

Sunder 5.a: Binary Liquidation

In hindsight, Lisa should have been expecting it. To be entirely fair, she *had* been, although she'd been more iffy on the *when* and the *how*.

That was, in the end, what tripped her up. She thought she'd have more time to plan, to get things ready, to prepare. More time to stack the deck in her favor, remove some of the riskier variables, figure out a way to *win*.

Real life, unfortunately, didn't actually work that way.

Friday started normally enough. Contrary to what tv dramas or action thrillers would have her believe, she didn't wake up that day with a bad feeling or any sense of impending doom. She didn't wake up with any particular foreboding, with any vague surety that *something* was going to go wrong, today. She did not wake up wanting to run for her life without any real reason *why*.

It was a perfectly normal day. A bit overcast, but nothing as cliché as a downpour that was drowning the streets or an ominous thunderstorm threatening along the horizon. There was nothing that had been moved since she'd set it down the night previous, no indication of anything wrong, no smoke wafting under her bedroom door or nutty smell in her coffee.

Later, she thought to herself, *Isn't that the way it is for people who die of strokes or heart attacks or in car crashes?*

Of course, life did not come with convenient indicators that something was going to go terribly wrong that day when you woke up. Because that would be too convenient, for someone like Lisa. Easier to avoid.

Nothing happened immediately, though. When she went into the kitchen, the coffee maker didn't explode. When she got out of the shower, her hair dryer didn't electrocute her. When she sat down to eat, the toaster didn't catch fire. She ate breakfast as she usually did — although, considering it was a bowl of creamy potato-and-spinach soup, it might have been more appropriate to call it lunch — drank her coffee, showered, braided her hair — everything she did every day when she woke up, completely uninterrupted.

Then, she plopped down on the sofa and checked in on PHO, to catch up on the news and see what people were currently buzzing about. Even almost two weeks later, the discussion about the capture of Oni Lee and Bakuda was still going strong, and it showed no signs of slowing down. PHO had lost its collective shit when the PRT and Protectorate had announced that they had helped the new heroine, Apocrypha, take down the ABB's remaining capes — importantly, that *they* had helped *her*, and not the other way around.

That was a *big fucking deal*. Lisa didn't need to be a Thinker to see exactly how hard they were trying to appease Taylor, because *holy shit*, the PRT *never* gave that much credit to anyone else if they could manage to avoid it. There was a *reason* that people on PHO sometimes joked that the “PR” in “PRT” actually stood for “Public Relations.”

It only added to the hype surrounding Apocrypha, the new independent hero who had ousted the ABB as a major power in Brockton Bay in less than a *week*.

If the E88 hadn't fallen apart, currently squabbling and infighting and trying to figure out who should be the new leader, now that Kaiser was dead, a meeting probably would've been called to figure out how to deal with her. The only major group unaffected, now, was the Merchants, however, and they only cared insofar as the chaos benefited them.

The ABB leaderless and falling apart, the Empire tearing itself to pieces as they bickered about who should succeed their late "emperor" on the throne... Looking back on it, she probably should have known what was going to happen as a result of all of that. There were other players in the game who wouldn't take kindly to a newcomer that seemed to be peeling the villains apart, one gang at a time.

She closed out of PHO and shut her computer down once she was done checking up on the news, then made her way back to her bedroom to finish getting dressed. The shirt, skirt, and leggings she'd picked out the night before were put on without any fanfare or trouble — they were casual clothes, because she was going to meet Brian and Alec for coffee, not have dinner with the Mayor. Her phone and her purse were both grabbed without thought, and the last thing she did before she left, as she had done every day for the last two weeks, was slip on the amulet Taylor had given her.

The door was locked and her secret alarm armed on her way out. It wouldn't stop Coil or even a determined burglar, but it *would* let her know if her "boss" was trying to snoop, and that was why she'd bought it in the first place.

Standing on the sidewalk outside of the Loft, Lisa checked her watch. Two-fifteen. She was supposed to meet the others at two-thirty.

