

#### Collateral 4.a:

Stakeouts, Vista found herself thinking, were *really* boring.

It'd been almost four hours already, and nothing of particular interest had happened. There had been a few stray cats wandering around (including one that had taken quite a liking to her and nearly blown her cover), a few of the neighbors had come home, and a beaten-up old pickup truck had pulled into the driveway of the house that Miss Militia *seemed* to be watching.

None of it inspired any movement, though. There were no hushed whispers on the comms about *moving in* or *the target is on the move* or *I've got eyes on target*. Miss Militia did not suddenly stand up and start walking with purpose or get new orders and drive off. There were no gang members showing up, no secret meetings or suspicious gatherings happening. Neither Oni Lee nor Hookwolf made an appearance, nor even any other cape at all, actually.

It was a bland, ordinary street in a bland, ordinary neighborhood in not-so-ordinary Brockton Bay, and in the four hours Vista had spent waiting, nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

It wasn't at all what she'd expected when she'd secretly followed behind Miss Militia. She'd thought they'd be sitting around for ten, maybe fifteen minutes, before whatever it was they were supposed to be catching or following showed up, and then they'd catch it or follow it. Over, done with, and taken care of, all before dinner.

It wasn't exactly an unrealistic expectation, really; most of the Wards' patrols lasted an hour or less, maybe an hour and a half at the long end. It was some mandated thing from the head honchos in Washington or wherever, something about keeping patrol length under a certain amount of time so that the Wards' normal lives were disrupted as little as possible — in other words, complete and utter bullshit written by politicians and youth advocacy groups who didn't know thing one about what it was actually like to *be* a cape.

Like turning off your powers was as easy as hanging your coat up or taking your shoes off when you got home from school.

But it had already been four, boring hours, filled with nothing but watching Miss Militia watch something on the other side of the street (or, well, watching the van Miss Militia was in, but same difference). If only somebody would actually *do* something, Vista thought. If only something *interesting* would happen.

What had she snuck out for? Why had she spun that sad little story about wanting to be with her parents during this crisis, if not to see some of the action that would no doubt follow? What had been the point of putting a dark grey hoodie on over her costume, *just* so that she could blend into the shadows until it was time to jump into the fray, if nothing at all was going to happen?

At this rate, she might have had better luck just going out on her own and trying to find Bakuda herself, instead of waiting around with Miss Militia for... whoever or whatever it was they were actually waiting for. At least then, she might have had a better chance of actually *doing* something, rather than just sitting around.

Vista held a hand to her mouth and stifled a yawn.

Of course, that was what Armsmaster was supposedly doing, and pulling one over on *him* was a lot harder, with all of the gadgets and vision modes he probably had stuffed into his helmet. Vista didn't put it past him to have installed some sort of infrared thing into his visor, which would have made escaping his notice much harder than it was to watch Miss Militia's van from behind a few rosebushes.

It was just that she was getting a little...anxious. Impatient. Sure, the Wards' patrols weren't usually very interesting, either, but it was a normal sort of uninteresting, the kind that came from doing it over and over again, day in and day out. It was *expected* that nothing would really happen, and even though that sometimes chafed, it had rarely gotten really frustrating.

There was a kind of comfort in routine. Like a friend you saw every day at lunch or a teacher who always gave homework over the weekend, no matter what. It was easier to do something when you did it all the time. Especially if you were *moving, active*.

But this? This was just sitting still and waiting. Nothing to take her mind off of how *boring* it was. Nothing to distract her from how her legs had started to fall asleep or the ache in her hips from crouching behind a bush for four hours. Nothing to drag her focus away from how late it was getting and that she was starting to get drowsy.

She wished she knew what they — what Miss Militia — were actually waiting for. A person? Another explosion? A sign from Scion himself? Maybe if she *did* know, it might be more interesting to wait for it. Probably not by much, but at least she'd know what to do when whatever-it-was finally showed up.

She yawned again into her palm.

*"Armsmaster to Miss Militia, over."*

Vista perked up and pressed her hands against her ears to make sure she could hear.

*"This is Miss Militia. Go ahead, Armsmaster. Over."*

*"Reporting for my hourly check-in. Have not yet found the warehouse Bakuda is purported to be using. Over."*

Vista let out a sigh and relaxed, checking her watch. Eleven o'clock. An hour before Bakuda's deadline. And it seemed no one was any closer to finding her than they had been four hours ago.

*"Nothing at all? Over."*

*"Nothing. I've checked through most of the north end and the Boat Graveyard. Swept the trainyard, too. No sign of Bakuda. Anything at Valhalla? Over."*

That *had* to be a codename, although Vista had no idea who it was supposed to be a reference to. It certainly didn't sound like something they'd use for an enforcer or top goon in the ABB. Actually, Valhalla was a viking thing, wasn't it? That had E88 written all over it.

So, why were they *here*, when Bakuda was still out there, threatening people's lives?

