

Sunder 5.8

Dinner was an awkward affair.

The heavenly smell of Mom's lasagna met our noses as we made our way down the stairs, and for a moment, I could almost feel here there, again, and her smile warmed me from the inside.

"Oh my god, that smells so good!"

"Oh hell, Taylor," said Lisa, "if that lasagna is anywhere near as good as it smells, I'll never be able to eat takeout again."

My lips curled of their own accord. "It's Mom's special recipe," I told them a little wistfully.

As we stepped into the hallway, it was to find Dad in the kitchen, setting up an extra pair of folding chairs around our usual table — itself moved out and further towards the center of the room so that everyone could sit down comfortably. I was glad he'd thought ahead far enough to plan for that, because *I* hadn't, and in hindsight, I really should've, before inviting anyone over for dinner.

Dad gave us a brief wave when he saw us, then gestured vaguely to the oven and went back to fiddling with what seemed to be a very stubborn chair. "Dinner's on the stove," he said, grunting with the effort. "Plates and silverware are on the countertop. Help yourselves. And if you'll just — ah! — gimme a minute...here...!"

We didn't move, at first.

"Need any help, Dad?"

It *was* an old chair, after all. I didn't think it'd seen any use in over three years, and we'd had it for as long as I could remember — had taken it on camping trips when I was younger, even.

"Ah! No, no, it's — urg — it's fine, you girls go ahead and get yourselves served up — *come on, you little* — and I'll be done in a jiffy."

I hesitated for a second longer. "If you're sure..."

Dad just waved me off, so I left him to it and moved towards the kitchen counter, with Lisa and Amy forming a line behind me in some unspoken agreement. Just as he'd said, Dad had left a stack of plates and piles of forks, knives, and spoons sitting out and waiting, so I took a plate, grabbed the spatula he'd set out, and started carving myself a piece of lasagna out of the dish.

"Ha!"

Only to nearly drop it on the floor as Dad's triumphant exclamation startled me. Lisa sniggered from behind me, and I shot her a short glare over my shoulder as I went back to getting my food — more carefully, now.

Dad had finished setting up the chairs by the time I made it back over to my usual seat, looking supremely pleased with himself, as though he had just run a marathon and placed third. Then, his stomach rumbled, and, laughing at himself, he went over to dish himself up some food.

The others joined me a couple minutes later, Dad to my left, Amy to my right, and Lisa sitting across from me. Wafts of steam rose from our plates like mist, and mine was not the only stomach to protest the wait.

“Everyone got what they need?” Dad asked, smiling the smile that had once been reserved solely for me and Emma.

A chorus of affirmatives answered.

“Okay, then. Let’s eat.”

The scratch of forks on plates rang out through the kitchen as the four of us carved up our meal and started to dig in.

“Oh my god,” Lisa said after the first bite. “Mister H, this is delicious!”

“You think so?” Dad replied, the tips of his ears starting to turn red.

“Of course!” she turned to Amy. “Don’t you think so, Amy?”

Amy flushed at being put on the spot. “Oh, um, yeah. Definitely.”

“The best lasagna I’ve ever had,” Lisa asserted.

Dad grinned, delighted. “Really? Well, I can’t really take any credit. I just followed my wife’s directions.”

“Then she must have been an amazing cook!”

The grin started to dim. “Yeah,” Dad said softly, wistfully. “Yeah, she really was.”

He shook it off. “Oh, um, Lisa, your bandages! Are your hands okay?”

Amy startled. “Oh, uh, I healed them for her.”

Dad blinked, nonplussed. “You healed them?” Then, an epiphany washed over his face. “Oh, oh, that’s right. Dallon — that’s the New Wave group, right?”

Amy nodded. “Yeah, that’s us.”

“So you’re the one in the robe and the...the scarf, I think it was?” He frowned and his fork stopped moving on his plate. “What was it... Pan... Panacreta?”

“Panacea, yeah,” she corrected him kindly. “I’m... I’m really more of a healer than a fighter.”

“Well, that was nice of you, Amy,” he said. “Lisa? Are you feeling better, then?”

