

Sunder 5.b: Black Dog Strut

Director Emily Piggot took in a deep breath through her nose, let it out slowly between the hands she'd folded in front of her face, and looked up.

"Are you satisfied?"

The collection of her fellow PRT Directors arrayed across the screen all made varying noises of assent. Each of them had a copy of the report that sat on Emily's desk, a hastily constructed preliminary after action report of the confrontation between Vista and her team and the independent cape, Apocrypha.

"Very," said Chief Director Costa-Brown. "The situation was resolved about as well as could be expected."

"Christ, I don't know how you can call that *good*," someone murmured.

Neither did Emily. In terms of how it *could* have gone, however, it was easily one of the least shitty possibilities. Not the best by any stretch of the imagination, but considering the best was "and they all got along and became friends," and was therefore unbelievably optimistic, this was probably the best they should have realistically expected.

To a degree, at least. No one could have predicted the sniper.

"I'd like to renew my objection to this entire course of action," said another. "It's the *courts'* job to determine whether or not Apocrypha is guilty, not ours."

"Your objection is noted — *again*, Deputy Director Tagg," said Costa-Brown coolly.

Tagg subsided, scowling at the subtle dig to his position, that he was only even there because his Director had been out sick for two weeks.

He'd been one of those least happy with the decision to let Vista go forward with her plans, although not because she was a Ward, but because it gave her the impression that she could get away with defying orders and bucking the rules. He'd also been the most dissatisfied — very vocally so — with how the whole situation with Apocrypha had been handled from the get go.

He didn't seem to understand that this was a *bomb* they were sitting on. If they pressured Apocrypha over Shadow Stalker's death, they'd make their very own worst enemy — and even worse than that, one who had a very damning card to play if she felt she needed to.

"Although the Chief-Director's phrasing is a little...*unfortunate*," said Director Armstrong, "I have to agree that the situation has resolved itself in a satisfactory manner, considering the alternatives."

"A Ward got her *arm* blown off?" snarled Director Wilson. "You call that 'satisfactory'? I'd call it one of the worst case scenarios!"

“And not only was she healed as though nothing had ever happened, but we have more information about a cape whose limits we still don’t really know,” replied Armstrong calmly. “And, in the process, we also achieved our original goal: we can now say that Apocrypha is reasonable enough to avoid unnecessary violence and possesses heroic tendencies sufficient that she won’t hold a grudge against someone she might not like.”

And all it cost us was to heap another trauma on five teenagers, Emily thought sourly.

“That doesn’t just *erase* —”

“There are plenty of things about this that didn’t quite go how we intended,” Costa-Brown interrupted. “That some things went wrong or some factors were in play that we weren’t aware of does not change the fact that this *is* a victory, however.”

“Yes, this sniper,” said Director Cruz, steering the conversation away from the hot button. “Do we have any information regarding who he or she might have been? Was it one of the gangs?”

“Unconfirmed,” Emily replied. “Considering the distance from which the round appears to have been fired, however, there are only so many snipers with that level of skill. It’s entirely possible that this may have been an attempted hit by Victor of the Empire Eighty-Eight. We believe he likely has the skill necessary.”

They probably still didn’t have a complete list of all of the skills he had stolen during his career as a villain, so they could only speculate. Even if they *did* come up with something they thought approximated a number, the nature of his power meant that it could and likely would change within a month.

Capes like that were the most annoying. Hard enough to deal with them when they *weren’t* constantly adding new powers or abilities to their repertoire.

“But you don’t believe that,” said Costa-Brown.

Emily frowned. “No. We don’t have a motive for it, for one, although it’s entirely possible he might have been hired for it, and for another... Miss Hebert’s testimony indicates that she believes this to be the work of the local supervillain known as Coil.”

That got her a few murmurs. Coil was one of the less renowned supervillains in the Bay, a slippery, understated villain who was more famous for not being famous. He *had* territory, he took it when he could, but he also didn’t seem too eager to *keep* it. In fact, whether or not he was even a *cape* had been — and, to some extent, still was — up for debate.

“It fits, to a degree,” Armstrong allowed. “He’s the one known for employing mercenaries, yes?”

“To the best of our knowledge, yes.”

It was the one thing they knew about him with any real surety. Even Taylor Hebert’s testimony could only be taken as supposition and hearsay until it bore out.

Armstrong leaned back in his chair. “And mercenaries are usually ex-soldiers or privately trained paramilitary agents.”

“Our forensic analysts are going over the bullets now,” Emily confirmed, “see if they can match it to anything currently in the system. The round that hit Vista was recovered from the road, mangled but mostly intact, good enough that we think we might be able to match the rifling. The round that hit Apocrypha, however...”