Stifling a yawn, Lisa started off towards the Boardwalk and the gourmet coffee shop they'd agreed to meet at. She'd have to take it easy for a few days, she decided. She was already brushing up against the limits of how much and how often she could use her powers, and Coil would undoubtedly want someone to attack the Mayor's fundraiser, next weekend. She needed to be in top form if it wound up being the Undersiders.

It took a little over ten minutes to make the walk to the Boardwalk and only another minute or two to make a beeline for the coffee shop, a quaint little place with an outside terrace and a spectacular view of the city skyline. There was no sign of either of her teammates waiting for her, so she went up to the counter and splurged a little on one of the designer coffees that was this shop's specialties.

It was always fun to watch a barista who loved his job carefully mix her drink, the effort he put into stirring not too fast or too slow, in exactly measuring the amount of sugar and cream she asked for. Just for the dedication he showed (a boy a few years her senior, named Richard, who thought she was way out of his league, but wanted to do something nice for her), she offered him her prettiest smile when he handed over her mug and stuffed a generous five dollar tip in his jar.

The exuberant "thank you!" he called after her made her day, and she wasn't ashamed to admit it.

Sipping at her coffee, she left the shop main and found a seat at a table on the terrace, picking particularly one farther away and less conspicuous — the better to have a clandestine meeting. Not

that it would matter overmuch, because schools were only just starting to let out and it was way too early for too many people to be there. Aside a few college kids, she was alone.

Ten minutes passed as she sat there, nursing her coffee, looking out at the distant rooftops of the city's skyscrapers. A couple of high school girls came and went, chatting inanely about something or other (the blonde, Angela, was gushing to her friend, Nicole, about the football player she had a crush on by the name of Brad), and for a moment, Lisa found herself jealous of them.

What did they have to worry about? Boys, clothes, shopping. Getting good grades and getting into a good college. They weren't plotting the overthrow of a supervillain or trying to juggle a nuclear warhead in the form of a teenage girl. They had it so much easier.

How much simpler her life would be, if Coil and powers and capes didn't exist. How much better things might be, if she was just a normal girl in a normal world, where her biggest concern was who she was going to take to Prom. She wondered, would she still be friends with Taylor? Would her life have been any better? Or would she still be stuck with parents who sucked at being actual parents, hating every moment of her life and unable to escape?

Lisa sipped her coffee and told herself that it didn't matter, because it hadn't happened. This was the world she lived in, not that imaginary one. It was no use pondering that sort of what-if. Life wasn't like Alec's video games, where you could go back to a previous save and try again. Besides, aside from the obvious things, there wasn't much about her life now that she disliked and even less that she hated.

If she had the choice, she'd choose to keep her powers every single time.

Probably, though, she'd never have come to Brockton Bay. She wasn't sure she would've fared any better in another city, but it wasn't like *all* villains had the resources that Coil did. It was just as likely she could have avoided being press-ganged if she'd just gone to Pittsburgh or Seattle instead.

By the time Lisa had finished navel-gazing long enough to check the time, another ten minutes had passed her by. There was no sign of Brian or Alec, and no call had been received by the phone she'd set down on the table. When she checked her watch, it said two-fifty — they were already twenty minutes late.

Maybe they'd been held up by something? God knew Alec only moved as fast as he wanted to move, and Brian only got any *real* respect out of him when they were on the job. If Alec decided that whatever he was doing (buying the latest video game in his favorite series, which had been released a week ago) was more important, then even Brian would have to fight with him to pull him away.

Of course, that was supposing that Brian himself hadn't gotten distracted pulling his little sister out of whatever mess she'd made for herself, now. Lisa didn't envy him trying to raise a hellion like that, not when she was at *that* age. The only thing harder to raise than a two-year-old who had just discovered the word "no" was a teenage girl in the middle of her rebellious phase.

Suddenly, her phone chimed to let her know she had a text. Lisa picked it up off of the table, swiped the screen, and navigated the interface with her thumb.

One new message, it said. The number wasn't one she recognized, and there was no ID to go along with it. A burner phone, most likely. Probably Coil asking her for an update on the "new recruit," like he had been for the past week. She'd have to come up with something convincing, or else he was going to catch on and the whole charade would fall apart.

