

## Sunder 5.5

As I had every day for the past week, I found Amy waiting for me at the top of the steps outside the front doors, although she looked distinctly less happy than she had the days previous. When I walked up to her, she turned to me, grimace in place, and offered an explanation without any prompting.

“Dean’s busy with his internship program, today,” she informed me with all the grimness of an undertaker, “so Vicky had to catch a ride with one of her other friends. She’s not entirely happy about that.”

“Oh.”

Again, Vicky and I weren’t on good terms, and the extra week hadn’t done anything to improve that. At the very least, she had yet to approach me at all, let alone to offer an apology for my broken arm and the ribs she’d bruised.

Amy jerked her head in the direction of the stairs. “Let’s get out of here, before she decides to come back and have a ‘sisterly bonding moment.’”

Like *that* would go well. They were fighting over me in the first place, so putting all three of us together would probably blow up in some way, and if a fight broke out, there went my secret identity. *In front of my school.*

I *really* didn’t want something like that to happen.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, and I fell into step beside her as we made the familiar journey towards the bus stop.

When we’d safely put Arcadia far enough behind us that I wasn’t worried about eavesdroppers, I asked Amy, “So, what was that all about?”

“What was what all about?” she asked back.

“That whole...*thing*, today at lunch.”

She glanced over at me. “You mean *Dennis*?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“You know, I don’t know?” she said, shaking her head. “Dennis isn’t really a cape geek, or... Well, a gossip, really. He’s not usually the one talking about the latest news on PHO about the new hero on the block or whether Assault and Battery are actually in a relationship. It’s not that he doesn’t keep up with that stuff or whatever, any less than anyone else probably does, I mean, but it’s not an obsession. Um, you know what I mean?”

“I...guess so, yeah.”

Even if you weren't a cape geek — and aside from something of a phase when I was younger, I'd never been — there were some capes you couldn't escape knowing. Alexandria, Eidolon, Legend, Hero. Armsmaster, Miss Militia, Mouse Protector. Lung, Kaiser, Skidmark. Capes that were in the news or in the public eye often enough that you couldn't have gone without hearing their names. Capes that were so big, either locally or nationwide, that they got more coverage and broader exposure than a politician up for reelection.

"I mean, I don't know him *that* well," she went on. There was a...*complicated* expression on her face. "Um, he's more...*Dean's* friend, you know? Than mine. Or Vicky's. But, uh, he doesn't...usually talk about cape stuff? I mean, if the conversation heads that way, then yeah, but other than that..."

I didn't say anything. It wasn't like I could correct her or anything. The sum total of my interaction with Dennis was that hour during lunch, and I'd never so much as seen him before that.

"Did, uh, that bother you?" Amy asked, brow furrowed. "Those rumors he mentioned?"

"A little," I confessed, frowning. "I mean, it wasn't like I hadn't heard about them before, but..."

A rumor that I was a murderer. Whether you considered what had happened to Sophia murder or not, the only people who should know what actually happened were me and the Protectorate — and the Protectorate only had the vaguest of ideas, because I'd never actually told them the full story or exactly what my defenses were capable of.

So, if we were the only ones who knew, then if *I* hadn't talked about it to anyone else aside Lisa and Lisa couldn't let it slip without betraying my trust, the only people left were...

I didn't want to think it, after how kindly Armsmaster had treated me, after the nobility he'd shown in all our interactions, few though they were. The feel of Miss Militia's arms as she helped me to my feet was one I could never forget. The smile she'd offered that first night would stay with me forever.

But there were only so many possibilities. If not me, if not Lisa, then the Protectorate was basically the only ones who could have.

...*Unless it was Coil*, I thought suddenly, and it very well could be. It didn't make me any happier, but it made sense, when I put it into context with what Lisa had said of him. He liked to use leverage to reel people in. Carrot and stick. Blackmail, if honeyed words and empty promises didn't work. If he didn't have a way of getting you, then he'd manufacture one.

And painting me as a murderous villain, telling the whole world I'd killed someone before, sounded like a perfectly valid method of burning my bridges and forcing me into his hands.

*Fucking Coil*, I wanted to snarl. I hadn't even done anything to him or anyone on his payroll, and he was already trying to come after me.