Costa-Brown leaned forward with clear interest. “She was hit?”

“And completely unharmed,” said Emily. “The round that hit her deformed on impact. No penetration, not even through her clothes. All that’s left of it is a disc, about the size of a half-dollar.”

“How many powers does this girl *have*?” someone muttered.

“Given that the barrier observed in her Breaker form didn’t seem to be present, the current theory is that she used one of her ‘Heroes’ and imbued her clothes with some kind of Breaker ability, as well.”

“Do we have any idea how powerful this ability might be?” asked Tagg. “Would it stop us from hitting her with containment foam? Tasers? Beanbag rounds?”

At least he hadn’t suggested using *artillery* on a *fifteen-year-old girl*. She was well-liked enough, especially on PHO, that if it ever got out that they’d planned on trying, there’d probably be a huge public backlash. They *had* gone out of their way to give the girl quite a bit of glory, after all.

“We don’t know. The size of the bullets — both of them — suggest the sniper was using fifty-caliber rounds, however, so small arms fire is likely to be ineffective. Whether that applies to other forms of projectile weaponry or even things like tasers, we simply can’t say.”

“Meaning that any countermeasure we might employ has a fair chance of failing,” said Cost-Brown. She changed tacks. “You said you think the rounds were fifty-caliber. Do we believe that this might be related to the other incident Downtown?”

Emily frowned. She’d thought that incident hadn’t made it up the chain, yet, so she’d have more time to try and get it pieced together, first.

“Other incident?” asked Armstrong.

“Around the same time as Vista’s confrontation with Apocrypha,” said Emily, “there was another incident on the Boardwalk. A sniper, also using fifty-caliber rounds, fired four bullets at a coffee shop. Two of them hit roughly the same spot — one a chair, one the table in front of that chair — and one was embedded in the middle of the road in front of the shop.”

“That’s only three,” he pointed out. “What about the fourth?”

Emily let out a long breath through her nose. “Deformed, almost identically to the one that hit Apocrypha.”

All at once, the other Directors broke out in questions, clamoring and shouting, such that Emily couldn't hear any of them clearly. For several minutes, they argued back and forth almost incoherently, and she sat there, waiting, until finally, Chief Director Costa-Brown opened her mouth and snapped, "Quiet!"

Almost immediately, the others subsided and stopped talking. When they had, Costa-Brown turned to Emily and asked, "What do we know about the target of the second incident?"

"Almost nothing," said Emily. "The only witness we have is the barista working at the coffee shop, a young man by the name of Richard Caffey, and all he's been able to tell us so far is that she was a pretty blonde girl."

"*That* narrows it down," Tagg grumbled.

"He's currently sitting in one of our conference rooms with the best sketch artist on our payroll," she went on, "but I don't expect to get much of anything useful out of it. Either she's dead, in which case we'll probably never find her, or she's been scared into hiding."

"I thought you said that the bullet deformed, the same way it did when Apocrypha was hit," Armstrong pointed out. "Meaning she wasn't hurt. Why are you so sure she's dead, then?"

"Because according to our *only* current witness, after she was shot at, a group of men dressed as Enforcers, all of them carrying semi-automatic pistols equipped with suppressors, chased her into the Docks." Emily briefly closed her eyes. Let out a sigh through her nostrils. "We don't know what happened to her, after that, but it's likely she was caught and probably executed."

She'd never agreed with the idea of the Boardwalk's Enforcers. They had too much leeway, not enough oversight, and most importantly, they weren't sworn to uphold the law like a real police force was. Quite frankly, they were little more than sanctioned thugs, and more than one of them probably had criminal records.

Unfortunately, they were also outside of her jurisdiction, and the BBPD didn't have the manpower to either arrest them or pick up their slack. They were a part of life in Brockton Bay — tolerated, but only because there was nothing anyone could really do about them.

"Christ," muttered Wilson.

"And the similarity in the deformation of the bullets could be a coincidence," said Armstrong. "It's entirely possible that this girl simply had some form of Brute power, and she ran to avoid outing herself — more than she might have already, at least."

"Just so."

Personally, Emily didn't believe in coincidences. That both girls had survived nearly identical attacks in what appeared to be exactly the same way almost certainly meant that they were connected to each other in some form or another — more likely than not, that they knew each other personally. Maybe they were even *friends*.

