

## Sunder 5.6

What a mess.

I sighed and let my head fall into my hands.

What a *fucking* mess.

Vista, Glory Girl, Clockblocker... What I could only assume was one of *Coil's* henchmen... Vista losing an *arm*... Just...

I breathed out long and low through my nose, pressing the heels of my palms to my eyes as my glasses shifted up my forehead.

*Vista* had apparently been eavesdropping on my conversation with Armsmaster after the Bakuda fiasco, and somehow or another, she'd gotten it into her head that I was a cold-blooded murderer who had killed one of her fellow Wards over petty *bullying*. How she'd missed the important parts, the context, the *attempted murder*... Had she *not* been listening *at all*, or had she just conveniently dismissed some of the details?

I had no idea. Hell, I hadn't even known she'd *been* there, that night, so for all I knew, she showed up too late or left too early or any combination thereof.

I wasn't going to hold a grudge. I *wasn't*. I'd already decided that. I wasn't going to hold it against her, because she just didn't *know*. I was a better person than that.

Victoria, on the other hand...

I grunted.

And then, there was Victoria, who was making it very hard to be the better person. She seemed *determined* to find me at fault, like just because we'd fought in the bank, I *had* to be a bad guy, *had* to be the scum of the Earth, *had* to be every horrible thing parents warned their children about. She seemed absolutely set on seeing the worst in me just because she didn't *like* me, and I... I had no idea what to do with that.

Should I hate her? That was the easy thing, wasn't it. She was certainly doing her level best to make me hate her, and people had become mortal enemies for far less than a shattered arm or an attempt at an illegal arrest.

Except...doing the easy thing wasn't what heroes did, was it? Being a hero meant doing the hard thing, doing what was right rather than what was easy — and even more than that, I wasn't about to let *anyone* force me into doing *anything*, least of all a teenage girl caught up in her own self-righteousness.

As for Coil...

I grimaced.

Yeah, that was where that determination immediately got tested, wasn't it? If that sniper even *was* one of Coil's, but I couldn't think of anyone else who'd send a *sniper* after me out of costume, let alone with two Wards and the youngest members of New Wave right next to me. Admittedly, I wasn't an *expert* on the local villains, but of the usual groups, the Empire had no immediate cause to go after me and the ABB was, to the best of my knowledge, still trying to piece itself back together after losing all three of their capes. The Merchants, such as they were, probably didn't give enough of a damn to try and get rid of me, either.

That only left Coil, of the villains I knew. Coil, who had the scruples of a Bond villain and twice the ego. Who was perfectly willing to use blackmail or murder to get his way. Coil, whose conscript I was helping escape and whose power mine apparently messed with.

I let out another long breath through my nose.

Except that wasn't exactly true, either, was it?

Sure, in the vaguest of terms, according to the letter of my geis, I *was* helping Lisa escape Coil. I was arming her with techniques that would let her outrun his henchmen and dodge deadly blows from any capes he might send after her, I'd granted her access to my castle as a sanctuary, and I'd even given her an amulet that would protect her from just about any kind of conventional ordnance he tried to throw at her. By all means, I was handing her the tools she needed to get out from under his thumb.

But even if that was enough to satisfy the terms of my geis, it wasn't *actually* helping her escape. It wasn't handling the issue itself, it wasn't confronting him and forcing him to let her go. It was just my passive-aggressive bullshit to show Lisa that I still wasn't happy with that stunt she'd pulled, that even if we'd sworn that geis together and made that contract, I still hadn't forgiven her, yet.

My geis was to help her escape. It wasn't to handle her problem *for* her.

Except...that wasn't really fair, was it? That was the letter of the oath, but not the spirit of it. If I wanted to be a true friend, if I wanted to be a true *hero*, this passive-aggressive stuff and only helping her help herself wasn't the way I should go about it. Wasn't the way I *could* go about it, anymore.

Even if I had managed to convince myself to double down and keep going this way, Coil had just taken that option away from me.