*"No activity since her father came home about an hour ago,"* said Miss Militia. *"It's getting late, too. I'm not sure how she's going to make it on time, not if she's going on foot. Over."*

...What? *Who* was going to make it *where* on time?

*"It's possible one of her power sets includes a Mover ability of some kind. I have not discounted outright teleportation, either. Console, are you there? Over."*

A *cape*? They were watching a *cape's* house?

*"Console, here,"* came Dauntless' voice. *"I hear you, Armsmaster. Over."*

*"Have there been any other reports of bombs or bomb threats since the three this morning? Over."*

*"That's a negative, Armsmaster. Everything's been quiet over on this end. Not so much as a peep from Bakuda or the ABB since the broadcast this morning. Over."*

Armsmaster grunted.

*"Keep me updated,"* he ordered gruffly. *"If at all possible, I'd like to handle this without having to use a fifteen-year-old girl as bait."*

*"Copy that, Armsmaster. Console, out."*

*"Miss Militia,"* Armsmaster switched immediately, *"comm me the moment you see something. It may be unavoidable that we have to follow her to find out where Bakuda is hiding. When you do see her, do not lose sight of her. She's probably the only person who actually knows where to go, and I would much prefer if she wasn't facing a Tinker specializing in bombs alone. Over."*

*"Understood,"* said Miss Militia. There was a moment's pause. *"How are we handling this when we do find her? ...Ah, over."*

Armsmaster grunted again.

*"Unfortunately, if we can't find Bakuda before Apocrypha leads us to her, our options are fairly limited. To minimize casualties among the civilian populace, our best bet would be to attack while she's distracted by Apocrypha. The profile we compiled based upon the video today and data from the Cornell incident indicates she's likely to gloat or monologue."*

*"...using Apocrypha as bait."*

*"Yes,"* he admitted grimly.

*Apocrypha?* Vista gasped, then slapped her hands over her mouth. If the microphone built into her visor had been turned on, she would've given herself away right then and there.

They were waiting for *Apocrypha*?

Their last resort was to rely on a *newbie*? A newbie that had taken down *Lung* on her first night out, yeah, but still a *newbie*. Facing a villain in an open fight was one thing, but *willingly* walking into what everyone *knew* was an ambush set by a *Tinker*? Most *hardened veterans* would think twice about doing something that reckless and suicidal.

And their Plan B was to wait for the newbie who hadn't even been a hero for a *week* to lead them to Bakuda? Were they *crazy*?

*"Whether we like it or not, our options are simply that limited,"* said Armsmaster. *"So, keep a close eye on things, call it in when she leaves, and follow her as discreetly as possible. Over."*

*"Roger, Armsmaster. I'll — wait. I've got movement."*

For one heart-pounding second, Vista was afraid she'd been caught, but then she realized that there was no way it'd been her. It had to be the girl they were apparently waiting for, Apocrypha.

*"I see her, Armsmaster. She's climbing out a second storey window. Black costume, white mask, hair done up in a ponytail — it's likely she's using one of her heroes, possibly optimized for speed."*

*"Keep on her,"* said Armsmaster urgently.

Slowly, carefully, Vista stood and stretched out her cramped legs. She made sure to stoop so that she wasn't visible, and she didn't dare to poke her head over the bushes to try and glimpse what was going on. Instead, she tried to peer through the gaps in the branches, although she couldn't really see much. It was mostly disjointed blobs of color, all dark and cast in grey.

There was a quiet, nearly silent pneumatic hiss as the van's doors opened and a ramp extended to the ground. Vista had to use her imagination to fill in the blanks of Miss Militia's bike slowly rolling onto the pavement.

*"She's leaving,"* said Miss Militia's voice, coming both from Vista's visor and, muffled by the motorcycle helmet, from the woman herself. *"Towards the Docks, like we thought. Fast, too — you were right, Armsmaster, it seems some of her power sets do include a Mover ability."*

*"Don't lose track of her,"* said Armsmaster. *"She's our only lead, right now."*

*"Roger,"* Miss Militia said. With an almost noiseless rev of her bike, she started off. *"I'm in pursuit."*

As she took off, so did Vista, shortening the space between her hiding spot and a nearby roof. It wasn't quite the same, roof-hopping in a residential neighborhood. The slanted rooftops were more awkward footholds than the flat, gravel-lined rooftops common in the older parts of downtown or the gothic marble of places like the courthouse. Awkward wasn't impossible, though, and Vista had the most experience of anyone on the Wards team, and even some of the Protectorate.

They'd barely gone one street over before Miss Militia pulled to a halt, and Vista herself almost stumbled and fell off of the roof she'd been crossing as she stopped, too.

*"Damn."*

*“Problem?”*

*“I’ve lost sight of her,”* Miss Militia reported. *“No, it was more like... The minute she left my field of view, she vanished.”*

What? Vista checked and looked over from her higher vantage point, but even though the vision enhancements in her visor gave her a clear view of everything from Miss Militia to the stray cat digging through someone’s trash can, she couldn’t see anyone else, and especially not anyone matching either the description PHO gave of Apocrypha or the one Miss Militia had given just a few minutes ago.