There were two problems with proving it: firstly, there was no supporting evidence, no available witnesses who could place the two of them in the same place at the same time, and because of the fact that the blonde girl had paid with cash instead of a credit or debit card, no means of connecting her to any other place in the city where they could ask if both had been seen together at any point. Without a name or a paper trail, they'd have to wait until the sketch came back and try to find her with facial recognition on whatever security cameras they could get their hands on. Even the Thinkers on the Protectorate's payroll would need *something* besides a vague description.

Emily wouldn't bet on it, though. The likelihood of Caffey remembering the face of one girl he'd spent all of a few minutes with well enough for the sketch artist to get an accurate rendering was fairly low.

Secondly, the girl likely *was* dead. No matter how athletic she was, a single teenage girl could not outrun a full team of highly trained ex-military mercenaries, not forever. It was entirely possible, of course, that she *had* managed to give them the slip, somehow, but Emily's money was on her corpse washing up on the shore or being found in some rarely used dumpster a week from now, if it ever showed up in the first place.

This was Brockton Bay, after all.

“Do we have anything else?”

“Nothing substantial,” Emily admitted. “We're trying to get the logs for nearby cell towers, see if she tried to make any calls while she was running, but we don't know which carrier she had and all of them are dragging their feet as a result. Even if we *do* get all the records, it'll take a while to sort through all of the calls and pinpoint what might have been hers. That's if she even *made* any calls.”

And even that was assuming she hadn't been using a burner phone, for whatever reason.

“What about Apocrypha?” asked the Chief Director. “Have we learned anything else about her powers? Her limits?”

Emily's lips pulled tight. “Some. According to Clockblocker and statements from Panacea and Glory Girl, she displayed a potent healing ability of some kind. Apparently, after speaking some kind of incantation, she reformed Vista's missing arm from, I'm told, quite literally nothing. The nature of the event makes it likely that this was one of her 'wizard' or 'spellcaster' type heroes.”

One of the Directors snorted at the mention of magic. Emily didn't particularly care. Whether it was magic or not didn't change exactly how extraordinary — and extraordinarily *dangerous* — powers were, and she wasn't one of those eggheads trying to figure out how they worked, so it was all the same to her.

“The...peculiarities and eccentricities of powers aside,” said Armstrong, “do we have any idea on this new ability's limitations?”

“None,” she confirmed. “Only that it did not, unlike Panacea's powers, require any available biomass to function. She restored Vista's arm without any obvious source of matter to convert.”

“Guess that's why we're humoring the whole 'magic' thing, then,” Cruz muttered.

Emily smiled tightly. “Our experts just threw up their hands and declared that she must be directly converting energy from higher dimensions into matter, and her incantation was some kind of matrix to tell it what to look like.”

A few chuckles answered her.

“Have you observed any side effects, so far?” asked the Chief Director. “Miraculous as this healing power is, it does us no good if there are harmful drawbacks.”

“None. Vista’s currently about an hour into her mandatory seventy-two hour Master-Stranger observation period, but so far, there’s no indication of any lingering Master or Stranger effects upon her behavior. Furthermore, the tests and scans performed beforehand show no abnormalities in her bloodwork, her musculature, her skeletal structure, her brain, or anything else we tested. Her arm is, as far as we can tell, exactly the same as the one she lost.”

And they’d put her through the wringer. The battery of tests and examinations they’d put her through had included everything they could safely and legally do with the equipment they had available, no matter how humiliating Vista had likely found a number of them.

The PRT did *not* fool around when it came to the two most dangerous power types in their system.

They’d come back with nothing. To be sure, some Master powers were subtle and hard to detect, even with the most precise of modern instruments, but by the same token, the more overt ones could be *incredibly* obvious and blatant. Either way, the lack of results currently did not mean that Vista was cleared.

The Chief Director hummed. “Continue the standard Master-Stranger period. Let it double as punishment for going outside the chain of command.”

It wouldn’t even be necessary if you’d just let me handle it the way I wanted to, Emily wanted to say, but she swallowed the bitterness and did as she’d been trained to do. “Understood.”

Ten years behind a desk hadn’t changed the fact that she was a soldier, and soldiers followed orders.

“Do we have a plan of action going forward?” asked Tagg. “Inflicting such a grievous wound on one of our Wards, no matter the circumstances, is not something we can stand to let pass.”

“Unless we get Thinker support, our hands are tied,” said Emily. “The best we can do is press Coil’s mercs harder. Without any idea where he bases his operations or how to draw him out, that’s all that we can do.”

“Do we think *Apocrypha* might try for a confrontation?”

Emily turned to the Chief Director.