I sighed again and looked up and across the street. The abandoned restaurant where I had healed Vista, where we had bunkered down and waited for an attack that never came, had been sectioned off and was now swarming with PRT agents. The splotch of road painted red with Vista's blood had been surrounded with bright yellow police tape, the puddle outlined with white chalk.

Off to one side, Victoria Dallan, somewhat shaken but somehow as pristine and unmarked as she'd been when she arrived, without even a drop of blood on her costume, was talking to a figure in armor that looked like a cross between futuristic power armor and a set of medieval plate. Gallant, it had to be. Kid Win, to my knowledge, didn't have a full face helm and had red and gold as his color theme.

Further along, Amy was talking to the PRT medics who had loaded Vista into the back of one of their vans, making gestures with her hands that told me she was laying out everything that had happened to Vista's body and what had been done — and how those treatments affected her — to treat her wound.

I watched, unsure of how to feel, as one agent reached down with a pair of tweezers and picked up the deformed disk that had been the bullet that hit me, then dropped it into an evidence bag.

That was the bullet someone had tried to kill me with. I knew next to nothing about guns and calibers and rifling or whatever, so I had no idea how big a standard rifle bullet was supposed to be, but...wasn't that a little too big? If that had *actually* hurt me, if I hadn't had my amulet to protect me, what would something that big have done to my body?

The image of Vista's arm exploding, throwing torrents of blood all over as everything below her shoulder disappeared in a spray of gore, rose back up in my head, and my stomach churned again.

Would I even have survived long enough for Amy to heal me? If I had, would she even have been able to?

No, I thought, Coil had taken the choice away from me. Whether I would've kept going as I was, giving Lisa only enough to help herself escape, or if I would've realized what I was doing and gotten more involved, it was immaterial, now. Coil had just tried to have me killed, had taken his first offensive action against me. Leaving him be was no longer an option.

*Just like Lisa said it would be*, whispered a thought in the back of my head.

And she had, hadn't she, back during the bank? She'd said that Coil would inevitably come after me, because the city he envisioned had no room for heroes or villains that didn't, in some way, answer to him. If you weren't on his payroll when he took over, you'd either be driven out of town or put in the ground.

And he'd just tried to put me in the ground. Like Lisa had said he would, he'd just *made* himself my problem.

How was I going to handle him? I wasn't sure, yet. I had a couple of half-formed ideas, but it wasn't going to be as simple as "go to his base, fuck up his day." If it was that easy, Lisa probably could have hired a mercenary group like Faultline and her team to take him out ages ago.

"Miss Hebert."

I jerked out of my thoughts and blinked up into the visored face of the Brockton Bay Protectorate's premiere hero, Armsmaster. A rather severe frown marred his bearded mouth.

"Armsmaster."

"You're uninjured?" he asked.

I gave him a sardonic smile. "Not a scratch."

How much hand had he had in today's events? I didn't want to believe it was all that much, if any. Consistently, he'd been kind and generous to me, fair to a degree that I hadn't seen in authority figures throughout my entire time at Winslow. He'd given no reason to doubt him, personally, even though the PRT and the Protectorate were at least tangentially responsible for a lot of the things that had gone wrong for me the past year and a half.

"Good," he grunted. "For the record, I didn't like this idea any better than you do."

I frowned up at him. "You didn't?"

Then why'd you go through with it, I wanted to ask. But I didn't need to be a high level Thinker like Lisa to know it wasn't that simple. He might have been the head of the local Protectorate, but it was a government organization with national reach, spanning the entirety of the country. Ultimately, *he* had someone he had to answer to, too. A person higher on the food chain.

And, I realized, they might not be as understanding about what had happened to Sophia as he was.

"No," he said with a grimace. "Neither did Director Piggot. Too risky, too many things that could go wrong, too much chance of alienating you. We were...overruled by the Chief Director. She thought it provided an opportunity both to teach Vista a lesson and to get a better grasp on your personality. We were told to assign Clockblocker to prevent loss of life on either side."

In other words, she, whoever this Chief Director was, wanted to see if I would try to kill a second Ward, because apparently, the rest of my track record of specifically *avoiding* lethal force somehow accounted for nothing. Right. Nevermind that I'd defeated Bakuda and Lung without killing them, had specifically admitted to *holding back* enough to keep from going too far, it was the psychopath who had thrown herself against my home defenses and tried to *kill* me that mattered more in judging my personality.