It was no such thing. Instead, when she opened the message, there was only one word, written out in all caps:

RUN

She didn't understand, at first. She just sat there, staring dumbly at the screen, as her thoughts all ground to a halt.

Then, something slammed into her, pushing her back into her chair a little, and clattered to the ground with a metallic clink. Blinking, Lisa looked down to see what looked like a smushed silver pellet about the circumference of a quarter or a silver dollar, sitting innocently between her feet.

The thunderous *CRACK* came a few seconds later like the rumble of distant storm clouds.

It took a moment for her brain to catch up with what was going on, to realize what had just happened.

"Shit!"

The instant she did, she dove under her table and out of sight, just in time to watch the back of her chair splinter and shatter right where her heart would have been, if she'd still been sitting in it.

[A sniper.]

No shit, power! She gave the mental equivalent of a snarl.

She looked at the mangled remains of her chair, where half of the back looked like it had been violently blown off or ripped away — by *Alexandria*. The jagged remains jutted out like a starburst, as though to point out where the bullet had made contact, where it would have torn through her if she hadn't moved, hadn't been wearing that amulet.

[High caliber rounds. 0.50 caliber. Anti-material. Designed for penetrating tanks and armored vehicles. Wants to make sure the job gets done. Wants to make sure damage is too extensive to survive, even if he misses an instant kill. Is a he. Is one of Coil's mercenaries.]

Fuck! Lisa mouthed. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* That was bad. That was *really* bad.

Her hand shot up to the pendant she wore around her neck, the thing that had almost certainly just saved her life. If not for that little piece of gold, she would have had a hole the size of a particularly large softball right in the middle of her chest, now. If she hadn't died immediately, she would've been in screaming, mind-numbing agony — for maybe a minute or two.

Taylor, the next time I see you, I'm going to bow down and make sweet love to your toes.

“Fuck,” she said aloud. “Okay. Okay. Calm down and *think*. Where did that come from?”

She looked back up at the chair, at the shattered back that had been ripped apart, then towards the terrace behind it and the wall a short ways off, where there was a large chunk gouged out of it. And the first round had hit her from the front, dead on. She’d been facing towards the city.

[On a rooftop.]

Yes, thanks, power, I hadn’t figured that out! She thought.

[Not working alone,] her power continued. *[Coil doesn’t like risk. Coil doesn’t like chances of failure. Part of a team.]*

“Fuck!” Lisa swore. “When it rains, it pours, doesn’t it?”

She turned towards the shop, where the barista from earlier (Richard) had come to the window to investigate the noise. He was gaping, staring at the damage caused by the second round that had obliterated her chair. She just hoped he was smart enough to stay inside, because she had no idea if the merc that had just taken two shots at her had any qualms about killing an innocent bystander.

Who was she kidding? Of course he didn’t. What kind of moral, just person took a contract to kill a teenage girl in the first place?

“Okay. All right. So, it came from the city — of course it did, there’s nowhere in the bay for him to shoot from aside the Rig. A rooftop in downtown, most likely. Longer sight lines, fewer obstacles, better vantage points. Nothing to get in his way, as long as I was out in the open enough.”

She took a few deep breaths, trying to get her rapidly beating heart to slow down, a little. The adrenaline wasn’t making it any easier to think clearly.

“Which means this was probably a setup. Coil wanted me out here so that his lackeys had a clear shot. So that they knew *exactly* where I would be at what time. Does Brian know? No, probably not. It’s a line he’s not willing to cross. Alec...more likely, but I’m still gonna say no. He might be a prick, but it’d cost way too much to get him on board. Bitch wouldn’t agree to it, and she didn’t have anything to do with today’s meeting anyway.”

That was a bit of a relief. She and her team might not have been BFFs, but she hadn’t thought any of them hated any of the others enough to be party to her assassination.

“Which means either Brian asked without knowing what Coil planned, or Coil was listening in on our conversation and set this up without them knowing anything. Probably the second. He’s sneaky enough for that, and he probably doesn’t trust anyone in the team enough to contact them directly, yet.”

And *that* meant that this might be a clean sweep, Coil getting rid of the Undersiders now that he felt they were slipping through his fingers. That...was possible, but it was more likely that it was just her. The rest of the team could be salvaged if Lisa was the only one compromised.