Lisa plastered on a smile, and it was only because I knew her as well as I did that I could see it wasn't wholly genuine. "Right as rain."

A few moments passed in silence, and we continued eating. I tried to focus on the delicious lasagna Dad had gone through all this effort to make, but the butterflies fluttering about in my stomach and the worry that one of us might say something and give away the whole charade made it hard.

At length, Dad asked, "So, Amy, how was it you and Taylor met, exactly?"

"O-oh, um." I saw her glance at me out of the corner of my eyes. "We... We met at a coffee shop. On the Boardwalk. Um, during one of her morning runs."

It was only because I was sitting across from her that I saw Lisa twitch.

"Really?" Dad said, surprised. "Lisa said the same thing. Did you all meet in the same shop?"

"No," said Amy at the same time as Lisa answered, "Yes."

They looked at each other for one quiet moment, bewildered, then turned back to Dad.

"Yes," said Amy. Lisa answered, "No."

Dad blinked at them. "Uh..."

They looked at each other again. I cleared my throat.

"We, uh, I met them both in different places on different days," I tried, hoping my nervousness didn't show on my face. "Then I introduced them to each other at one coffee shop a couple weeks ago."

Dad laughed. "Oh, that makes sense. You girls had me confused, for a second, there."

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. Bullet dodged.

"So, Lisa," he began, turning his attention back to her. "Taylor tells me you have your GED? Do you plan on going to college or do you have a job of some kind?"

Lisa flashed him a smile, loaded with hidden meaning that there was no way he could have noticed.

"I *do* have a job, actually," she told him. "The hours are weird and the tasks can be strange, but the pay is good. I guess you could call me an information and analysis specialist, although that really simplifies things..."

The rest of dinner went smoothly, compared to the handful of landmines we navigated around in the beginning. When we finished, Dad told us to leave our dishes by the sink and he'd wash them, so we piled them up, and after the customary thanks were delivered, made our way back up to my room.

The moment the door was closed, I turned back to face the two of them.

“Alright. Where did we leave off?”

“We were talking about Coil,” said Amy. “We were about to start planning for how to deal with him.”

Lisa jerked.

“Wait, hang on. I just remembered something.” She started rummaging about in her pockets. “Before we really get into it, there was something I wanted to show you. Ah.”

From her pocket, she pulled out a smartphone — rougher, more scuffed and well-worn than the one she’d bought me, with scratches and gouges carved into the outer protective casing. It looked like she’d taken it through a warzone. Then, she started thumbing through it, fingers moving rapidly.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Something you really need to see,” she replied. “Hang on a second...”

I glanced at Amy, but she shrugged and didn’t seem to have any better and idea what this was about than I did.

“Here.”

Lisa shoved the phone over to me and into my hands, and I took it from her curiously, unsure of what she was talking about. Next to me, Amy crowded close so she could see it, too, and when I looked down at the webpage that was open, my heart shuddered to a stop.

MAYOR’S NIECE KIDNAPPED, read the headline of the news article. Next to it was what looked like the school photo of a young girl maybe four or five years younger than me, with long dark hair and big, gray eyes.

Yesterday around noon, Dinah Alcott, Mayor Christner’s eleven year old niece, was kidnapped from her home...

My eyes moved of their own accord to check the date the article had been published: Friday, April 15, 2011.

The day after the Undersiders robbed the bank.

My stomach dropped.

I went back to the article, racing through the words so fast I almost didn’t have time to parse them all. Attacked... Men with guns... Parents were injured but in stable condition... Dinah kidnapped during the lunch hour... No demands, no ransom, no communication from the kidnapers at all...

When I was done, I looked back up at Lisa, an accusation forming on my tongue.

But she beat me to the punch.

“I just put the pieces together a couple of days ago,” she told me. “If it hadn’t been for Bakuda and her tantrum, then maybe...”

“You were a distraction.”

Her lips tightened grimly. She nodded. “He used us to draw attention so he could go in and grab her without getting the heroes involved.”

“He?” asked Amy. “You mean *Coil*?”