With all of that in mind, though...

"Should you be telling me this?"

Because it didn't sound like something a government official should be telling a private citizen. Or whatever I counted as when I was Apocrypha. What exactly *were* independent heroes, in terms of laws and legal stuff? Lisa might know, but I didn't have the first clue.

Armsmaster pursed his lips and took a second to answer.

"Not strictly speaking, no," he admitted. "However, in the interest of maintaining a cordial relationship, I decided that it would be better served to be as up front as possible about this situation rather than attempting subterfuge. Director Piggot would likely agree with me," he added.

"I see," I said, for lack of anything better.

I still didn't know much about this 'Director Piggot,' but what little I'd heard... Tough, but fair? Admittedly, all I had to go on was a few things Armsmaster had said and Clockblocker's formal apology.

I didn't know, though, what else you could be but tough as nails if you were in charge of the Brockton Bay PRT. This was home, but because it was home, I could say without any reservation that it was a hellhole, so you had to be made of pretty stern stuff to lead the charge against the likes of the E88 and ABB.

"Thank you, as well," Armsmaster said bluntly.

I blinked.

"For?"

"For healing Vista," he clarified.

"Oh." I shifted a little uncomfortably. "Well, what else was I going to do? I'm a hero, so I wasn't about to let her just suffer like that."

I thought I saw a brief smile flicker across his face. "Indeed." But if it did, it was gone too quickly to be sure I'd seen anything at all. "Now. I need to take your witness statement. Describe what happened, start at the beginning."

Funny, how all of this had actually started with [a](#) witness statement two weeks ago.

I took a deep breath, gathered my thoughts. "Well," I began, "I guess it started when I was walking Amy — uh, that's Amy Dallan — when I was walking with her to the bus stop..."

I told him what I remembered happening as best as I could. Some of it felt like a blur, like it had happened too fast for me to remember all of the details, but I tried to be as clear and truthful as possible. Walking to the bus stop with Amy. Realizing we'd overshot our usual route, somehow. Vista, Glory Girl, and Clockblocker showing up. The argument with them, the accusations — I couldn't remember the exact words, but I tried to get the general tone right, at least. Clockblocker freezing both Glory Girl and Vista's skirt.

I faltered a little when it came time to describe Vista losing her arm — blood, there'd been so much blood, and how *agonized* she'd sounded — but somehow, I managed to get through it and all the way to the end.

"...and then we took cover in the restaurant until you showed up," I finished.

He hummed. "Two bullets?"

"What?"

"Two shots were fired?" he clarified.

"Oh." I nodded. "Yeah. The first hit Vista, took off her arm. The second... The second hit me."

Without thinking, I reached up to the spot on my chest, and a phantom sensation of the impact tingled along my skin — a slight but sudden pressure, like someone poking me with a finger. In spite of how gentle the feeling had been, it had still been enough to push me back a step.

He frowned. “And yet, you’re uninjured.”

“Yeah.” I hesitated. How much should I tell him? How much *could* I tell him? Lisa had told me that Coil had his fingers in the PRT, that he had moles and spies, which meant that anything I told Armsmaster that got put down in some file somewhere would be open to him finding it.

“I, uh... Can I say something? Unofficially?”

But I trusted Armsmaster. He hadn’t done wrong by me, yet.

He frowned and tilted his head for a moment, then gave me a short, clipped nod. “Go ahead.”

“I think...both of those shots were meant for me.”

It was something I had had a lot of time to think about, while we were huddled in the restaurant, prepared for a shootout. Why Vista? What could have been gained by shooting — killing, or at least maiming, if Amy and I hadn’t been there — a Ward in broad daylight? What could she have done that warranted such an extreme application of deadly force, such that an inch or two in one direction would have...have *disemboweled* her?

Nothing that I could think of. Nothing that would put her on *Coil’s* bad side, anyway.