[Apocrypha also person of interest.]

...No, not just her. Taylor, too. If she messed with his powers, then she was a liability, and Coil didn't suffer liabilities if he couldn't maintain them as assets.

Fuck. She needed to tell Taylor right away —

CRACK

The table in front of Lisa splintered and exploded, and she yelped, tumbling backwards, as the bullet continued on and blew apart the seat of the chair, too. A moment later, the rumble of the gunshot reached her ears.

Okay, yeah, tell Taylor, *but get somewhere safe, first.*

Biting her lip, Lisa looked out from beneath the table. There weren't many options for safe spots to run to, because this section of the Boardwalk had a wide, yawning gap between the opposite sides. The best she was going to be able to do, right now, was — *there.*

Getting her legs up underneath her, Lisa grabbed a few shards of porcelain from her destroyed mug, wound up her arm, then tossed the in the opposite direction to confuse the sniper. The moment they left her hand, she kicked off the ground and threw herself into a dead sprint for the closest building she'd been able to find: a big, green porta potty.

The twenty yard gap felt like a hundred. She ran as fast as she could, but it still felt like trying to make a mile in less than ten seconds. Five, ten, fifteen feet — she raced at speeds that, later, she would marvel at, eating up the ground at a pace that would put Olympic sprinters to shame, and still, it felt like too long. There was no way she was going to make it.

At the last fifteen feet, she pushed herself forward in a long jump that would have wowed her elementary school PE teacher and tucked herself into a roll as she landed. The porta potty thudded when she came to a stop, the back of her head bouncing off of the door.

On the road that she had just crossed, another chunk was torn out as the fourth round exploded against it with a thunderous CRACK. Of all the misses so far, this one was the most egregious — he had to be making the shot from at least half of a mile away.

“Fuck,” Lisa breathed. “Fuck...”

Shaking hands reached for her phone, which she had dropped upon landing, and thankfully, it hadn't suffered any damage. She had to try three times before she managed to get Taylor's number dialed from her contacts list.

The phone rang. And rang. And rang. And rang. It seemed to ring forever, until finally, there was an answer.

“Taylor, listen,” Lisa began, “it's Coil, he's —”

“Your call has been forwarded to an automated voice message system,” a pleasant female voice said. “Uh, Taylor Hebert — *is not available. At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press one for more options. To leave a callback number, press five.*”

BEEP

Swearing, Lisa pressed the end call button and let her head thunk back against the porta potty.

Of all the terrible, fucking luck. The one day, the *one day*, where Lisa *absolutely needed* Taylor to answer her phone, and she didn't answer. Just... Fucking hell...

POP — something pinged off the side of Lisa's head like a pebble, and it clattered to the ground with a metallic clink. Lisa stopped cursing her luck, blinked, and looked in the direction it came from — and felt her stomach go cold.

There, crossing the distance, was a man dressed as an Enforcer, and in his hands, he carried a pistol — a glock, equipped with a silencer — that was raised and aimed in her direction.

[Not working alone,] her power repeated. *[Part of a team.]*

Plan B, in other words. If the sniper failed, a ground team to take her out.

In broad fucking daylight.

She was on her feet almost before she realized what she was doing, and then she whipped around and raced away in the direction of the Docks as quickly as she was able. She wasn't thinking at all about where she was going, just about getting away.

The sound of footsteps following after her was like thunder.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” she swore breathlessly as she ran.

How many timelines could Coil keep open? Two, three? How many of those was he dedicating to seeing her removed? All of them?

Had acquiring Dinah Alcott really made him *that* confident?

Bad news. Bad *fucking* news. Trying to plan around his power was hard enough when you had days or weeks to meticulously pick it apart and figure out how he worked and how he used it. Trying to do that while running away from a hit team sent to kill you? How the fuck was she supposed to manage *that*?

It didn't seem like she had much of a choice, though.

Lisa made a sudden turn, nearly tumbling ass over teakettle as her momentum tried to carry her forward, then began racing down the street. The buildings around her started to go from the sparkly, clean, newly built ones on the Boardwalk to the disheveled, decaying brick ones that made up the Docks and Old Town. Behind her, her pursuers gave chase.