"Yeah, that's the roughest part about being a cape," said Amy, breaking me from my thoughts. A tired, knowing smile curled her lips. "The minute your name's out there, people like to start making stuff up about you. Who you're in a relationship with, what gang is gonna recruit you, who you

might be working for. You get all kinds of guys with all kinds of different theories and rumors they hear from ‘a friend of a friend.’ It’s all bullshit.”

Except this particular one was kind of true, I didn’t say. Explaining the circumstances of Sophia’s death would inevitably lead to my Trigger Event, and I wasn’t yet at the point where I wanted to share that with Amy.

*A great presence, filling me, consuming me, gnawing away at me from the inside out. Every part of me being transformed, altered, changed, to match **her** shape. Every thought unraveling, everything that made me **me** being overwritten —*

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said, locking that memory away. “Do you...ever get used to it?”

“Eventually,” Amy said with a tired sigh. She gave an exasperated shake of her head. “You learn to keep it from getting to you. That doesn’t stop it, though. People *still* wonder if I’m Othala’s long lost cousin or something, just because we both have healing powers. And Vicky, uh...” She coughed awkwardly, grimacing. “Still...gets, uh, kinda steamed, whenever someone calls her ‘Collateral Damage Barbie.’”

A startled laugh managed to tear its way out of my throat. “Wait, what?”

“Well, she’s an Alexandria Package,” Amy explained. “She can go through brick walls without much effort, you know? So, sometimes, she...*forgets* exactly how strong she is.”

My right arm twinged in remembered pain, and I grimaced, too. “Yeah, I guess so.”

It wasn’t like I was really any better. The fact that I hadn’t quite understood how strong Siegfried really was didn’t change how much damage I’d caused with him, that first night.

Amy coughed awkwardly again.

“Anyway, so, people started calling her by that nickname after one too many cars she broke or craters she made. It’s, uh. It stuck, and she’s not...really happy about it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I imagine not.”

I was sympathizing with Victoria Dallon. The oddity of that was not lost on me, that I was sympathizing with the girl who had done me grievous bodily harm.

“So, your advice is to just...deal with it?”

She shrugged. “It’s not like there’s much else you can do, you know? This is America. People have the inalienable right to be complete and utter assholes.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“What?” I managed.

She shrugged again. “It’s true,” she said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from being a healer the past couple of years, it’s that people are selfish, self-entitled jerkoffs who think that they deserve whatever it is they want from you, and if you don’t give it, you’re cruel and heartless and don’t deserve to call yourself a human being. People on the internet are the same: they think they can say whatever the fuck they like, and fuck you if you think it’s offensive, because the First Amendment means no one can tell them what they can and can’t say.”

“That’s... I mean...”

It seemed incredibly cynical, but I found that I didn’t have anything I could say to refute it. There *were* people making up rumors about me, but they were faceless bystanders who could be anywhere in the country — anywhere in the *world*. I had no power to stop them from saying whatever they wanted, and one way or another, trying would be a wasted effort.

It was a little frustrating, I had to admit. That I would have to simply sit there and watch people make up stuff, even when I told them they were wrong. That they could spread their rumors basically without consequence.

Maybe, because of Emma and the Trio, I was more sensitive to that than most. But it felt like I had the right to be.

“Even the Protectorate can’t escape it,” she went on, “and they have a whole department dedicated to public relations. That’s just the way it is.”

That wasn’t comforting at all.

“Grin and bear it, huh?”

“Grin and bear it,” Amy confirmed grimly.

Yeah, not comforting in the slightest.

Suddenly, Amy stopped walking, brow furrowing, eyes narrowing, lips twisting into a bewildered frown. “Wait,” she said.

I stopped, too, and turned to face her fully. “What?”

“Where *are* we?” she asked me.

“Chatham Street,” I answered immediately. “The way we’ve *been* going. Cross the street from the school, right, left, right onto Chatham, straight for two blocks, then left onto...Essex, I think.”

It was a bit out of the way, but bus schedules were what they were, so it was the only stop that would get her home at a reasonable time. It also skirted a bit closer to the Docks and Old Town than I thought either of us would have liked, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Taylor,” Amy said lowly, “this isn’t Chatham Street.”