Except...she’d been basically right across from me, and while I wasn’t an expert on bullet trajectories (although some of my archer types might have known better), it seemed reasonable to me that the bubble of warped space we’d been inside of could easily have thrown off even an expert marksman.

And the second shot? The second shot that had come just seconds after that bubble popped? That one had been aimed at *me*.

Armsmaster frowned. “Explain.”

“I think... I think this was Coil.”

He grunted. “Coil?”

I bit my lip, chewing on it uncertainly for several seconds.

“I... I have a friend,” I began haltingly. “She’s a...a pretty high level Thinker. He forced her, at...at gunpoint, to work for him. Conscripted her. She told me that my power...my power apparently messes with his.”

“You’re certain?” he asked gravely. “You’re *sure* she said he has a power?”

“She isn’t sure of all of the specifics, but yes,” I told him. “A Thinker power of some kind. Precognition, maybe.”

“That would make sense,” he muttered to himself. “Trumps and other Thinkers *are* sometimes known to affect the performance of a Thinker power, particularly precognition.”

He murmured something else I didn't catch, then turned his attention back to me. "Continue."

"One of the things she made sure to impress upon me was how dangerous he is," I said. "Amoral. Ruthless. A Bond villain is how she described him. If you don't factor into his plans, he'll *remove* you."

Armsmaster's mouth pulled into a grim line.

"And because your power skews the effectiveness of his..."

"I think both shots were meant for me," I concluded. "The first one just missed. Something to do with Vista's power, probably. The second one didn't."

He looked me over again. "And yet, you're unharmed."

"I..." I hesitated. "Can I...keep *how* a secret?"

"Why?"

"Li — *my friend* says that...that he has *spies* in the PRT," I said. "Moles. Anything that gets put on an official report —"

"Will wind up in his hands," Armsmaster concluded gravely. He grunted and did not look at all happy. To himself, it seemed, he muttered, "We'll have to upgrade security protocols."

For a long moment, he worked his jaw. At length, he told me, "I'll keep this information out of the official report. The only one I'll inform is Director Piggot."

I breathed a short sigh. "Thank you."

He nodded brusquely. "Apocrypha," he said, "I'm glad that you're okay."

And having said so, he turned and walked away, just like that, nodding to the figure who approached slowly, as though he'd been waiting for us to finish talking.

"Uh, hey..." said Clockblocker awkwardly.

"Hi...?" I replied uncertainly.

"So...um...I'm sorry...about today," he told me slowly. "It, uh, wasn't...exactly my idea, you know? And, well, if it'd been up to *me*, this whole...crazy plan wouldn't've happened. Because the whole thing was stupid. Stupidly stupid. Stupid squared."

That... That was... How...

"What?"

How did he...?

“I tried to warn you, earlier,” he went on. “But, uh... Heh. Guess I’m...not cut out for this spy stuff, you know? That whole double-talk thing you see in the movies. It’s harder than it looks, and I screwed it up pretty bad. Just as well, I guess. Who ever heard of a redheaded James Bond?”

No way. *Seriously?*

“You’re... *Dennis?*” I squeaked.

“Shh!” One finger lifted to where his mouth should have been. Then, he cast a quick glance around and lifted the mask away to reveal the familiar face of a boy with a shock of red hair and brilliant blue eyes. “At milady’s service,” he whispered with a wink and a grin.

A moment later, the mask was shifted back into place.

I... what? I had...no idea how I was supposed to react to that. Dennis was Clockblocker? Dennis was a *cape*? In what world...?

Something Amy had said before clicked into place in the back of my head.

“Wait,” I said. “Amy said...said that you’re one of Dean’s *friends*. Does that mean that Dean’s...?”

It was possible, wasn’t it? There were three other boys in the Wards — Kid Win, Gallant, and Aegis — and any one of them could correspond to the blond pretty boy I had seen Victoria spending so much time with at lunch.

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies,” Denn — *Clockblocker* said, one hand raised. I could almost hear the smile in his voice. “But, uh, officially? Don’t go looking. And if you *do* figure it out, keep it to yourself?”

The unwritten rules. Don’t go looking for a cape’s secret identity, don’t go trying to use it against him. Keep family out of it.