Safe place, safe place, safe place, where could she go? The Loft was out, immediately. That was the first place Coil would check for her, and unless the rest of the team had made it back, yet, he could afford to demolish it or bring it down around her ears. It would be easy to later claim some other group had done it, and without her there to gainsay him, the Undersiders would have to believe it.

And just as importantly, the pendant might be bulletproof and it might stop other projectiles, but it wouldn't be able to do much if the ceiling came crashing down on her head.

The hospital? No, that was a fucking terrible idea. Not only was there the chance she might run into one (or both) of the Dallon sisters, either one of whom would be less than happy to see her, but she doubted Coil's mercs would have any qualms about following her in there. If they were at all trained, they'd have a guy at the front entrance, a guy at the back, and the rest of the team would follow her in.

She preferred not to get strangled in a janitor's closet, thank you.

Lisa swung a right at the next intersection, then made a sudden swerve into an alleyway and threw herself behind the dumpster it housed. She slapped her hands over her mouth to muffle the sound of her breathing and waited, pulse pounding in her ears, for the team of mercs to pass her by. When she heard them go, she let out a short breath and grabbed again for her phone.

A second time, she dialed Taylor's number.

She needed to tell Taylor. She *needed* to. To not warn Taylor of a threat against her life when Lisa knew about it was a betrayal of trust — as the insistent tugging inside of her chest kept telling her.

"Your call has been forwarded to an automated voice message system," the recorded voice said again. *"Uh, Taylor Hebert — is not available. At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording, you may hang up or press one for more options. To leave a callback number, press five."*

BEEP

"Fuck!" Lisa screamed, frustrated, into the receiver. "Why aren't you answering, Taylor! I need you to fucking answer me!"

"You hear that?" someone asked.

"Double back, check the alleyways," said another. "Boss wants this done. She doesn't get away, understand?"

"Fuck!" Lisa shouted, surging back to her feet. She took off at a run, again, clipping the side of the dumpster on her way out of the alley — which fucking *hurt*.

"There she is!" one of them shouted as she came into view. She didn't even face them, she just turned and went full tilt in the opposite direction.

POP — something, a *bullet*, bounced off of the back of her left shoulder, and she stumbled a little from the impact, then redoubled her efforts and kept going.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Somewhere safe, somewhere safe...

Where else? The castle? Yeah — wait, no, fuck, because if she went there, she couldn't tell Taylor about the threat to her life. Somehow, she didn't think she'd get cell phone reception under

thousands of gallons of water. She'd be safe from Coil, but the geis would get her, and having *that* happen with the entire bay over her head sounded even *less* fun than getting fucking strangled.

Where, where, where... The Mayor? No, that was stupid. The Protectorate? Haha, no, that was equally stupid. She might as well just giftwrap herself for Coil's inside guys. New Wave? Probably turn her out on her ass, and they were all the way on the other side of the fucking *city*.

She turned another corner and kept going, headed towards Downtown, now. Maybe if she got far enough into the city... But there was no counting on that, not if Coil *really* wanted her gone.

Protectorate was out, PRT was out for the same reason, hospital was out, the castle was fucking out. New Wave, out. How about the BBPD? No, that would start a shootout, and then she'd have to answer a whole fuckton of uncomfortable questions about why she was being chased. It'd be *days* before they let her go, if they didn't figure things out and hand her over to the fucking PRT, that was.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, where else?

Damn it, where else could she fucking *go*?

POP — another bullet hit her in the back of the head, and she stumbled, fell, and skidded along the pavement, tearing up her knees and her left hand, which she'd thrown out to catch her fall. She got up as soon as she could, hissing in a pained breath, and when she looked down at herself, she could see how badly she'd skinned them. Blood flowed freely over her ripped leggings and down her fingers.

Her knees and palm throbbed from the pain, and she'd be feeling it for days as they healed, but she probably wouldn't need special care, thank fuck for that.