“Sure it is,” I replied. “We took a right, then a left, then another right, so we should be...”

I turned to look around and stopped.

Because this *wasn't* Chatham Street.

“How did we...”

But it *was* familiar. Of course it was, this was the route I'd taken for almost two months to the warehouse where I'd been practicing my powers. It was nestled in the no-man's land between the city proper and the territory the ABB had staked its claim to, and this particular street ran parallel to Chatham, only about three blocks over.

It was also completely and utterly abandoned, because the people who used to live here had long ago learned that it was dangerous to live on the edges of gang territory, where the streets could violently change hands from day to day.

“We're on Jefferson Street,” I said slowly.

“Yes, we are,” Amy replied, like I was being stupid on purpose.

“How did we get on *Jefferson Street*?”

I'd been paying more attention to Amy than I had been the road, but the route we took had become familiar, become routine. Even if my eyes weren't watching, my feet knew the way; we'd gone the same way we had every other day, this week.

So, how did we wind up *three whole blocks* off course?

“Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?” Amy asked.

“I don't...think so?” I answered uncertainly. I shook my head a little. “No, because then we'd be somewhere else. Jefferson and Chatham are parallel.”

“Maybe we walked too far, then.”

I looked to her incredulously. “An extra *three whole blocks*?”

She scowled. “Well, unless you've got a *better* idea...”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “I don't,” I admitted.

Unless this was a cape's doing. Did Coil have a space warper on his payroll? I had no idea. I didn't *think* so, and I didn't think the Undersiders had one, either, otherwise the fight at the bank would have gone a whole lot differently. Did Coil have more than one villain team working for him? I didn't know *that*, either, and it seemed ludicrous, considering the kind of funding required to sponsor several teams like that.

But if it wasn't Coil, who else could it be? As far as I knew, the E88 and the ABB didn't have anyone like that, either. In fact, the only space warper in Brockton Bay that I knew about was —

Suddenly and without warning, the space around us wobbled and stretched out like a piece of elastic. The sidewalk became a football field. Five feet became fifty yards. The short walk that would have taken us to the front door of the apartments around us had transformed into a marathon. In a single instant, all avenues of retreat or advance had been bluntly cut off.

*What the...*

A space warper.

There was no denying it now, that was who had trapped us. Someone who could change the distance between points by stretching out the space between them. Arbitrarily turning inches into feet, feet into yards, yards into miles, increasing minor gaps into yawning chasms, creating craters out of potholes, that was the enemy who had cornered us on this abandoned street.

As my mind whirled, my body subconsciously prepared for combat. Fight or flight instincts surged through my blood. My weight shifted to the balls of my feet. My muscles tensed and pulled taut.

*Did* Coil have access to such a cape? That was something I couldn't know. Lisa might have known, perhaps, but...no. If Lisa had known Coil had someone who could warp space, she would have told me. That much I was certain of. It would be a betrayal of my trust to keep information like that from me and ran counter to her goal of escape.

It didn't remove the possibility. If Coil was half as paranoid as Lisa had asserted, then there were undoubtedly assets he kept from her. Compartmentalization. It was the greatest defense against a Thinker of Lisa's level. Therefore, it was within the realm of possibility that he had a space warper that neither Lisa nor myself was aware of.

However.

A power like this was *noticeable*, and for Brockton Bay, familiar. Utilizing it would invite comparison. Speculation. Inevitably, a degree of fame. The idea that Coil had somehow found and coerced a space warper of this level before they'd had a chance to use their powers in public even *once* felt like an incredible stretch. It was simply unlikely.

Therefore, if this wasn't one of Coil's pet capes, then the only other person in the city who could fit this power set was...

Three figures appeared just as suddenly across from us in this vast and empty arena. Two were dressed in white: one, a familiar statuesque blonde girl in a dress and cape, the other, a boy probably my age in a bodysuit decorated with clockfaces. Each one appeared to be moving at different rates, some slower, some faster, and none at the same speed. One took up his entire face.

Glory Girl. The boy could only be Clockblocker.