The hell? How did someone just *disappear* like that? Apocrypha was supposed to be a Brute or something, wasn’t she? That was the main theory on PHO, some kind of Brute-Blaster combo, like Lung.

Wait. They’d mentioned *power sets*. Was Apocrypha a *Trump*?

*“Are you certain she didn’t just turn?”*

*“No, she was cutting through backyards and hopping fences, and I didn’t see her cross into the street. The only reason to move like that —”*

*“Is if you’re taking the quickest route to your destination: a straight line,”* Armsmaster finished. He grunted. *“Not as good as we wanted, but more than we had an hour ago. What was her heading?”*

*“North by northwest, towards Old Town. I can’t think of any particular landmark in that direction, though. Armsmaster?”*

There was a moment of silence; Vista thought he was probably checking a map on his heads-up display.

A Trump, though. Those were pretty rare. On the other hand, it *did* make a little more sense. How a newbie could beat Lung by herself. Why the Protectorate and the PRT knew where she lived. Why Miss Militia had been parked outside her house all day. Trumps were one of the most sought after types of cape, next to Tinkers and Thinkers, and one that was powerful enough to put Lung down would be worth her weight in gold.

She was still a newbie, though.

*“...A couple of old fisheries, several abandoned warehouses leftover from the city’s shipping days, and a factory. Nothing that jumps out. Console.”*

*“Go ahead, Armsmaster,”* said Dauntless.

*“Check the power grid for the area. I need to know which buildings are using electricity that shouldn’t be. Send me the addresses the minute you’ve got them.”*

*“Copy that.”*

*"You think we'll find her like that?"* asked Miss Militia.

*"No,"* said Armsmaster bluntly. *"If I were in Bakuda's position, I'd be using my own generator. Even if it's a longshot, however, there's a chance she hasn't been that careful. In the meantime, we sweep Old Town. Look for anything that seems out of place — a new security camera, lights on where they shouldn't be, people standing watch, anything."*

*"Understood."* Miss Militia revved her bike back up, a quiet purr that could have been mistaken for the wind. *"I'm heading out. ETA, twenty minutes."*

Miss Militia's bike took off, and so did Vista, trailing just far enough behind that she wasn't going to be seen in one of the rearview mirrors. She crossed the rooftops like hopscotch, staying low to reduce her profile and shortening the distance so it was less like jumping over them and more like one continuous stretch of road.

Her heartbeat started to pick up the further they went, and she had to focus to keep herself from grinning. Bakuda was waiting ahead, and so was a fight, a chance for Vista to stretch her legs and prove that she was ready for the big leagues. If she used her powers to save someone's life, if *she* turned out to be the only thing that stood between Armsmaster or Miss Militia, or even the new girl, Apocrypha, that had everyone's panties in a twist, and a grisly death, then they'd *have* to take her seriously, stop treating her like a little kid to be swaddled and dressed up for the cameras.

The buildings started to change as they went, steadily turning from suburban residences to old, brick buildings, from houses with slanted roofs to bakeries and shoe-makers with flat, gravel-lined roofs. At the same time, the quality of the buildings she traveled across started to decline — boarded up windows, missing front doors, collapsed chimneys, and things like that.

They were starting to enter Old Town.

Down on the road — which was filled with cracks and potholes — Miss Militia pulled up to another stop.

*"I'm at Old Town, south end,"* she reported. *"No sign of Apocrypha or Bakuda. Over."*

*"I'm at the north end,"* Armsmaster replied. *"Same. Console, do you have anything?"*

*"Still looking,"* said Dauntless. *"Nothing so far, though. Sorry, Armsmaster."*

Armsmaster grunted.

*"It was worth a shot,"* said Miss Militia.

*"Unfortunately, it puts us back at square one. A general location, but nothing specific enough. Console, is Velocity still —"*

A flash suddenly lit up the night sky off in the distance, and as Vista turned to look towards it, an echoing rumble, deep and powerful, shook her to her bones. Off towards the other end of the Docks, closer to downtown and Empire territory, an explosion briefly expanded outwards, and a cloud of thick, black smoke rose up into the air.

A bomb. Bakuda had set off another bomb.

*“Was that...?”*

*“Console!” barked Armsmaster. “Get Velocity over there, immediately, have him check on that blast site! Contact EMS, but don’t let them in range until Velocity sounds the all clear! I want Assault and Battery in the air and on standby in thirty seconds!”*

*“Copy that, Armsmaster,” Dauntless replied. “Rerouting Velocity, A and B are heading towards the landing pad as we speak. ETA, three minutes.”*

*“Armsmaster,” began Miss Militia, “you don’t think...”*

He grunted.