“Right,” I said. “Right, yeah. Sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“No harm done,” he assured me. “Just, uh, the PRT gets kinda titchy on the subject of who the Wards are under the mask, you know? We don’t want to give them a reason to pull out the scariest thing in their arsenal, so...hear no evil, right?”

My brow furrowed. “Scariest...?”

“Lawyers,” he replied sagely. “They carry the most frightening of all weapons: NDAs.”

I couldn’t help myself. I snorted, and a short laugh escaped my lips.

“Ah, there we go,” said Clockblocker. “So, the pretty lady can smile, after all. I’ll have to practice my best jokes for next time.”

I felt heat flood my cheeks and had to look away. I hoped he hadn’t seen.

“Anyway. Where was I? Oh, right, yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Yeah. I tried to warn you today at lunch, but that obviously didn’t go too good, huh?”

“No,” I mumbled. “No, it didn’t.”

“And, uh, yeah, uh...” He trailed off awkwardly. Sighed. “I *am* sorry. I wasn’t... I didn’t know how to do it without outing myself, so I probably just came across as being weird and stupid. I guess that was kinda pointless, since I wound up outing myself *anyway*...”

For a moment, there was silence. Then, at length...

“Look. I know today was really screwed up and this whole thing was a mess,” he began, “and you totally have every reason to be upset and every reason to hate her guts, but...please don’t think too badly of Vista. Even if none of us really *liked* Shadow Stalker, it’s...it’s not easy, losing a teammate, you know?”

I didn’t. I didn’t know anything about losing someone like that, a coworker you didn’t like but someone who was part of your *team*. I had no idea what that was like at all, although a few of my heroes might, if I went looking.

But I *did* know what it was like to lose someone. To lose someone you cared about. The hole they left when they were gone, the way you felt so *lost* in the aftermath. Like someone had taken away your rudder and left you to drift in an empty boat.

“And Vista... Vista took it the hardest,” he went on. “And yeah, I’m not saying Shadow Stalker wasn’t a...a bitch or that you’re a horrible person if you don’t miss her in the slightest, but...”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I get it.”

I looked up at him. “You know the whole story, right?”

I heard something from him that might have been a sigh. “Yeah. All the sordid details.”

“Do you blame me?”

“...No,” he replied. “But I think that’s why this whole...*this*, happened. We weren’t told anything about her death, and Vista... I guess she just wanted someone to blame. Someone she could be angry at. Without any outlet or some kind of official word from the bigwigs...”

“I made the best target,” I concluded.

“Only better one would’ve been wearing a bullseye.”

I felt my lips twitch against my will, but I’d schooled my expression by the time I offered him an unimpressed look.

“Ouch,” he said. “Tough crowd. I’ll have to turn in my funny man card if I can’t get another laugh out of you.”

...I liked Dennis, I decided right then. He just had this...I didn't know how to describe it. Aura? Presence? If Armsmaster was noble and heroic, the kind of stoic figure that stood strong against the dark, then Dennis was personable and down to earth. Easy to talk to. The kind of guy who could make you feel better with a joke or two, even if you were about to walk to certain death.

"I don't. Blame her, that is," I clarified. "I mean, it'd be easy to. Really easy. After Sophia... Painting the rest of you the same would be so very *easy*. But I won't, because that's not right. That's not what a *hero* does. Being a hero means doing what's right, always, even when, *especially* when it's hard. So I don't blame her. I don't blame you. I'm not *happy* about it, but... She doesn't know." I looked at him. "*You* didn't know. Sophia's sins are her own. And I'm not about to start hating people because they don't realize the extent of them."

He was quiet for a moment, then he shook his head and laughed. "Oh man," he said. "You're making us look bad, you know?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"I...sorry?"

"For what?" he asked. "Hell, there's probably a few heroes in the *Protectorate* who could take a lesson or two from you. Man, they could hire you as a motivational speaker."

I felt my cheeks start to burn, because that *was* pretty flattering. I didn't know if it was exactly *true*, but it was definitely flattering.