POP, POP, POP — three more rounds hit her in the back, and she stumbled, but managed to stay upright, and when she glanced behind her, it was to see six mercs with guns raised, rapidly gaining on her.

She turned back and started again, but slipped, stumbled, and fell again, because she'd just stepped on her fucking *phone*, wasn't that just fucking *perfect*. Whatever god was looking down on her at least made sure that she didn't break it, so she scooped it up and kept going.

Okay. Okay. Where else? Where the fuck else?

Nothing came to mind.

Damn it, where the *fuck* was she supposed to *go*?

Panting, Lisa made a turn, then another turn, then a few more turns, just to confuse things, racing along the streets as her legs screamed at her to stop. That she even managed to last as long as she had was likely due to the training Taylor had put her through, because the Lisa of a month ago wouldn't have made it past the first block without being taken out or overrun.

When Lisa threw herself into another alleyway, pressing her back against the brick, there weren't any mercs passing by, this time. She'd bought herself enough of a breather to take a moment and *think*. She didn't hold any illusions about escape, though. They'd manage to find her eventually. They'd managed it when she was just a homeless pickpocket, after all.

Okay. Where could she go? Where could she fucking go?

...*Damn it*, why couldn't she think of anything that wouldn't end up with her *dead*? There was nowhere she could go that didn't have one problem or another, and most of them were places well within Coil's grimy fucking paws, so where the fuck was she supposed to —

...She *did* have somewhere she could go. Somewhere Coil and his mercs couldn't reach her, somewhere where they'd get themselves hurt or killed just to try, and somewhere where she could tell Taylor about all of this without breaking her geis.

It was an idea. A horrible fucking idea with so much different shit that could go horribly fucking *wrong*, but it was the only one she could think of that didn't wind up with her dead *for sure*.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, what *choice* did she fucking have?

Shakily, Lisa lifted up her phone and dialed for the third time.

It rang.

"Taylor. Taylor, I need you to fucking answer me, all right, because this is a terrible fucking idea, I know it is, I know how fucking terrible it is, but I don't have a better one and I need you to tell me it's okay."

It rang, and rang, and rang. Finally...

Click.

"*Your call has been forwarded to an automated voice message system,*" the recorded voice said again. "Uh, Taylor Hebert — *is not available. At the tone, please record your message. When you have finished recording —*"

"FUCK!" Lisa screamed again. "Our *lives* are in fucking *danger*, and I'm about to do something that could get me *fucking killed*, if not *worse*! Answer your goddamn phone, you stupid bitch!"

"Over there! I thought heard something!"

"Go, go, go!"

"Fuck!" Lisa shoved herself off of the wall, then left the alleyway and headed — not towards Downtown, but towards the other end of the Docks, where the older neighborhoods were located. The ones that hadn't quite been left behind by the march of progress, but had been around long enough that no one rich and powerful in the city lived there anymore.

She knew where she could go. She just had to hope she could make it there before her body gave out and that she wouldn't be killed when she got there.

Lisa ran. She ran and ran and ran, as fast and as far as her legs could carry her. She didn't know if she outran her pursuers, eventually, or if they managed to keep pace with her all the way. She didn't know how long she ran for or how she even managed to keep going. She just kept running the entire way, until her legs screamed, until her lungs burned, until her head pounded and ached.

When, at last, she turned the final corner onto the street of a cozy suburban neighborhood, when she finally laid eyes upon her destination and saw just how *close* she was, the relief that hit her almost stole what little energy she had left. The only thing that kept her going was that she knew she couldn't stop until she was all the way there.

When she crossed the street and felt the wave of cold pass over her, she knew she was safe. When her feet found the slightly unkempt grass of the front yard and nothing arose out of the ground to smite her for trespassing, she knew she was welcome. When she reached to front porch, when she laid one foot on the step that had once been wobbly and rotten, she collapsed right then and there.

She wasn't ashamed to admit she sobbed. She sobbed like a little girl, laughing in-between sobs as hot, relieved tears dripped down her nose and snot dribbled over her upper lip.

"I-I guess," she hiccupped, "you f-finally *did* g-get me over here for d-d-dinner, Taylor."

Above her head, the Hebert family home loomed like a silent guardian.