“Yeah.” Lisa worked her jaw for a moment. “I haven’t *quite* figured out what he wants her for. I have a couple of ideas... Maybe as a bargaining chip with the Mayor? I mean, that sounds like the kind of thing he’d do, sure, but I checked the PRT’s files and they don’t even know he’s involved.”

“Wait, hold on a second,” said Amy. “You *checked* the PRT’s files? *How?*?”

...Not my first question, but definitely one of the ones I wanted an answer to.

A brief smile tugged at Lisa’s lips. “I hacked into them. How else?”

“You can do that?” I blurted out.

“High level Thinker,” Lisa answered somewhat smugly, like it was obvious. “Passwords and security codes don’t mean anything to me.”

“That’s *illegal*,” Amy said hotly.

“And I’m a supervillain, remember?” Lisa replied. “Look, that’s not the point. The point is, as far as the PRT knows, Coil wasn’t involved in her kidnapping. He hasn’t made any demands yet or taken responsibility. He hasn’t asked for a ransom. That doesn’t mean he *hasn’t*, only that they don’t know about it, but if he has, the Mayor has managed to keep it out of the press for two weeks without *anyone* catching on.”

Left unsaid was how likely it was that something like that could happen with such a prominent figure in Brockton Bay, especially with the kidnapping making front page news.

“What do *you* think, then?” I asked her.

She frowned. “I don’t have anything concrete.”

“Your best guess, then.”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, brow furrowed in thought, then let out a short breath through her nose.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. Alright. So, Coil doesn’t need money. He’s got plenty of it. How, I’m not sure. How much, I don’t know. I’d have to get a look at his accounts. But since he can comfortably pay both us — uh, the Undersiders, that is — *and* his private army of mercs, it’s obviously quite a lot and obviously it’s a very stable source of income.”

“So it’s not about money,” I concluded.

“He’s a Bond villain, you said,” I heard Amy mutter. “When do they *ever* need money?”

“Right.” Lisa nodded. “If he’s extorting the Mayor, it’s not for money. At the same time, though, there are easier and better ways of blackmailing someone. Kidnapping a person to extort someone *necessarily* involves holding her life or safety at risk, which makes it *more* likely the police or the FBI or whoever is gonna get involved, not less. In this case, the PRT. A surer and easier way is to dig up dirt on the guy and threaten to expose it in order to get him to do what you want.”

“Like an affair or something, you mean,” Amy clarified. “Something that could get the Mayor in trouble, like if he embezzled city funds or whatever.”

“Exactly!” said Lisa. “And Coil’s done that before, so it’s not like it’s something he can’t do. It’s not always *me* he uses to do it, either, so obviously he can hire investigators or hackers to do the job, too. So that means that it’s not about blackmail or extortion, whatever he needs Dinah for.”

“If not that, then what, though?” I asked.

Because what else could he need an eleven-year-old girl for? I mean, there were *things* I could think of that I wouldn’t entirely put past a guy like Coil, and they were all bad and horrible and disgusting, but at the same time, if it was just about an eleven-year-old brunette girl, there *had* to have been someone less risky to grab than the Mayor’s niece.

“Wait,” Amy interjected, sounding as though the thought nauseated her, “you don’t think he wants her because he... well...”

“Whatever I think about Coil’s moral fiber — or lack thereof,” said Lisa sardonically, “I’m also fairly sure that he’s not an outright pedophile. Even if he was, he’s not stupid enough or careless enough to grab a girl that’s so high profile, rather than snatching a girl from a poor or homeless family. Too, if he just wanted to get his rocks off, he wouldn’t have kept her, he’d have just kidnapped her in one timeline, done what he wanted, and then dropped it in favor of the one where he didn’t.”

The thought made me faintly ill. Fortunately, I didn’t have a real enough idea of what Coil looked like for my brain to conjure an image of him doing exactly that.

“So, if it’s not about extortion and it’s not about...about *that*,” I asked, “then what *is* it about?”

A thought clicked in my head.

“Wait. You don’t think she has *powers*, do you?”

Lisa’s lips pulled into a grim line. She nodded. “That’s the part I’m not sure about, but it’s the only thing that really seems to fit. I can’t give you a one-hundred percent answer about what *kind* she’d have if she does, but...” She grimaced. “Well, it says something that I’m the only one of the Undersiders he was so desperate to have that he needed to threaten me at gunpoint to get me on board.”