*“No. This is likely a distraction, meant to draw our attention as far away as possible. However, I’d rather check and be right than not check and be wrong. Console, as soon as EMS is on scene, I want Velocity back here and scouting.”*

Vista heard Miss Militia let out something like a relieved sigh. *“You don’t think that was Apocrypha, then? That she’s still alive?”*

*“No,” he said. “It’s too far off her projected path, for one. For another, Bakuda is arrogant, not stupid. It isn’t an entirely unreasonable assumption to think that we would be tailing Apocrypha, or failing that, looking for her ourselves. Letting off another bomb is a textbook misdirection to keep us occupied chasing after her in the wrong place.”*

*“That doesn’t guarantee anything.”*

It really didn’t, Vista agreed. Real life cape fights weren’t anything like they were on those silly Saturday morning cartoons; *real* supervillains were perfectly happy to set up traps and ambushes to kill their enemies without fanfare.

*“No. But as I said earlier, Bakuda’s profile suggests a flair for drama and an inflated sense of self-importance. Someone like her cannot pass up the opportunity to gloat about her cleverness and superiority.” He paused. “And the fact that she set up a distraction to keep us busy would suggest that she’s shown up in person.”*

*“Meaning that if we find Apocrypha, we’ll find Bakuda, too.”*

*“Exactly.”*

The comms crackled and beeped.

*“Velocity, here,” said Velocity’s voice. “I’m at the site of the latest bomb blast. It was a building across from the Old Dutch Church.”*

*“Casualties?” asked Armsmaster gravely.*

Vista swallowed thickly, dreading the answer.

*“None. The building was empty, so no one was killed in the explosion. However, I’ve got a lot of panicking people here who were holding vigil for the victims of this morning’s bombs. Some of them have shrapnel wounds, a few were cut up by the glass from the windows... Nothing fatal, but some of them are pretty serious. The bomb appears to have been a normal explosive, although there’s no way to know for sure until the forensics team has gone through the wreckage.”*

Armsmaster grunted. Vista agreed, it was a lot better than it could have been.

*“Stay on sight. Keep them calm until EMS arrives, then I want you back on the search.”*

*“Copy that. Velocity, out.”*

*“Miss Militia.”*

*“Yes, Armsmaster?”*

*“I need you to —”*

BOOM

It was much less loud and much more muffled than the previous explosion, but Vista could still hear it, like the rumble of distant thunder during a rainstorm. Immediately, her head swung around in the direction of the noise, and down below her, she could see Miss Militia turn to look, too.

There was no sign, though. No telltale cloud of smoke or flash of light. Just the sound of another explosion.

*“Militia!”*

*“I know, I heard it!”* Miss Militia replied. Her motorcycle revved almost silently. *“I’m on my way!”*

Her tires squealed, and then she was off. Stumbling, Vista scrambled to follow her, running low to keep her profile down and less noticeable. In her chest, her heartbeat started to pick up, again. This was it, she thought. This was the fight. Any minute now, they’d be coming up on Bakuda and Apocrypha and *then...*

BOOM

Another explosion echoed. It was deeper and fuller, somehow, than it had been the last two times, and it seemed to come from the same place. Even at such a distance, Vista could feel the building beneath her feet rattle.

What was going *on*? Was Bakuda *insane*? Was she *trying* to get slapped with a Kill Order?

*“What? Another one?”*

*“They’re fighting!”* Armsmaster growled. *“Apocrypha and Bakuda! They’re fighting!”*

*That’s* what those explosions were about?



Vista's heart skipped a beat.

And they might finish before she got there.

*"How close are you?"*

*"Close!"* replied Miss Militia.

*"ETA?"*

*"Two, three minutes, if I floor it —"*

*"Then floor it! I did not install gyroscopic inertial stabilizers so that you could forget about them when you need them!"*

*"Roger!"*

On the road below, Miss Militia's bike sped up, far, far faster than Vista could surreptitiously follow along. She had to abandon the crouched half-run she'd been relying on to escape notice and break out into a sprint, squishing together larger and larger distances just to keep herself from getting left behind. Whole rooftops were smushed into the space of a few centimeters, each step stretched out to twenty feet — and still, she was barely keeping up, barely able to keep Miss Militia and her bike in sight.

Around and through Old Town, they went. Through the streets, Miss Militia made turns that even Vista, who knew next to nothing about motorcycles, thought shouldn't be possible, while above on the rooftops, she struggled to keep up.

*BANG-BANG-BANG* went another series of explosions, so close together that they seemed almost to be a single sound, so nearby that Vista could feel the vibrations shake through her teeth. They accompanied brief flashes of light that lit up in the distance, there and gone so quickly that she would have missed them if she'd blinked.

*"Miss Militia!"* barked Armsmaster's voice.

*"Almost there!"*

Barely had the words left her mouth than did a loud, bone-chilling scream split the air — tortured, agonized, filled with such pain that Vista could only imagine that the one making it had to be burning alive or drowning in boiling acid. It echoed and pierced straight through her, as though someone had driven nails through her eardrums or a stake through her chest.

