

“And you’re alright?”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’m alright. When the hell did you turn into such a mother-hen?” She shifted, trying to get comfortable as the piece of plastic and nylon barely fit to be called a chair dug into her back and thighs. What was this thing made from, PVC and old 80s jackets?

“Around the time you told me your transport got hit, Emma! Holy shit, your dad lost his hand! Excuse me for being worried about my friend,” Sophia huffed over the phone.

“Well you don’t have to worry. I’m fine. It was scary but I’m alright. One of those weird capes dealt with the monster – I think they’re calling her Owl? Isn’t there already an Owl on PHO?”

“At least three,” Sophia snorted, *“but nobody’s gonna claim copyright on her. Helped kill Nilbog, helped save a city, and she’s personal friends with the woman who bitchslapped the Simurgh.”*

“Well don’t worry. I’m okay, maybe we can get Panacea to help my dad – he works with her mom, after all – and I’ll see you soon. Okay?” Emma had no idea how long the curfews and quarantine would last, how long until the militarized PRT patrols would stop rumbling down the main streets and tracing the Brockton Bay city limits. It already felt like days even though it’d only been hours at most: being told she couldn’t leave only made her want to do so all the more, especially when she had plans to see to. She hadn’t managed to acquire Annette’s pistol yet, so this was setting her back even more.

The door squeaked open beside her. “Alright, sweetheart,” her mother smiled down at her. “Your turn to sit with your dad while I call Anne and make sure she’s not going spare.”

Emma’s older sister was off in Boston attending college, and if news about the carnage had gotten out then her fellow redhead had to be going nuts. She shouldn’t worry, however: they were fine.

Emma stepped into the hospital room and pulled up another consummately uncomfortable chair. “Hey Daddy,” she muttered, squirming to try and find a tolerable sitting position. The machines hissed and beeped as Alan Barnes remained unconscious, having fallen into shock and some level of catatonia upon the monster’s attack – likely aggravated by the need to remove the mutilated forearm.

The beeps quickly grated on Emma as she tried to browse the internet on her phone. But she had nowhere else to go, so she was stuck there.

It was all going to be fine.

(BREAK)

Sophia Hess rolled her eyes. Emma could be incredibly stubborn and thick-headed when she wanted to be. It was her best friend’s greatest strength and weakness: when the girl was set on a path, it took moving heaven and earth to divert her from it.

Tucking her phone into her pocket, she checked her other phone. *Curfew still in effect, it read. Make the rounds with the Winslow evacuees, ensure there’s no carnage. Can provide additional ammunition if needed.*

The hardest part had been changing back out of her Shadow Stalker costume and stowing it away. Once they were free from the werewolves, any head-count of students would inevitably turn her up as missing. Sophia didn't know exactly how many teachers knew her secret – that was for her handler to track – but the student body was a cesspool of rumormongering. If the various counts all forgot to call for Sophia Hess, people would start to talk. That was shit she really couldn't afford.

And so it was in the guise of Winslow Riot badass Sophia Hess that she made the rounds to ensure nobody was causing trouble, rather than as dangerous Ward Shadow Stalker. As she approached a recognizable pair of chucklefucks, her lips curled in a gentle smile. “Sparks.” She could take or leave Sparky: the guy was perpetually lost in a haze of his own mind. “Veder.” And that was the one who caused her to smile unbidden. Somehow Greg Veder had become a trusted confidant...a friend.

Sparky muttered as he sketched in his notebook. Weird shit, but the art wasn't terrible. She just thought she'd need to drop acid or something to understand it.

Veder smiled back, not shying away in the least, as if he trusted her not to hit him. “Hey Sophia. How're you holding up?”

“Going a little stir-crazy stuck with all you holes rather than back home where at least I could be alone with my thoughts,” she shrugged. “Nobody knows how long this curfew's gonna last: they might bring out some pods or something with cots for us.”

Greg winced. “Better make sure they divide things along racial lines or we'll have stabbings, at least.”

Sophia nodded assent. “So since there's basically no wi-fi out here and nothing to really keep me occupied, I've been looking for fights to break up so at least there'd be something to do. But it seems like werewolf attacks really dampen the gangland spirit. So instead I'm over here with you fuckwhistles.”

“Well, not much to do, Sparky's lost in his drawing...” Greg gestured to the fading black eye that was a physical reminder of his only semi-successful contribution to the riot's conclusion. “If you're so bored, how about you teach me how to fight? I don't want to just be a black-eyed sack of potatoes next time.”

“You think there'll be a next time?” Sophia prodded, trying to stall for time while she processed this request.

“It's Winslow,” he replied flatly. “Not sure if there'll be another riot like that anytime soon, but you know shit'll go down. I want to be able to help, or at least keep myself alive, when it does.”

Sophia sized him up. Gangly yet doughy, sandy-brown hair, green eyes. Greg was a schlub, easily forgettable, just another gawky teen in a sea of them. But he'd been the only other one to notice something was wrong with Taylor. He'd stuck it out with her all this time. He'd trusted her, stuck up for her...

She nodded and walked past him. Greg quickly caught up and fell into step with her, keeping even pace. It felt oddly comfortable, having him at her side. She hadn't even cried with Emma, her best friend: couldn't trust that Emma wouldn't suddenly fall out of love with their friendship if she showed weakness like that.

“Plus,” he said under his breath, “we do still need to discuss what we’re going to do about Taylor. This shit just keeps escalating and I’m feeling out of my depth. We need some sort of plan, some way we can get through to her and remind her who she is in case she starts to forget.” Greg gestured toward the open space to which she was leading him. “We’ll have some privacy to talk while you kick my ass.”