“If she does, do we have reason to believe she might have some method of pinpointing his location?” Costa-Brown continued. “Your estimates place her as a Trump in a vein similar to Eidolon. Do you think it would be accurate to assume one of her powers would include a Thinker ability that might help her find him and his base of operations?”

“Frankly, Chief Director, we have no idea,” Emily said bluntly. “Given the limited variety of powers we’ve seen her display so far, there’s no concrete answer I could possibly give you. However, if we assume that her own estimation of her powers and how they work is correct, then the answer is likely yes. I’d feel more confident if I had an expert in mythology on hand to advise me.”

“I see.” The Chief Director made a note of something offscreen. “We’ll have to see if we can consult a couple of professionals in the field. Even if the breadth and depth of her possible powersets exceeds our expectations, I don’t imagine it would hurt to have a better grasp on what to expect from at least *some* of them.”

“Are we even sure they *do* work the way she said?” asked Wilson skeptically.

“During the first encounter, she referred to the powerset she used to defeat Lung by the name ‘Siegfried,’” Emily stated. “Siegfried is, as I’ve been told, a legendary hero from Germanic mythology, featuring as the protagonist of both the *Nibelungenlied* and Richard Wagner’s operatic epic, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. During her second encounter, again with Miss Militia and Armsmaster, the powersets she named were ‘Hassan of the Hundred Faces,’ whose power seems to be some kind of self-duplication, and ‘King Arthur,’ who likely had multiple abilities, but the only ones recorded were a self-healing type Brute power and some kind of Stranger aura.”

“*King Arthur* had a *Stranger* power?” Armstrong asked incredulously. “What?”

“According to Armsmaster and Miss Militia’s reports, it made her seem grander, stronger, and more capable than her appearance would suggest,” said Emily. “A leader, in other words. A king. Miss Militia described it as a kind of charisma that carried not only in her bearing, but in a subtle, indefinable quality in her voice.”

Whatever that really meant. She could only guess that you had to experience it for yourself to understand it, and she wasn’t eager to put herself at the mercy of a cape just for the chance to see what that Stranger power actually felt like.

“Which makes a degree of sense, I suppose,” Armstrong replied, settling back down. “Now that I think about it, yes, I don’t think it’s too strange. Her powers, however they work, might have interpreted any charisma King Arthur might have had in his legend into something more tangible. In that case, it might be a good idea to treat any charismatic hero from mythology as having the same kind of power until proven otherwise.”

“I’ll make a note of it when I update her file.”

“And the other one? Hassan of the Hundred Faces?”

“More obscure,” Emily answered. “The only result we could find was ‘Hassan-i Sabbah,’ the supposed leader of a sect of Islamic assassins from around the twelfth century AD. There’s no mention of an ability to duplicate himself.”

“There’s no other references to that name? At all?”

“None.”

The Chief Director hummed. “It could be that Apocrypha has access to resources for research that we don’t,” someone snorted, “or it may be that her power connects to ‘heroes’ that have even been lost or forgotten to history.”

“If that’s the case,” said Armstrong, “then even if we researched every hero ever written down, she could still have access to ones whose stories didn’t survive any of a thousand different natural disasters, sackings, pillagings, or religious conversions over the past two thousand years — *or more*. Do we have any idea how recent a legend has to be for its characters to count for her powers?”

“None.”

A collection of frowns greeted Emily’s answer.

“Christ,” muttered Wilson. “How many thousands of years does it go back?”

No one volunteered an estimate. It wasn’t like the research teams had any more of an idea; whenever they were asked, their long-winded, complicated, scientific answers really boiled down to the same thing: they didn’t know.

“Do we have anything else to go on? Anything on the power she used to heal Vista?”

“A description of her appearance and the apparent reliance on incantations, but nothing else,” said Emily grimly. “She didn’t volunteer any names for this particular one, and whether she deliberately left it out when giving her statement to Armsmaster or she simply didn’t think to mention it, we have no way of knowing.”

The other Directors grumbled lowly.

“I don’t like this,” Tagg put in. “We know too little about her. Right now, our strategy seems to be, ‘cross our fingers and hope she doesn’t turn villain.’ Because we don’t have *any* plans for how to deal with her.”

As much as she disliked Tagg, Emily had to agree. For all that he was militant and far too eager to start planning offensive action against capes who were nominally allies, it rubbed her the wrong way that they really *didn’t* have any options for dealing with Taylor Hebert *except* to hope that she stayed a hero.

If she decided to become a villain and directly oppose the PRT and the Protectorate, it seemed that their only current option was to stick their heads between their legs and kiss their asses goodbye.