“A Thinker?” said Amy. “You think the girl — Dinah — might have some kind of Thinker power?”

“Or Tinker,” Lisa replied. “Those are the two most sought after powers, Thinker and Tinker. I don’t know how he’s forcing her to cooperate, or even if he’s *managed* to force her cooperation, yet, but if

he's kept her this long and hasn't resorted to obvious, visible tactics — like hurting her parents — to get to her, then she must have powers he desperately wants.”

“Or she's already given in,” I added darkly.

“Or that, yeah.”

“They must be pretty powerful, then,” Amy murmured.

We both turned to her. “What?”

She blinked.

“Oh, um...” She fidgeted. “It's something from one of the college courses that Vicky... that Vicky's taking. About parahumans. Uh, Parahuman Studies, I think. There's apparently a correlation between how young you trigger and how strong your powers are. The younger, the stronger. And, uh, yeah.”

Lisa frowned. “It would explain why he wants her so badly,” she allowed. “If she's a Thinker on my level, I could see him going through a lot of effort to keep her around. It'd definitely explain how much trouble he went through to grab her in the first place.”

That... That could be a problem, though, couldn't it.

“Is that something we'll have to worry about?” I asked.

Lisa turned to me.

“What do you mean?”

“If she's a Thinker on your level,” I clarified, “will that mean he knows we're coming before we even leave the house?”

She mulled it over, for a minute. I could almost see the cogs turning in her head.

“What if she's a precog? Won't that mean he'll be prepared for us?” Amy added. “Hell, how can we even be sure he'll be where we think he'll be?”

I had a few ways around that, probably. Of confirming he'd be where we thought he would. On the other hand, if he used Dinah's power in conjunction with his own, vacating his base in one and staying put in another... But then, no matter *which* timeline he was in, wouldn't I find him all the same? Unless...

Ugh, this whole timeline bullshit was going to give me a headache.

“It depends,” Lisa finally answered. “I feel confident enough to say his power is some kind of precognition, and Taylor's power messes up its accuracy. If that's the case, then her power should also screw up *other* precogs, too, so if we use Taylor's power to get to his base or she's using her power on the way there, he shouldn't have any warning.”

“If she’s not predicting us right now,” I pointed out.

“Even then, I’m not sure how accurate it could get,” Lisa said. “I honestly have no idea how badly your defenses mess up precogs — or if they even do at all.”

“Keep planning, hope for the best?” Amy asked wryly.

“Or explore other options.” Lisa turned to me. “How much range does your best wizard have for her spells? Could you hit him from a distance, without ever entering his base?”

I hesitated.

“If...I had control spanning the entire city, yes,” I hedged. “I could hit him from here. Or even if I had control over the ley lines —”

“Ley lines?” Amy asked incredulously. “Wait. Hold on. Those *exist*?”

“I’m surprised you even know what they are,” Lisa commented.

“I *do* read,” Amy snapped back.

“*Point being*,” I drew us back on topic, “I can *find* him from here, but I can’t *do* anything to him from here.”

To be fair, *I* wasn’t entirely sure they were real, either, or if it was just a way my powers interacted with the world or something. Some of the things that my powers took for granted or were even based on seemed too...fantastical, too impossible, to ever be real, and yet they worked or they existed, at least for the duration of that hero being in use. And since most of those things required a hero who made use of them or understood them in the first place...

I’d given up trying to understand this stuff about my powers ages ago. It was easier on my sanity, that way.

“What if we found these ley lines?” Lisa suggested. “Could you take control of them and do it like that?”

“Are you seriously just accepting this without batting an eye?” Amy asked incredulously.

Lisa shrugged. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Taylor’s powers, it’s not to question them. It’s easier to avoid the headache if you just ignore the bullshit and write it off as powers being weird.”

“...Right.”

She turned back to me. “So? Can you?”

I made a sound in the back of my throat. “It’s not about finding them, exactly. It’s about where they’re located.”

“And?”