Between them was a much shorter girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, with blonde hair and a tinted green visor that covered her eyes and ears. She was decked out in panels of what looked like ceramic body armor, painted a forest green, that protected her chest and upper arms, and her skirt was patterned with swooping, undulating green and white lines.

Vista. It had to be.

In that case, the one who had trapped us here was undoubtedly her, as well.

“Independent villain Apocrypha!” she called across the gap. My heart stuttered to a halt. *What?* “By the power vested in me by the Parahuman Response Team, East-Northeast division, I am placing you under arrest for the murder of Shadow Stalker!”

“What?” I asked faintly.

But it was drowned out by Amy’s startled, “What the fuck?!”

My head swam, and my thoughts swirled around each other, chasing one another as I tried to grasp the situation happening in front of me. But my scattered thoughts didn’t have the coherency to put the pieces together, and so I stood there, staring dumbly at them, brow furrowed and mouth hanging slightly open.

This was...

What?

“No, what the *actual* fuck?!” Amy demanded. “What the fuck is this? Some kind of joke? Vicky, did *you* put them up to this?”

No, she didn’t. That thought gave me clarity, gave me focus. No, no matter how much she disliked me, Victoria Dallon could not be responsible for this situation. It was a simple impossibility, an unavoidable truth. To declare my cape name so confidently, to accuse me of killing Shadow Stalker, both required knowledge that she should not have.

Knowledge that only Armsmaster, that only Miss Militia and the Director of the PRT, should have.

My eyes turned to the other two. Clockblocker and Vista.

Knowledge that only *they* could possibly have access to.

Was it possible? I didn’t know. I didn’t know how. Armsmaster had assured me that the PRT wouldn’t be pressing charges, that it had been ruled self-defense. What I’d understood, too, was that they’d be keeping everything under wraps, and that they had no intentions of sharing my identity out. My interactions with him, limited though they were, had not inclined me to disbelieve him.

Then, what was this?

I...had no answer for that.

“Move away from her, Amy,” Victoria said stonily. “*Now.*”

“Not until you explain what the *fuck* is going on, Vicky!” Amy shouted back. “What do you think you’re fucking *doing*, pulling something like *this*?”

“I’m arresting a villain. A murderer, Amy!” Victoria snapped. “Who killed a *Ward*!”

“You can’t just go around calling someone a villain or a murderer just because you don’t like them!” Amy spat back. “Grow up, Vicky! *Grow. Up.* I made a new friend, *get the fuck over it!*”

“This isn’t about *that*, this is about her being a *villain*, like I told you *from the beginning* —”

“And you dragged Clockblocker and Vista into this fucking mess, too!” Amy talked over her. “Seriously, Vicky? You pulled them into *our* argument —”

“She didn’t drag *us* into anything!” Vista interjected suddenly. “I recruited *her!*”

“What?” said Amy, bewildered.

But all it did for me was confirm what I’d already suspected. Somehow, she’d found out the things only Armsmaster and Miss Militia should know.

“*I’m* the one who put this together!” Vista spat indignantly, jabbing her thumb at her chest. “*Me!* This is *my* op! Not Glory Girl, not Clockblocker, not the PRT or the Protectorate! *ME!*”

“What?” Amy repeated.

“And she!” Vista pointed at me. “She killed Shadow Stalker! I heard it from her own mouth!”

“What?” Amy said for the third time, somewhere between confusion and alarm.

“The *adults* want to sweep it under the rug, because Apocrypha is a Trump who beat *Lung* single-handedly!” I couldn’t see her eyes, not through the opaque visor, but the way her brow furrowed and the rictus of fury that curled her mouth told me more than enough. “They’re more concerned about how much more *useful* she is than one of their own *goddamn* Wards! They’re letting her get away with *murder* because she *might* be the next Eidolon or Glaistig Uaine!”

She tried to pin me with an accusatory stare. But compared to Lung, compared to the hateful, baleful gaze of a twenty-foot dragon, it was woefully inadequate. It just made her look younger.

I almost wanted to laugh. Not because it was funny or because it deserved to be laughed at, but because it was so *wrong*. “Is that what you think actually happened?”

“You, shut up!” Victoria snarled. “You managed to talk your way out of helping the Undersiders at the bank, but I’m not about to let you try and make excuses for *murder!* If you think I’m going to let you try and twist my sister’s head around some more, you’ve got another thing coming!”