He shook his head again. "Alright. I hate to cut and run, but Miss P — uh, *Director* Piggot is gonna want to hear my report. I'll see you on Monday?"

"Monday?" I asked bewilderedly.

"At school," he clarified. "You know. In my civvies?"

"Oh," I said. "Right. Yeah. School. Because we both go to Arcadia."

*Shut up while you're ahead, Taylor.*

"Later!" he said with a wave, and as I lifted my own hand, he turned and left.

So. Dennis was Clockblocker, huh? Couldn't say I saw *that* coming. But it *did* make some sense, I supposed. That nonsense from lunchtime certainly made a lot more sense, now. The strange things he'd said, the focus on my cape ID and the rumors surrounding it... Yeah, I could see how some of it could be taken as a warning of what Vista would try to do, in hindsight.

Only in hindsight, though. Even if I'd known from the beginning that he was Clockblocker, I didn't think I'd have had any easier a time figuring out what he'd been trying to tell me. As great a guy as he seemed to be and no matter how much I liked him, Dennis definitely wasn't that good at the spy stuff and the subterfuge, and the less said about his attempts at clever doubletalk, the better.

He was right, he'd have made a *terrible* James Bond.

I wasn't sure it would've made a difference if I *had* known. What would I have done, called up Armsmaster and demanded he call the whole thing off? Like that would have worked. No matter how powerful I was or what I'd done so far, I was still a newbie in terms of heroing, and not only was Armsmaster a veteran, he was also under no obligation to listen to me. It wasn't like I was his boss or whatever. It would've been perfectly within his rights to tell me to fuck off.

And I couldn't have come ahead or planned something to deal with things, either. A lot of the things my casters could've done to deal with Vista's power required setup — usually on the order of hours or days, which wouldn't have been at all feasible while I was sitting in a classroom — and if I'd just popped out Medea and used a spell to hold them in place, well, that had its own problems — namely, Amy, who probably wouldn't have been very amused watching me trap her sister and two Wards in place with a spell.

By chance, at that moment, I looked up and across the road, and at the same time, Amy turned around and looked in my direction. Our eyes met, something passed between us, and a premonition of cold dread dropped into my stomach like a stone.

She turned back to the person she was speaking to, but her eyes never left mine, and after a parting comment to the technician or EMT or whatever he was, she turned in my direction again and started over.

“You will be visited by three ghosts,” I murmured to myself, struck by a sudden humor.

Did that make me Scrooge? Because I didn't think that really fit.

At the last few feet, she stopped and hesitated for a moment. I watched her bite her bottom lip, watcher her brow furrow and her eyes narrow, as my heart fluttered nervously in my chest.

Would she hate me, once she knew? Lisa had told me that I had the right to defend myself, Armsmaster had said the PRT decided it was self-defense, and I only felt guilty that I didn't feel guilty for what had happened to Sophia. As I'd told Detective Chase, there were only so many ways to escalate from attempted murder, and I had no pity in my heart for the grim fate of the girl who had put me in *the Locker*.

But would Amy be as understanding?

I wanted to believe she would be. I wanted to believe that the last week hadn't just been me deluding myself that I could have a friendship that didn't suffer some kind of break or betrayal and didn't have an ulterior motive. I wanted to believe that this wouldn't end in heartbreak.

I wanted to believe it, but some part of me, the jaded little girl who had hardened her heart throughout nearly two years of misery, just couldn't.

“Taylor,” Amy said as she came upon me.

“Amy,” I replied quietly.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out shakily.

“We... We need to talk,” she told me.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Yeah, I guess we do.”

I stood up and followed her as she led me further down the street, away from the agents and paramedics still going over the scene and out of earshot. When she’d judged we were far enough, she turned back around to face me.

“Is it true?” she asked me tremulously.

“Which part?”

“Damn it, Taylor, this isn’t a game!” she snapped. “They — she — you were accused of murdering a...a *Ward!* And you *didn’t deny it!*”

She gestured wildly back down the road, towards where the puddle of Vista’s blood even now was being scrubbed off of the asphalt.