*"Armsmaster!"*

*"It doesn't mean you're too late! Go!"*

It took a moment for the words to register, for Vista's brain to catch up and realize that it wasn't Bakuda or one of her goons that was screaming, that it couldn't be, because it was too high pitched and didn't have the rasp she could remember from the video earlier in the morning. It wasn't a man, it wasn't Bakuda.

That meant it had to be Apocrypha.

It felt like bare seconds later when Vista saw the lights, turned to see a warehouse on the street to her right, with pale shafts of light spilling from the windows and from holes that looked to have been blasted into its sides. That had to be the one, the warehouse they were looking for, but Miss Militia didn't turn onto the street, she drove past it, and when Vista took a bare second to look, she realized why: there was no one *on* the street, no sign of any explosions, so either they were inside or out behind it.

As Miss Militia took the next turn instead, Vista scrunched up the space between her building and the one across the street from her. One step took her onto the next rooftop. Another step, then another, and she was standing atop the warehouse next to the one with all the lights on. She took barely a second, little more than a quick glance, to see the devastating holes blasted into the side walls, then she was running along, crossing another rooftop. A long alleyway stretched out between her and the next building over.

With three running strides, she was at the edge of the roof, peering down, panting from having run for so long. Below her, there was a smooth, black ball closer to the holey warehouse, and further out — there, a tall, slim girl in purple and gold, splayed out on the ground and shaking. And there, coming up on her —

Vista gasped breathlessly.

Oni Lee.

Oni Lee advanced on the girl who had to be Apocrypha, knife raised menacingly. There was something wrong with him, a slight limp in his step, a strange flop to his right arm, but Vista didn't care much for trying to figure out what or why, because that wasn't the time for it. She reached out, preparing to widen the space between them as much as she could, no matter how difficult it would be —

But Miss Militia was already there, sliding into a crouch at the open end of the alley. She was already hefting a large, long rifle with a wide barrel, already sliding a tube with a fluffy ball at one end and big, thick needle on the other into it, already propping the butt against her shoulder and aiming down the sights.

*Fwboop*

The sound of the gun firing was barely audible over the pounding of her pulse in Vista's ears. Thirty, forty, fifty feet — the dart traveled with speed, crossing the distance so quickly that it was little more than a blur. It struck home in Oni Lee's chest, piercing what she took to be some kind of bulletproof vest, and lodged there.

For a long, tense moment, he didn't seem to know what had happened. Vista swung her attention back to Miss Militia, who was now carrying a slightly different rifle and aiming unerringly at Oni Lee. Then, she fired again, and there was a loud *CRACK*, and when Vista looked back at him, Oni Lee had dropped his knife, which clattered to the ground, and the hand he'd obviously been holding it with looked mangled and broken.

Wait. Rubber bullets? Why...?

Duh, Vista felt like smacking herself a second later. Oni Lee. Grenades everywhere. Explosives and firearms did not mix, especially with Apocrypha, the new heroine, *right there*.

*CRACK* — and she shot him again, right in the head, only for the body to stumble, fall, and vanish into ash —

And the *real* Oni Lee to appear in the air above the rooftop *Vista was standing on*.

As he fell and landed and stumbled, Vista slapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her gasp and ducked behind what she could only guess was an air conditioning unit or something. Her heartbeat thudded loudly in her ears, and for a few tense seconds, she waited to see if he'd noticed her, if he'd heard her gasp or her moving.

But when he didn't suddenly pop up beside her holding a grenade, she turned carefully and cautiously poked her head over the boxy thing she was hiding behind.

Oni Lee was still where he'd landed, crouched and hunched over. With his right arm apparently somehow disabled and his left hand broken, he was on his knees, propping himself up with his left elbow. He must have landed pretty hard.

As she watched, he slowly got his feet underneath himself and started to stand, but he was having obvious difficulty. He couldn't use his hands, could only support himself with the one elbow, and his legs looked as though they might give out at any moment. Even when he managed to get mostly upright, he was swaying dangerously, almost like he was drunk.

...Or was feeling the effects of that tranquilizer he'd been hit with.

Even still, it was clear to her that he wasn't going to fall over before he managed to escape. Before her eyes, he was getting his bearings, and all it would take was a handful of quick teleports, a scant few seconds, for him to get far, far out of range before he collapsed. He was going to get away.

Unless she stopped him.

For a heartbeat, Vista hesitated. After all, Oni Lee was an infamous psychopath. He was not only one of the few capes both willing and able to kill people casually, he was also one of the ones who could pretty easily get away with it. He'd never killed or seriously injured a Ward before, but she had no trouble believing he'd do it without batting an eye.

But...what if she captured him?

The idea swelled in her chest, pushing away caution and fear. After all, wasn't that why she'd come out here in the first place? To prove she was good enough, that she wasn't just the cute, little media darling that the PRT had forced her into playing, that she was a hero in her own right and not just window dressing?

Wouldn't that go against the whole point if she just let him get away?