Something hot coiled tightly in my belly. For a single moment, a brief flash, it was Blackwell standing across from me, telling me to stop making stuff up and wasting her time.

“*Excuses?!*” I spat. “How about the *truth?* Or doesn’t that fucking *matter*, if you’ve already made up your mind?!”

“I *heard* you!” Vista spat back. “You admitted it! You *admitted* killing her!”

“When?” I demanded furiously. “Where did you hear me say that?!”



“In the alleyway! After you captured Bakuda, while you were talking to Armsmaster! I *heard* you admit to killing Shadow Stalker!”

The confession stalled me. “You were there.”

“I captured Oni Lee!” she said, proudly and indignantly, like she’d been waiting for *years* to say it. “I’m the one who held him off until the tranquilizers knocked him out!”

“You did *what?*” Amy asked incredulously. “Are you fucking *insane?* He could have *killed* you!”

“I did what *had* to be done!” Vista countered. “I didn’t let him get away, like you and Miss Militia did!”

I tried to make sense of the idea, of where she could have been to both capture Oni Lee and listen in on my conversation with Armsmaster. There was no way she could have been in the alleyway itself, because we would have seen her, one way or the other. Miss Militia and Armsmaster had both come from the same direction, and if they’d passed her, she would have been caught, and if she’d been in either of the side alleys, my duplicate would have seen her when she went to retrieve Bakuda.

And if Oni Lee hadn’t gone in any of those directions, either, had teleported *up*, instead —

“You were on the rooftops,” I concluded.

Vista pinned me with a laser-like focus. “That’s right, I *was*. And I heard *everything*.”

The anger slithered back. “Then you know that —”

“I know that you *killed* her over a little bullying!” she spat. “Just because she —”

“A *little* bullying?” This time, I did laugh, a hollow, empty sound. “That’s all you think it was? A *little* —”

“I told you to *shut the fuck up!*” Victoria yelled. She started to rise off of the ground. “You don’t get to try and wiggle out of this again!”

Her aura blasted out from her like a physical wave, and a sudden fear shooting through my belly forced me to take a step back. It was only an intervention of willpower that kept it from being more.

“Actually, you know what? Fuck it!” she said with grim fervor. “This whole talking thing is over. You can make your excuses down at the PRT cells. I’m taking you down, right now!”

She pulled back her fist, started to turn, getting ready to charge me. My muscles pulled taut, readying for the fight, and I pulled back my own arm. If she was determined to make this into a fight, then I’d answer that.

It would go differently, this time.

“Amy, step back,” I said lowly.

“Wait, damn it!” Vista interjected. “I need to read her her rights, first! We have to do this as by the book as possible, or she’ll get away, Glory Girl!”

Victoria didn’t stop.

“*I don’t care!*”

“Okay, time out!”

A hand reached out, viper quick, and tagged Victoria’s bare leg, and instantly, she froze, mouth still curving around the last syllable, cape caught mid-flutter, utterly and unnaturally still. She was completely motionless, like a photograph or a movie paused mid-scene.

A statue.

“Wha — Clockblocker!”

“And...”

Clockblocker, who was the one who had frozen Glory Girl, turned to Vista, next, hand reaching out for her now, and she flinched away, starting to move — instead of her shoulder, he touched her skirt, and it froze, too, midway through swaying with the motion. Vista let out a startled gasp as she slammed against the frozen fabric, breath driven from her lungs in one, explosive sound.

“Cl-Clockblocker,” she wheezed, one arm wrapped around her ribs, “wha...fuck...’re you *doing?*”

“Following orders,” he said simply. “Miss Pig — uh, *Director Piggot* was pretty clear, the one thing that I couldn’t let happen was for this to turn into an actual fight.”

Cautiously, I started to let the tension bleed out of my body.

“Wh-what?!” Vista sputtered breathlessly. “You... You went... to the *Director?*”

“The minute you told me your plans,” he confirmed shamelessly.

“You... You sonnuva — !”