“You can’t just flippantly ask me — *and why aren’t you screaming at me about how wrong I am?!*”

“Because, in a way, it’s true,” I told her quietly.

Her face fell and she looked as though the world had just dropped out from under her, and for a moment, it seemed like she’d even forgotten to breathe. It was the face of a girl who had just had her heart broken and didn’t know what to do.

In a way, it *was* true. Sure, it was Sophia’s own fault for charging recklessly through my yard, apparently so intent on...on *killing* me that she’d managed to make it past my fear ward, and I hadn’t actually swung the blade that cut her in half or given the order to the specific Dragon Tooth Warrior who *did* cut her in half. But they were my defenses. I had set them up with lethal capabilities, knowing that someone might in fact be dedicated enough to my death to brush off the utter certainty that they would be walking to their own doom.

I just hadn’t expected that someone to be Sophia Hess, rather than Hookwolf or Krieg.

So, by proxy, yes, I *had* killed Sophia. There was just a lot of context missing by condensing it down to something that simple.

Context that Amy didn’t have, I knew, as I watched the utter despair on her face begin to harden into cold anger. Context that Vista hadn’t had.

Context that only *I* could give her. Context that I *had* to give her, if I wanted to salvage this friendship.

I tore my eyes away from Amy’s face, working my jaw anxiously as I tried to come up with something.

I hadn't wanted to have this conversation so soon. It was... It was a deep trauma, and although Lisa had managed to convince me to go that far for her, I'd been burned, and I hadn't wanted to let Amy that deep into my heart, just yet. I hadn't wanted to *rush* it, the way things had gone with Lisa.

But there was nothing else I could do. Nothing except let Amy hate me and walk out of my life.

"So, that's it, then? Vista was right? You *murdered* a Ward, and the PRT is letting you get away with it because you're a powerful Trump?"

"No," I said, making my decision. "It's not that simple. There's a lot of details — *context* that Vista was missing."

"*Context?*" Amy spat. "There's *context* that makes murder —"

"Do you remember your Trigger Event?" I asked her, cutting her off. Her mouth snapped shut and her lips thinned into a line. I didn't need for her to say it to know the answer. "Of course you do. *Every* cape remembers. It's not something you can forget, is it?"

"What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"The girl Vista accused me of murdering is Sophia Hess," I said, "and she caused my Trigger Event."

Her mouth fell open. "What?"

"She was a thug and a bully," I went on, "and she spent the last year and a half doing her level best to make my life a living *hell*. Her, her two friends, and their posse of leeches have spent every day doing whatever it took to make me miserable. Every mean-spirited prank you can think of, I've probably been on the other end of it."

Amy's lips pulled tight. "And so you killed her for it?"

"No," I denied woodenly, "*she* tried to kill *me*."

It threw her for another loop, and her eyebrows shot up into her hairline. "What?" she repeated.

"There was an incident in January," I told her. "First day back from Christmas break. I opened my locker to find it stuffed full with used pads and tampons, smelling like it'd been sitting in there to fester for *months*. The smell of it was so bad, I lost my breakfast right then and there. Just threw everything up right into the mess."

Amy looked faintly green.

"I hadn't even got my wits back about me before someone grabbed me from behind and shoved me in with the muck and the grime and my own vomit," I continued. "Had to be Sophia. None of the others were brave enough or strong enough to grab me and shove me in. She locked my door behind me, left me in there with the garbage to rot. I begged them to let me out, and. She. *Laughed*."

I took in a breath to push back the memories that tried to crowd their way forward.

“I was left in there for three hours. It felt like days. I was in the hospital afterwards for a week, and it wasn’t until February that I was back in school. And at the end of the day, *no one was punished.*”

“So, you punished her instead?” Amy asked tremulously.

It *had* been tempting. In my darkest moments, I’d considered it. I’d seriously thought about it. If no one was going to give me justice, then why *shouldn’t* I just take it? That was what had been going through my head for a large portion of January.

In the end, though...

“...No,” I said. “No, I went back to being their punching bag, because I wasn’t about to use my powers on them and let them make *me* the criminal. And in the meantime, I made preparations to make my debut as a hero. I researched the myths and legends behind my heroes. I practiced with my power in an abandoned warehouse. Most importantly, I set up protections around my house, so that any enemies I made as a hero who were looking to get back at me or my dad *wouldn’t* get that chance.”