Yes, yes, it would.

Vista shifted and narrowed her gaze on her enemy.

So, she needed to capture him. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Oni Lee had a power that countered hers pretty hard. No matter what she did, no matter how she twisted or altered space to keep him from getting away, he had the advantage in that he could simply teleport out of whatever she did. She couldn't beat him like that.

Fortunately, she thought as he swayed again, shaking his head, she didn't even *need* to beat him, she just had to keep him occupied long enough for the tranquilizer to kick in and knock him out. So all she really needed to do was distract him, not pen him in.

In that case...

Vista glanced around for something to use, then felt like an idiot when she realized she was standing on a roof lined with *gravel*.

Well, it certainly beat trying to use something heavier.

She carefully and quietly reached down, grabbing a fistful in one hand. She took a single piece, and with a moment of concentration, the space between them twisted like a pretzel, curving around. She wound back her arm, took aim, then *threw* it.

Coming from a completely different direction, that little piece of gravel hit Oni Lee in the back of the head, just above and behind his left ear.

Vista ducked back down, and the altered space snapped back to normal as Oni Lee flinched and whirled around to look for whoever had thrown that gravel at him. She had to grin as he looked out over the street and towards the building across from theirs, where there was no one in sight.

Twisting space again, she fingered another piece of gravel, wound her arm back again, and threw it. It flew through the curved space, traveling out and around, and it hit Oni Lee square on the back of the head — from the exact opposite direction of the first.

He spun around again, looking, but again, there was no one there to have thrown the gravel.

Grinning broadly, Vista used her power, and the third bit of gravel sailed up, then came back down and landed on top of his head, this time. Comically, he turned towards the sky, head swiveling wildly as he looked for a nonexistent enemy who had dropped a pebble on him.

*Where are you even looking?*

Stifling a giggle, Vista picked up another piece and considered how she was going to hit him, this time. Wouldn't it *really* screw with his head if it hit him right where Miss Militia had shot his clone down in the alleyway? Right between the eyes? Yeah, that sounded like a good idea. Let him try and wrap his brain around *that* one.

Vista wound back, shifted, and as she tried to visualize the twists and turns in space, her foot shifted and slid —

*BONG*

And slammed right into the box she was using as cover.

As Oni Lee whirled around to look at her, Vista froze, arm raised, fistful of gravel still in one hand, halfway through winding up for her throw. For an instant, they remained that way, staring, frozen in place, and the moment hung...

Then, Oni Lee appeared less than ten feet away.

Vista scrambled to back away and fell onto her behind, dropping the gravel she'd been holding, and Oni Lee started to advance menacingly, one step at a time. Each inch closer sealed off another escape route, cut away another option, hemmed her in alone with a remorseless killer, until all that stood between her and him was the metal box that she'd been hiding behind.

She tried, failed, to focus on lengthening the space between them as she dragged herself backwards along the roof. She tried, failed, to push her feet up under her, to kick herself up and stand, as her heart thundered in her chest and in her ears and drowned out everything else but her and him.

Oni Lee advanced, implacable as a mountain. He advanced, unstoppable as a speeding train. He advanced, inevitable as death. There was no way to escape him, nowhere else left to go, no more distance to put between him and her.

And then, Oni Lee, one of the most dangerous villains in the city, stumbled, fell forward, and slumped bonelessly onto the box thing she'd been hiding behind.

Dumbfounded, Vista wondered for a moment if she was dreaming.

“Holy...” she whispered. *Did that really just happen? Like some fake-out from one of Dennis's action movies?*

A moment passed. Oni Lee didn't move.

“Is he out?” she asked herself quietly.

Still, Oni Lee didn't move. If it wasn't for the rise and fall of his chest, she might have thought him dead.

Slowly, cautiously, Vista stood back up and walked over to him. He remained slumped over the box thing, apparently out cold, even when she grabbed another piece of gravel and pinged it off of his mask.

Yup. Out cold.

Rummaging about in her pockets, Vista pulled out one of the zipties she'd swiped from her father's toolbox, and with a little bit of maneuvering and far too much effort for how easily the adult heroes did it, she bound his arms behind his back by the wrists.

“How do Battery and Miss Militia make it look so *simple*?”

When she was done, she stepped back and inspected her handiwork, and after a moment, was satisfied. She’d captured Oni Lee.

Now the hard part: figuring out how to hand him off to the adults.

...Eugh. She hadn’t thought this part through very well, had she? If she tried to take credit for it — and she wanted to, because hadn’t that been why she’d come out in the first place, to prove she was capable of hacking it in the big leagues — then there was no way she wouldn’t get punished for it. Maybe even benched for the foreseeable future.

Wouldn’t that be the height of irony? She proved she was ready to be a real hero and not some mascot to be paraded around, only to be stuck manning the console until she graduated.

On the other hand, if she left and didn’t say anything, then what was the point of coming out in the first place? She might as well have just stayed —

“LOOK OUT BELOW!” a familiar voice suddenly called.