He held up his hands. “Hey, *you’re* the one who decided you knew better than the adults! I just figured, you know, there was no way it was a simple or as clear-cut as you thought it was! Also, it’s kinda stupid to try and bring down a Trump that beat Lung like a drum.”

“We could have taken her!” Vista snarled. “All you needed to do was touch her once —”

“Yes, but again, this *isn’t* as simple and clear-cut as you *think* it is,” Clockblocker rebutted.

“Something I know, since I, you know, actually *asked* Armsmaster and Director Piggot about it.”

“She killed Shadow Stalker! That’s pretty fucking simple and clear-cut!”

“And it’s missing a whole *load* of context and nuance,” he shot back, “and other important stuff that makes it *way* complex and convoluted, which, *again*, I know, because I *asked* about it. *Anyway.*”

He stepped around Vista, staying well out of reach of her arms, and came up to me. I tensed again as he raised his hand, but all he did was lift it to the section of his mask that would be about the level of his mouth and dramatically clear his throat.

“Independent hero Apocrypha,” he said formally, with the tone of something he’d practiced and rehearsed many times, “on behalf of Director Emily Piggot of the Parahuman Response Team, East-Northeast division, I’d like to apologize for this entire incident and any inconvenience it may have caused you.”

“...What?”

“What the *hell* are you doing, Clockblocker?!” Vista demanded.

“Uh, well, so.” He rubbed at his neck. “When Vista came to me with this whole convoluted scheme, for her and I to trap you out here and arrest you, I went to the Director and told her, ‘cause, you know, I figured she’d put a stop to it?”

“I...guess?”

I didn’t know the Director, so I had no idea what he would or could reasonably suspect of her, but he seemed to take it as encouragement to continue.

“Except the Director decided this’d make a good lesson, for some reason,” he went on. “You know, teach her about disobeying orders, going off on her own, acting on bad info? That sort of thing. Let her screw up, then reprimand her once it was all over. I was told to just keep an actual fight from breaking out, so no one got hurt.”

He laughed nervously.

“That was before, uh, Vista decided to bring Glory Girl in at the last minute. I gave Armsmaster a call the minute I could, so he should be on his way here to handle things.”

I thought I might have heard him say, “Thank God,” under his breath.

“You *what*?!” screeched Vista.

I scowled.

So, they’d let her throw herself at me to prove a point. From an outside standpoint, it made a degree of sense, because I was a hero and I wouldn’t *actually* hurt her, so if she was going to stumble and fall on her face, I was the safest option — except *I* was the one they’d let her throw herself at. Understanding *why* didn’t make me any happier about being a...a...an *object lesson*.

“I’m going to — what the fuck!?”

At that moment, Victoria unfroze.

Clockblocker let out a stifled groan and under his breath, muttered, “Great timing, power.”

She turned to him, looked at where he was standing, and it seemed to click inside her head. “You froze me!” she snarled. “What the fuck, Clockblocker!”

“He’s on *her* side!” Vista said, gesturing, as much as she could while trapped by her skirt, in my direction.

“*What?*” Victoria screeched.

“I’m on the *Director’s* side!” he corrected, holding up his hands. “The one with all of the facts and details!”

“You *told* on us?” Victoria snarled, fist raised threateningly. Splotches of red rose in her face. “You sonnuva — !”

“Hey, just because Shadow Stalker is dead doesn’t mean any of her stupid ideas are any less stupid than they used to be!”

“Fuck you, Clockblocker!” Vista spat. Her skirt fluttered and fell back into place, but she didn’t seem to notice. “Fuck you and your traitorous ass and your new murderer girlfriend, you —”

CRACK came the sickening sound of shattering bone. Vista’s right arm exploded, vanished, between blinks. Red blood spurted from the wound, splattered like raindrops all over the pavement — more, way more than seemed possible for a single person, from a girl her size. She did a nauseating mockery of a pirouette, completed one full spin, more blood surging from the stump of her shoulder, then collapsed onto her back like a puppet with severed strings.