She worked her jaw, confused. “So? How’d you kill her, then? *Why?*”

“I told you,” I said, “*she* tried to kill *me.*”

Amy’s brow furrowed again, bewildered, but after a moment, comprehension dawned on her face. “Wait. You don’t mean...”

“Do you remember the Dragon’s Teeth, Amy?” I asked instead. “In the legend of Medea and Jason?”

“...No,” she replied after a moment, “can’t say that I do.”

“The legend has it that Medea sowed the ground with the teeth of a dragon, and from those teeth sprouted warriors, all fully armed and twice as strong as any ordinary man,” I explained. “So, I sowed my yard with Medea’s Dragon’s Teeth and set them as my second line of defense, to trigger if anyone was so determined to hurt me that they made it past the first. It was *supposed* to be for hardened killers like Hookwolf, but Sophia Hess did her damndest over the last two years to prove that she was a worse human being than I ever expected.”

“And she tried to kill you,” Amy concluded. “But...*why?* What did you do to make her *hate* you *that* much?”

My lips quirked into a mirthless half-smile. “I talked back to her.”

“What?” Amy asked incredulously.

“Three weeks ago, I beat Lung, and the next day, I was feeling *really* good about myself. Like I could rise above everything they threw at me and nothing they said could ever bring me down. So, when Sophia and her friends started in on me that day, I fought back. I told her that she’d never amount to anything other than a burger flipper at Fugly Bob’s or a street-walker making money on her back.”

Amy snorted, then waited a moment for me to continue. After a few seconds, she asked, “Wait, that’s it? *That’s* what she was willing to *kill* you over?”

“She tried in January just for *kicks*,” I reminded her. “Because she thought it would be *fun*. After I showed her up in front of her friends? It would’ve been more surprising if she *didn’t* try something.”

“But *murder*?”

I met her eyes and gave her another mirthless smile. “Like I said, Amy. Sophia Hess has spent the last two years doing her level best to prove that she’s a worse human being than I ever thought she was.”

She bit her lip again and chewed on it for a few seconds. “Does the PRT know? The Protectorate?”

“The broad strokes,” I answered. “They never really asked *exactly* how Sophia died, so I never really told them. They know what she did, though, they know the important parts. Armsmaster himself told me that the PRT had filed it as self-defense and that there were no plans to formally charge me with anything.”

“And Vista...”

“The conversation Vista overheard was just that: Armsmaster telling me I wasn’t being charged with murder. How much of it she missed, what parts she didn’t hear or misheard, I don’t know. But it’s obvious she didn’t hear *everything*.”

I had a few vague ideas, but... Really, there was no way of knowing exactly what she had and hadn’t overheard.

“So this, all of *this*...” She gestured down the street behind me, to the spot where the confrontation had happened and Vista had lost her arm. “It was all over a misunderstanding?”

I gave a helpless shrug, because at the end of the day, that was basically it, and Amy fell into silent contemplation, frowning thoughtfully.

After a few seconds, I asked, “So...what now?”

“Now?” She sighed. “Now, I get to go home and probably have another argument with Vicky about all of this, maybe answer some hard questions from Carol, and sit through the most awkward dinner *imaginable*. And it’s the weekend, too, so the next forty-eight hours are gonna be filled with *so much bullshit*...”

A wave of relief washed through me. She believed me. I hadn’t just lost another friend.

“You could...have dinner with me,” I suggested.

Amy blinked, thrown. “What?”

“Dad’s been after me to bring my, uh, new friends over for dinner, so he can meet them,” I explained. “You and Lisa, I mean. So... I mean, if you want to, you can have dinner at my house.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “Oh. *Oh*. No, I thought you meant...”

I frowned. “Thought I meant what?”

Plotches of red rose in her cheeks, but she shook her head and said, “Nevermind. Um, sure, yeah. If you think your dad will be okay with it, I mean.”

I smiled. “Great.”