Vista startled and dove for cover behind the stairwell, peeking out just enough to see a blur of red flash towards the ground and a white and grey blur land, then burst into motion atop the building across the alley from hers. Neither seemed to have noticed her.

Assault and Battery.

Which meant she only had so much longer to figure out what she was going to do. If *they* were here, Armsmaster couldn’t be all that far behind them, and then it was just a matter of minutes until the PRT arrived and started securing the scene. If she hadn’t come up with something by then, the decision would be made for her.

Great.

Vista sighed.

What a wonderful way of proving that she knew what she was doing, by showing that she had no idea what she was doing. *That* would certainly convince the PRT and the Protectorate that they shouldn’t be treating her like a helpless kid, to be coddled and left on the sidelines.

She glanced back at Oni Lee, who hadn’t moved at all.

It wasn’t like she could just go down there and drop him off. “Oh, by the way, I happened to be in the neighborhood and caught this guy trying to sneak off.” Yeah, like *that* would go over well. No, of *course* she hadn’t snuck out to help find and fight the mad bomber who blew up a bunch of public places and had threatened to blow up more, why would they think something like that? That was just *crazy*.

...She *really* hadn’t thought this part out that well, had she?

Damn it.

Where were they all, anyway? What was with the radio silence? Shouldn't she be hearing a bunch of "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" and Assault cracking jokes? At the very least, there was no way Armsmaster wasn't keeping tabs —

When she reached up to check, it was to find that her radio had gotten turned off at some point. When, how, she didn't know.

But when she turned it back on, there was no sign of him or Miss Militia. The only ones on the line were Assault and Battery, who were making quiet small talk as they did...whatever it was they were doing.

"Where *are* they?"

Vista went over to the lip of the building and looked down into the alleyway below, searching for the others who should have been there. Sure enough, there was Miss Militia, standing off to one side, and there was Armsmaster — when had *he* shown up? — talking to... Wait. Where was...? Was that *Apocrypha*?

Vista's brow furrowed. What? But she looked *completely* different, now. Blonde hair, blue dress, silver armor, nearly as short as *Vista herself* was — where was the tall, willowy girl with long, dark hair, dressed in purple and gold? Where was the mask with the reflective lenses, the gloves, the skintight undersuit?

Was *this* part of Apocrypha's powers? What even...

Vista stopped as a thought occurred to her.

And why were the talking with the radios off?

She leaned over the edge and aimed her visor at Armsmaster, then reached up and turned a dial to increase audio pickup, like one of those toy spy microphones kids played with. It was one of the handful of functions that Kid Win had added for her.

Having a Tinker on your team could be really cool, sometimes.

For a moment, there wasn't any sound at all, and Vista worried that it had gotten broken, somehow, during the scuffle with Oni Lee or something. Then, after a couple of seconds, Armsmaster's voice was talking in her ear, as crisp and clear as if she was standing right next to him.

"We... We know how...Shadow Stalker died."

Vista's heart stopped.

...What?

"Oh?"

And Apocrypha's voice, cool and unmoved, filled her with dread.

Why... Why would they be telling this to an *independent* when even the Wards, Shadow Stalker's *teammates*, hadn't gotten the full story, yet?

"We know that you were...involved in her death."

"That I killed her, you mean?"

Vista gasped and slapped her hands over her mouth, flinging herself back into her hiding spot. For a few heart-pounding seconds, as her pulse thundered in her ears, she was sure that she had been discovered, that someone would appear over the lip of the roof and reveal her. She was sure she'd been caught.

But no one came.

Slowly, as her heartbeat started to calm, Vista crept back out and tried to focus in on the conversation, again. She'd missed a parts of it, though, because there had to have been something said that made this next part make sense.

"— do not intend to pursue any charges, criminal or otherwise."

"Really?" the skepticism in the girl's voice was almost physical. "And why should I trust you, now? Now, after everything she did under your nose? Now, after you just admitted that you shattered the unwritten rules and unmasked me?"

What?

Vista tried to wrap her head around what she was hearing, but couldn't. The unwritten rules, unmasking Apocrypha? When, how, why? What did it have to do with anything?

Obviously, there was something going on that she didn't understand, some background detail that she'd missed or something, because there had to be *something* that explained why the Protectorate were not only going to let Shadow Stalker's murderer get off the hook, but also letting her act as though *she was the victim*.

Right?

There had to be *something*, didn't there? Armsmaster, Miss Militia, Director Piggot — there was no way they would just let the girl who murdered a Ward get away with it, just because she was powerful, right? There had to be some reason that made it all make sense, didn't there? Something that *explained* why they weren't slapping the cuffs on her and dragging her into a cell, why they weren't going to send her to jail for *killing a Ward*.

...Right?

Then, down below, Armsmaster said something that did nothing to reassure her.

"Are you familiar with the protocols of the Endbringer Truce?"



“No,” said Apocrypha.