For a long moment, we were all frozen, and we stood there, stunned. A puddle began to form underneath her, a gushing torrent of vivid red — blood, oh god, there was so much *blood* — that darkened the road and seeped out along the asphalt, expanding rapidly. My brain stuttered, died, tried to wrap itself around what my eyes were seeing, what was right in front of me, because it didn’t make *sense*. One second, Vista was *fine*, shouting, yelling, spewing anger at anyone in range. The next, *oh my god, her arm is gone!*

My stomach churned threateningly. My mouth was dry as a bone. There was no Siegfried in my head to offer experience and control.

CRACK came a sound like distant thunder.

It was Vista screaming that broke the echoing silence, the chilling, hair-raising sound of her screaming her lungs out. She thrashed on the ground as though trying to kill an invisible fire, kicking with her legs as her remaining hand went to her mutilated shoulder, rocking back and forth in her own blood.

For just an instant, for a fraction of a second, I was back in that alleyway, unable to see, unable to hear anything but my own screams, unable to feel anything but the agony of every nerve set ablaze. *I* was the one rolling on the ground, trying to douse flames that weren’t there, wishing, *begging* for it to just *end*.

Around us, the altered space snapped back to its natural shape and size, returning us to a normal street in the middle of Old Town. Vista's power collapsed as suddenly as she did.

It was enough to set us all back into motion.

"SNIPER!" someone shouted. It might have been Clockblocker.

"Get out of the open!" commanded Victoria.

I made to move and duck out of the way, but before I could do anything, something slammed into me, forcing me back a step, and tinkled as it fell onto the road. When I looked down, there was a deformed metal disk, roughly the size of a silver dollar.

A bullet.

Someone was trying to kill me.

"Taylor!" Amy's voice called me, and when I looked to her, she'd stopped, halfway to the restaurant where Clockblocker and Glory Girl were carrying the injured Vista inside, stricken.

I moved without wasting another moment, grabbing Amy as I went, and space bent around us as I *stepped*, and Vantage of Swiftness carried the two of us to the restaurant doorway. We stumbled through the door and into a dusty, abandoned room, with rundown tables and broken chairs, a musty countertop that stretched across half of it and sported an old, busted cash register. It looked like it hadn't been used in ten years, except maybe by squatters.

Glory Girl and Clockblocker were clearing off one of the tables, haphazardly throwing chairs and condiment containers out of the way, and once they had, they lifted a very pale, incoherent Vista onto the top of it. Splashes of red soaked her costume, and streaks of it clumped up her hair and painted grotesque patterns across her too-white skin.

She'd lost a lot of blood. Even I could tell, and I knew almost nothing about first aid or medicine.

Amy left my side before I even realized she'd moved, and she was pressing her hand up against the side of Vista's face. Before my eyes, the flow of blood from Vista's wound slowed to a trickle, then stopped.

"She's lost a lot of blood," Amy stated the obvious. "I've stopped the bleeding, for now, and I can use some of her fat stores to replenish the blood she's lost. I've numbed the wound so she doesn't feel the pain."

"Shit," Clockblocker swore quietly.

"Great going, Ames," said Glory Girl shakily.

I watched from the background, looking down at Vista, at her lolling head, at her ashen skin and her lips, now a faint shade of blue, as she babbled something under her breath — still, somehow, conscious after a blow that would have knocked a grown man out. She was flatter than I was,

although the armored plates that protected her chest did a good job of hiding it, and if she was taller than five feet, I would eat my shoes.

She was just a kid, I thought. Couldn't have been older than thirteen. Probably still in middle school. What did she know about what I'd been through? What did she know about what Sophia had done to me, about the Trio's cruelties? What did she know about Winslow and the useless staff and the hangers-on and social climbers?

Nothing. She didn't know anything about that. She didn't know anything about the shoves in the hallway, the trips on the stairs, the targeted barbs, the mean-spirited pranks, the desecration of my mother's flute — *the Locker*. She didn't know anything about Mister Gladly and his worthless, half-hearted offer of help. She didn't know anything about the girls who would sell their souls to be at the top of the pyramid with Emma, the teachers who neglected their duty because it was easier or because Sophia was a Ward.

She knew *nothing* about how I'd suffered for the past year and a half.

And how could any decent person — how could a *hero* hold that against her?

“Can you heal her?” I found myself asking.

Amy scowled and shook her head faintly. “The best I can do is close up the wound. I don't have the resources to do anything else for her, right now. We need to get her to a hospital before I try anything ambitious.”