“Alright,” Sophia said to her friend as she set him up to face her, “the first rule is to keep your fists up and your chin down. Protect your face and your vitals...”

(BREAK)

It was surreal, for her hometown to have been the site of such an attack. Academically, Amy Dallon knew Brockton Bay was a hotbed of violence and always had been. The Teeth, the Marquis... That had been a tough bastard, ruling his section of the city like if Lung actually had scruples, a solo cape with the chops to chase off the Slaughterhouse 9. But she’d been far too young to remember when the supposed Bad Old Days had come to an end: she only knew the Bad New Days.

So many dead, and exponentially more injured. She’d set up and immediately started working when the transport dropped her off. For once, it was invigorating. Normally healing was drudgery, suffering through the same-old, same-old of ingratitude or misery as she fixed the same general problems. But this? It truly felt like she was making a difference as victims of the attacks left, whole once more. The horror in their eyes was a universal factor: they’d all stared into a nightmare and she was helping them move past it. Something in that made her feel good, made her feel like she was contributing to change – maybe even making things legitimately better.

An entire group clustered within Brockton General, tired and scruffy, looking like war veterans. Some still wore their jackets which identified them as the local Dockworkers’ Union, the 128th as if that made a difference. Amy could see the way they watched everyone else, the skittishness. She’d seen it before, although rarely: these were people who had been through a traumatic experience as a group, and were behaving almost like a pack of animals more than individual humans. They kept their most injured toward the center, while triage doctors bustled around them for the more mutilated victims.

Something twinged at Amy, told her to go talk to them. With an armed PRT trooper at her back to ensure her safety, she approached. “Can I help you with anything?”

“O-oh,” a bimbo-looking blonde startled. “You’re Panacea!”

Yes, Amy didn’t say, I’m Panacea. I’m glad you passed kindergarten. Your parents must be ever so proud.

Moments later she was glad she’d held her tongue. The blonde began rattling off injured parties from most to least wounded, pointing them out by name and even listing estimated blood lost. Some were relatively minor, like the stocky Kurt who only had some deep lacerations in areas that weren’t immediately life-threatening (“Hey, chicks dig scars,” he’d said with a smirk at the blonde, who rolled her eyes with a huff), while others like Alexander shocked Amy that they were even still alive.

“Why haven’t you gotten him to a trauma team?” Amy gestured at the unconscious bearded man.

“Honestly?” the spindly latino – Frankie, she thought he was called – responded, “pure nerves. I’m worried if I let go this bungee cord he’ll drop dead.”

“Oh, for the love of–” She tapped one of Alexander’s exposed arteries. “There, the blood vessels are sealed over. Pass him over to triage and if I have time I’ll see if I can grow his leg back.”

“We’d really appreciate it,” the blonde smiled. “Us dockworkers make our living through hard labor. If he loses that leg, well, that’s his livelihood gone too.”

Amy sucked her teeth. Of course, guilt.

“Could I trouble you to look at one more of our people?”

One of the seated dockworkers waved Lacey off while the other hand held a blood-soaked rag to his mouth. He was tall and lanky, slightly balding, with a weak chin. His head was covered in bruises and obviously his mouth had been brutalized.

“Dan’s trying to be stoic but he took a real beating and I’d appreciate it if you could at least make his mouth stop bleeding.” The blonde took a moment to gaze deep into Amy’s eyes and the parahuman healer could make out the subtext plain as day: *make sure he’s not going to die, please.*

“Sure, it won’t take long.” Panacea didn’t know why she agreed. It probably wasn’t the feeling of guilt, nor was this man particularly tripping her new sense of making a difference. But something compelled her to take his hand and look him over.

Dan’s head was in a bad way. She regrew his lost teeth but left the visible bruises to remind the doctors to do their jobs. She could work a bit with the blood vessels around his brain, help them to safely clot, but it was still worrying. He could suffer a hematoma or hemorrhage and drop dead, and the man was certainly concussed.

“I’ll make sure some people see you all, alright?” Once she turned away, Amy ground her teeth. This Dan was now partly her responsibility, so she needed to remind a doctor to get him a bed and make sure he didn’t die in his sleep.

Then she saw other people suffering from rather exotic wounds and felt that odd new giddiness return at the prospect of restoring them.

(BREAK)

Hours later, Danny Hebert drifted in and out of consciousness. He lay in a hospital bed beside the window, which was somehow cracked open. He wasn’t even sure if hospital windows could do that. But the chill night air felt nice, despite his head throbbing in agony.

Then he heard something he’d long since believed himself to have accepted that he would never hear again. The most beautiful voice in the world, at least to his ears, singing something deeply personal to both of them. The rhythm and gentle voice had soothed Taylor to sleep many times during that first colicky year of their daughter’s life.

So long ago I don’t remember when, that’s when they say I lost my only friend.

Well they said she died easy of a broken heart disease, as I listened through the cemetery trees.

It had to be a hallucination, brought on by his beaten skull. He tried to look out the window but from his position saw nothing. He tried to sit up but the world swam and he fell back into the bed and the papery pillow.

Almost failing to make sound past the lump in his throat, he answered with the next set of lyrics, and was rewarded by more of his wife's singing. Tears began to pour down his face as Danny sang, and wept, and remembered a time when he and Annette still held onto some hope that the world might be better for their daughter than it had been for them.

Outside, balanced on the narrow jut of concrete that made up a facsimile of windowsill, the woman known as Owl would not show up on any security cameras. But a few people, looking from just the right angle, saw her. And they saw tears spilling from her eyes down into the cloth that covered her face, as her voice echoed faintly with half the impromptu duet of the Wallflowers' *One Headlight*.