Vista could only listen as he explained it for her benefit, talking about the whys and the hows, while something like dread settled in her stomach. An idea of where he was going, what he was about to do, started to bounce around inside her head, but no, there was no way, he wouldn't.

Would he?

But why? Why were they going so far for this girl? Why were they treating her with such care and respect? Why were they going through so much effort to stay on her good side? Why weren't they *arresting* her? *She killed Shadow Stalker! And she admitted it right in front of them!*

In the alleyway below, Armsmaster lifted off his helmet and revealed his face.

“Colin Wallis.”

“Taylor Hebert,” said Apocrypha. “But then, you already knew that.”

“I did,” Armsmaster admitted.

“There's just one thing I want to know, Armsmaster.”

“If I can answer it, I will.”

“Did you know? You, the PRT, the Protectorate, *whoever* was in charge of watching out for her, *you*, who worked with her... Did you know what Sophia was doing — to me, to all of the other people she tormented?”

“No,” he said firmly. “No, we did not. The issue is currently under investigation, to determine who or what failed and enabled her to act in such a manner. Her handler will be brought up for review, and the staff at Winslow will be questioned to determine their level of complicity.”

“Just...one more thing, then.” I looked at where I thought his eyes would be. “If you *had* known, if you *had* found out before she died...what would you have done?”

“She was in violation of the terms of her probation,” he answered gruffly. “Per the original deal worked out by the courts...she would have been remanded into PRT custody, until such time as a hearing could be arranged. If the courts decided that she had, indeed, violated her probation, she would have been sent to a juvenile detention facility to serve out the rest of her term.”

“Thank you.”

But Vista couldn't sit and listen to it anymore. She turned away and left immediately back in the other direction, Oni Lee forgotten on the rooftop. Space yawned, then contracted, yawned, then contracted as she used her powers to put as much distance between her and those *fakes* who called themselves heroes as she possibly could.

There was no way. *No way.*

She didn't even think about where she was going or how far, she just went as fast as her legs could carry her as far as her powers would let her, her head swirling with anger and betrayal.

Bullying? *Bullying?* That was why Apocrypha had killed Shadow Stalker, because she'd been *bullying* her?

Granted, Vista herself had been on the receiving end of some of that vitriol and spite, and she'd had a fantasy or two about beating Sophia's face in, but that didn't mean she'd ever *do it*. A little mean-spirited teasing, a trip or two in the HQ hallways, some insults and derogatory remarks about her height and age — those weren't any fun, but that wasn't a reason to *kill* her.

Hadn't Apocrypha — hadn't *Taylor* ever thought about going to a teacher? Or fighting back? Or even *transferring* to a different school, if it was that bad?

And the heroes — Armsmaster, Miss Militia, hell, maybe even Piggot and the rest of the Protectorate were in on it, too — just letting her off the *hook*, like she'd been caught stealing from the cookie jar and hadn't just confessed to *murder*. That easily, they'd just... Sure, she'd been a massive and total bitch, none of the other Wards had really liked her, and Vista had hated her guts, but Shadow Stalker — Sophia — had been a *Ward*. Didn't that count for *anything*?

Vista stopped only when her legs gave out and she couldn't go any further, on a random rooftop in the middle of what she vaguely recognized as Downtown. She landed on her knees, scraping them against the roof, probably skinned them pretty badly. She didn't feel it, then. She probably wouldn't have cared if she had.

"Damn it!"

Hot tears spilled down over her cheeks and she punched the roof as hard as she could. Her fist throbbed from the impact, but all it did was make her angrier.

"Is that all we're worth, to you?!" she demanded of the heroes who weren't there. "It's okay if we die, as long as you get another strong hero on your side out of it?!"

Kid Win, Clockblocker, Browbeat, *Gallant*... Would they all be sacrificed, too, if it meant they could sweet talk someone like Apocrypha into joining up? Did their lives mean that little, that they could be tossed aside when it was convenient? Were they willing to overlook *anything*, if it meant having a powerful cape as part of the Protectorate?

"Taylor Hebert." That was the name of the girl who had killed Shadow Stalker — who had killed Sophia.

"Taylor Hebert." She said it again, to make sure she had it right.

Taylor Hebert. Apocrypha. She seared those names into her brain and clung to them so that she wouldn't forget. Taylor Hebert. A tall girl with long, curly dark hair. Taylor Hebert. The girl who had killed Sophia Hess.

A decision formed, cold and hard, in Vista's head, and as she wiped away the tears, she stood up and looked back in the general direction of where they'd all been.

Fine. They wanted to suck up to a murderer? Let them suck up to a murderer. They were willing to bend over backwards for the girl who beat Lung? Let them bend over. They wanted to treat her with kid gloves? Let them.

“Taylor Hebert.” She said it one last time so that she would never forget it.

If they didn’t want to arrest the girl who had killed a Ward, then Vista would do it herself.

She just had to figure out how to do that, first, capture a Trump that could take down Lung.

But she had a pretty good idea about where to start.