“If she becomes too much of a handful, I’ll authorize the intervention of the Triumvirate,” Costa-Brown declared casually, as though she hadn’t just said that she would send the cape equivalent of a nuclear warhead against a single teenage girl.

“What?”

“Are you serious?”

“The *Triumvirate*? For *one* girl?”

“That’s madness!”

“In the meantime,” the Chief Director spoke over the others, “Director Piggot, if we can’t convince her to join the Wards and get her under our thumb, then we must at least maintain a good relationship with her. To that end, I want you to keep a good lookout for the next week or two. If she *does* confront Coil and his mercenaries, I want *you* to be there the moment you catch a whiff of trouble.”

Emily frowned, but gave her superior a severe nod. “I understand.”

A hint of a smile flitted over Costa-Browns lips.

“Good. That’s settled. If, for now, there are no other concerns that need to be addressed by this assembly?” Silence. None of them looked quite happy, but neither did they look like they really wanted to keep arguing the Apocrypha issue. “Excellent. Then, this meeting is adjourned.”

One by one, the images of the other Directors winked and vanished, until, with a final, spiteful murmur from Tagg, the only one left was the Chief Director, who stared up at Emily stonily. They were now alone.

“You disapprove,” she stated. It wasn’t a question.

Emily frowned. “It was risky, it was convoluted, and even if things had gone exactly as planned, there was still far too much that could have gone wrong.”

“But it gave us new insights into Miss Hebert’s powers and mindset.” Costa-Brown leaned forward, folding her hands in front of her face. “I consider it quite a trade. Not only do we now know that she *does*, indeed, have some kind of ‘magic’ based heroes in her repertoire, we know she’s capable of healing, we know that she likely has the ability to imbue items with at least temporary powers of their own, and we know that her heroic tendencies are strong enough to override any lingering negative sentiments she might have carried from the debacle with Shadow Stalker.”

“Most of that could have been handled if she came in for power testing.”

Costa-Brown gave a short nod. “True. However, that supposes that she would even be *willing* to come in for power testing. Given her overall feelings regarding the PRT and the Protectorate at this time, it was more likely she’d refuse outright and we’d know even less now than we do currently.”

“Feelings that this course of action did nothing to ameliorate,” Emily shot back. “We ran the risk of alienating what is likely the most powerful single parahuman in Brockton Bay, and we managed to avoid it *in spite of* this plan.”

“And I judged that the risk was worth it to gain the knowledge that we now have,” replied the Chief Director. “You should know, Emily. There is no better time to observe a person’s *true* character than in a moment of intense stress. That it is in just such moments where you find out whether you can count on the guy next to you, or whether he’ll cut and run when trouble comes calling.”

Emily took in a deep breath to try and keep her blood pressure down, knowing that Costa-Brown had chosen her words *specifically* for her, *specifically* to hit home for her. She *knew* those words had

been chosen for no other reason than because of the impact they would have, and that the Chief Director was *precisely* aware of just what nerve she'd touched.

Bitch.

"If she was a soldier, I'd be inclined to agree with you. But she's a fifteen-year-old girl."

"Who has more power than most people would know what to do with," Costa-Brow pointed out. "We can't afford uncertainties, Emily. If we don't know enough about her powers, then we have to make *damn* sure we know where we stand with her. Someone like her is the *last* person we need to take a surprise hit from."

And I still think you went about this in the most cock-eyed, nonsensical way you could have, Emily didn't say. "I understand."

A single eyebrow raised. "Do you? I'll never tell you that you have to *agree* with all of my decisions, Emily. I *will* tell you that I expect you to follow them, when they're direct orders."

"I understand." Even if it tasted sour on her tongue to say so.

"Good. Have a good day, Emily."

The image of Costa-Brown flickered and vanished. Emily Piggot sighed and leaned back in her chair, and not for the first time, she wished she could down a bottle of scotch without killing herself in the process. God *damn*, she could use a good drink.

But, there was no time to rest. Instead, she reached over to her phone, dialed a number, and waited until the man on the other end picked up.

"Yes?"

"Armsmaster. Is Carol Dallon here, yet?"

A pause.

"According to security footage, she's still in the process of being registered at the front desk."

"And Glory Girl?"

"In interview room five."

Emily grunted. "Good. As soon as she's done, have Carol Dallon escorted there. I'm on my way, right now."

"Understood."

Click went the line. Emily sighed again, braced herself against the arms of her chair, and then hefted her bulk up and onto her own two feet. She grabbed the necessary files from off of her desk, then made her way around towards her office door.

She had another bomb to defuse before the day was up.