, though. A guy called HammerTiem thinks she’s a Trump that can shut down other capes’ powers, but only as long as they’re Asian. And it’s not like we’ve ever seen her go up against any of the Empire, so you never know, you know?”

What? Who even... What kind of stupid power was *that*?

“Dennis,” Amy began flatly, “that’s stupid.”

“It could be true! Powers are weird, Amy!”

“Not only is it stupid,” she went on, “it’s *stupidly* stupid. It’s stupid squared, then stupidly *cubed*. It’s so stupid that it comes back around into *almost* smart. *Almost*.”

“Hey, if you’ve got a better idea...”

“I don’t,” she admitted shamelessly. “But I don’t need to to know exactly how *stupid* that theory is. *I healed Bakuda and Oni Lee*, two weeks ago. A Trump shutting down their powers would *not* have shattered his shoulder or broken her leg. That kind of Trump *definitely* wouldn’t have done what she did to Lung.”

Dennis held up his hands.

“Okay, okay, if you say so!”

He let them drop again.

“And anyway, that isn’t the big thing getting debated.” He looked around, then leaned forward as though to share a secret. Almost without realizing it, I found myself leaning in, too. “Some people think she’s killed before.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“What?” Amy asked incredulously, but it came to me as though across a great distance. I stared into Dennis’ face, but there was no guile, there, no suspicion, no accusation. There was no way he knew, right? About what had happened to Sophia?

Dennis nodded. “Yeah. A poster named ViewFromSpace says she heard it from a friend of a friend, and that the PRT knows about it but won’t do anything. A PRT agent denied it in the thread, but the PRT hasn’t made any press announcements, yet, and people are wondering.”

“Wondering?” I asked.

“Well, there’s been theories since she first popped up, you know,” he said. “Whether she’s an E88 plant or a newbie trying to muscle out Lung and the ABB. Or maybe she’s just overzealous and doesn’t care how much damage she does? The PRT doesn’t talk about it, but *everyone* on PHO already knows that Shadow Stalker used to get pretty violent, too, back before they made her a Ward.”

That didn’t surprise me. ‘As above, so below.’ It probably would have been *more* shocking if it had turned out that Sophia was actually all sunshine and rainbows while in costume, but the idea that she was just as violent and cruel in her alter ego as she was in school wasn’t exactly a stretch of the imagination. Lisa had said as much, in the aftermath of her death.

Amy snorted. “Shadow Stalker went after petty criminals and beat them up, Dennis. Apocrypha fought two of the most dangerous capes in the Bay — *three*, if the rumors about what Bakuda could do are true. The amount of force you need to use against them just to make it out *alive* is a *lot* different than what you need to catch an unpowered thug.”

Dennis shook his head. “Hey, I’m just the messenger, you know? I’m not saying I *believe* it, but there are a bunch of people who do, and they’re saying stuff like the PRT and the Protectorate need to bring her in or toss her in jail, and if Halbeard doesn’t have enough gadgets and Miss ‘All the Guns’ is too afraid her bullets will bounce off, then Aegis can show them the justice of his raging muscles or Gallant can ride in on his white horse and save the day.”

“Of course.”

“And if things are *really* bad, the awesomest of awesomes, Clockblocker, can descend from the skies and smite her with his holy wrath.”

Amy chuckled a little. “Careful, Dennis, your bias is showing.”

I couldn’t help it. I stared at him, not quite slack-jawed, brow furrowed, as I tried to figure out *what the hell* I just heard come out of his mouth.

“I...what?”

“And where’s Vista in all of this?” Amy asked, indulging him. “Smiling for the cameras?”

“What, are you kidding me?” Dennis retorted. “She’s leading the charge!”

Amy blinked. “She is?”

“Of course!” He nodded like it was the most natural thing. “She’s the most experienced Ward, after all. Where else would she go but the front?”

“Okay, I’m going to repeat myself: that’s stupid,” said Amy. “When was the last time you heard of a Shaker who was famous for getting into fisticuffs? They don’t, because it’s monumentally stupid to fight with your hands when your power works at range.”

“Experience trumps conventional wisdom!” Dennis declared. “Vista’s just that awesome! Clockblocker is still the best, though. Space will always lose to time, that’s just how it works.”

I sighed and reached up to pinch the bridge of my nose. “I thought we were talking about stuff on PHO.”

The both of them looked at me oddly.

“Taylor, that *is* the stuff you see on PHO,” Amy told me.

“The tamer stuff, too,” added Dennis. “Like, there’s fanfiction about Apocrypha already, too. People writing about her falling in love with Lung or Oni Lee, because sometimes mortal nemeses make the best lovers —”

“All right!” I interjected, voice higher and squeakier than I would have liked. My face must have been a bright, cherry red, because it felt like it was on *fire*. “I don’t need to hear about that!”

Mercifully, the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch, so that I didn’t have to hear any of the sordid details about people writing *smut* about me. Because apparently, that was a thing.

“And that’s my cue,” said Dennis. “I’ll see you ladies later.”

He picked up his tray with one hand and gave a jaunty wave as he left.

Amy let out a long, exasperated sigh, then turned to me with a little smile. “In front of the school, like usual?”

“Yeah.” I hesitated. “Hey, Amy?”

She turned back to me, halfway out of her seat. “Yeah?”

“Have you...noticed anyone *following* us, the past week?”

She frowned and adopted a look of concentration, eyes glazing as she thought back. After a moment, she shook her head. “No, not that I can remember. Is...something wrong?”

I couldn’t prove it, and even Lisa hadn’t seen anyone, but... The feeling that someone had been watching me after school for the past several days, that wasn’t just my imagination, was it?

“...It’s nothing,” I lied. “Don’t worry about it.”

Amy shrugged. “Okay. See you later, then?”

“Yeah. Later.”