“What about if I go out there and...” I hesitated, swallowing around the rebellion of my stomach. The image of it would remain burned into my brain for the rest of my life. “And get her...get her arm.”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Can you reattach it?”

“No,” she repeated.

“Even if I —”

“I can't!” Amy said impatiently. “You saw what happened out there, Taylor! There's not enough *left* of her arm! I work with biomass, I heal by converting biological matter from one shape to another! I can't just *magic up* extra flesh when I need it, I have to have something to work with!”

She couldn't? But even the meanest of healers in my repertoire were able to —

The idea struck me like a physical blow. I turned to her and said, “I can.”

“What?” she snapped.

“I can do it,” I repeated. “Heal her. Without extra biomass. I can do that.”

She gave me an inscrutable look, like she wasn't quite sure she could believe me. I couldn't say I blamed her — she was a professional healer, or as close as, and when you heard about mystical heroes, the first thing to come to mind was a warrior, not a medic. You thought magic swords and monsters and knights in shining armor. Not witches who could restore youth or heal grievous wounds.

That didn't mean I couldn't do it.

“I can do it,” I repeated.

Amy pursed her lips, then looked back down at Vista. For a long moment, she hesitated, obviously warring with herself over whether or not I could really do it. Then, “I'm going to keep her stable, but there's only so long I can hold her blood where it is before complications start to show up. You're going to have to work fast.” She pinned me with a hard stare. “Are you sure you can do that?”

“Amy, no!” Victoria hissed. “She's a *murderer!*”

Amy ignored her and repeated, “Are you *sure?*”

I didn't give her a verbal answer. Instead, I closed my eyes briefly, reaching into and through myself and out into the vast halls of legend. There were several heroes capable of doing what I needed, including the likes of Florence Nightingale, but there was only one with whom I'd forged a deep and abiding connection, only one who I was comfortable enough with to use her to save Vista.

“Set. Install.”

In a flash, I became the Witch of Colchis, and the knowledge of her healing magic opened up before me like a book. Spells for increasing fertility, spells for lifting mental afflictions, spells for breaking curses, spells to enhance physical strength, and most importantly, spells for undoing wounds of the flesh.

I stepped forward and Amy stepped around to the other end of the table, her hand remaining in place. Then, I reached out to Vista, to the mangled flesh where her arm had been torn from her body, and I spoke the words that tamed the power of the gods.

“Ἀσκληπιός Ἄκεσώ Αἰθήρηα.”

Vista's body began to glow, emitting a bright, blue light that radiated off of her. It gathered and condensed at the sight of the wound, filling in the rips and tears in her flesh and leaving unblemished skin in its wake, and then it started to move, growing out and long. It was like watching a puzzle being put together — as the shining motes started to form a cohesive shape, the glow flaked away one fragment at a time and evaporated, and in its place was skin and bone and muscle.

“Holey sheets,” breathed Clockblocker.

“Oh my god,” muttered what must have been Glory Girl.

What we were witnessing was a miracle, the divine power to restore wounds to an undamaged state. It was the authority permitting the reversal of injury, the revocation of harm committed upon the body, a magic of such perfection and utility that it could even be mistaken for time travel. The only thing which it could not heal was death.

Such was the power of Medea's spells. Such was the power of the woman that *Jason* had discarded.

It took only a handful of seconds for my spell to restore Vista's arm, and when the glow faded and I was done, a perfectly normal arm with perfectly normal skin and a perfectly normal hand was attached again to Vista's shoulder. It was not atrophied or flabby from disuse, there was no discoloration to show where her natural body ended and her restored arm began, and there was no scar anywhere on it. It was, for all intents and purposes, identical to the arm that had been blown off.

Groggily, Vista tried to lift herself up off of the table, wobbled, and failed. Her bare fingers — I had restored her arm, not her clothing — wiggled and twitched feebly, and she stared at her shoulder with half-lidded, barely-awake eyes. Several long seconds passed.

Then, she looked up at me, eyelids fluttering as she struggled against sleep, and slurring drowsily, said, "This doesn't change anything."

And without another word, her entire body went limp and her head fell back and she was out cold.