“...One’s directly below the Rig, Protectorate HQ. One’s deep underground in the Brockton Bay aquifer. The third is seated under the PRT building downtown.”

That was actually what the plan had been for building Nimue’s castle: find one of the ley lines and construct it there. Unfortunately, both the aquifer and the PRT HQ were out for obvious reasons, and I couldn’t have just asked the Protectorate to move the Rig a mile or two out of the way. And since the bay was the only real place to hide a freaking *castle* in the first place, the only thing left to do had been to pick a large enough empty spot to build it and do so.

Fortunately, for Nimue, it was fine. She was more of a support type; she *had* offensive options, some of them fairly powerful, but she was much more of a...a maker of trinkets, so to speak, than a fighter. Long range attacks weren’t her thing anyway, and anything that required a big enough bang could be completed using the castle’s architecture, regardless of access to the ley lines.

Unfortunately, *most* of my casters who could do long range required access to the ley lines to have the kind of reach Lisa was talking about. Medea could even have hypnotized him into coming to *us*, but she didn’t have the range on her own to do that kind of thing across that kind of distance.

So, unless the Protectorate decided to pick up their base and move, no ley lines for us.

Lisa laughed. “Okay, yeah, no, there’s no way we’re getting to any of those, huh?”

“Not unless you feel like going for a swim on the bottom of the bay.”

She grimaced. “I’d rather not.”

Me, too, I didn’t say. I didn’t relish the idea of trusting an amulet of waterbreathing that had been rushed through in a couple of days under the crushing weight of thousands of gallons of ocean water a hundred feet or two beneath the surface.

“So, what other options do we have?” asked Amy. “If we can’t do it that way.”

“Are we still assuming Dinah’s a precog and he’s coerced her into working with him?”

“We might as well,” I said. “The worst that could happen is that we’re wrong and we overprepared.”

“Point,” Lisa allowed. “Okay. Well... We could Trojan Horse it? You guys sneak in while I pretend to go meet him? Ambush while he’s focused on me?”

“After he tried to *kill* you?” said Amy incredulously. “And you think he *won’t* just try it again?”

“Eh.” Lisa wobbled her hand back and forth. “Maybe? If he thinks he’s in control, he might decide to hear me out.”

I shook my head. “He’s already decided you’re a liability. If he thinks he can’t rely on his power to work right around you, I don’t think he’d risk it.”

Not with what she’d told me about him.

“Point again,” Lisa admitted. She blew out a frustrated sigh. “If we can’t sneak in like that... I don’t like the idea of a frontal assault. If we get it wrong and he slips away with his power, it’ll give him that much more time and information to work with.”

An idea popped into my head.

If sneaking in was our best option, then...

“What if we *could*?” I asked.

“Could what?” replied Lisa.

“Sneak in,” I clarified.

She blinked, and then a slow grin spread across her face. “You have an idea.”

I nodded. “What if we could turn *invisible*?”

“You can *do* that?” Amy blurted out.

Lisa’s eyes danced with excitement. “Go on.”

“There’ll be a few limitations,” I warned. “I can get the visible spectrum, maybe even infrared, but if he has some Tinkertech sensor that sees into ultraviolet or whatever, then it probably won’t work. It won’t stop sound or motion sensors or even smell, either. But if we aim for Sunday night, then I can make this work.”

“Lay it on me, Chief,” said Lisa.

I bit at my bottom lip.

“I’m going to need a spare bed sheet, and I’ll probably be working through most of the night tonight and tomorrow. It’s not going to be pretty and it’s not going to look like a work of art. But it *should* get the job done. As long as you can lead us through his base and he doesn’t have anything that can catch us, we can be in and get to him without him ever realizing we’re there.”

And if all went well, we could be there and back with enough time to catch some sleep before school.

“Alright.” Lisa grinned. “So, this is what I know about the layout of his base. I probably missed a few things, but if we follow the route I remember, it shouldn’t matter. Got a pen and paper?”

I pulled one each from my desk drawers and handed them to her, and she set them down and started to draw.

“There’s the entrance, here, and down from there, a hallway — all lined with mercs with guns, mostly automatics and sidearms — and I’m pretty sure some turret emplacements *here* and *here*...”