

Interlude 10.a: A Face Without Hands

Dennis McKellen (no relation to Sir Ian, a fact that had always disappointed him, because *Lord of the Rings* was *awesome*) felt like everything had started moving too fast. He was on a rollercoaster, swinging from one crazy thing to the next, and he never knew until it happened whether it was going to be something great or something terrible.

It hardly seemed possible that so much had happened in the span of just a month or two. Some days, it felt like it had only been a short while ago that he'd been at the console to hear that Armsmaster was dragging Lung's half-crippled carcass into lockup, and then Sophia was dead, and then Medhall got blown all to hell, and then the robbery at the bank went spectacularly wrong, and then Missy's harebrained scheme had nearly cost her an arm, and then Echidna and Leviathan and the Empire's attack...

And in the midst of all of that, he'd met a dynamite girl who, he wasn't afraid to admit, was kind of intimidating, sometimes. Intense. She wasn't the prettiest girl out there, and she wasn't the hottest, either, but her sheer badassery was just so fucking *sexy* — and she was maybe, kinda, probably his girlfriend? Sorta?

He really needed to get that clarified, because it was eating at him every day not being sure.

How was it that so much had been packed into so little time? Any one of those would have been the biggest thing of his *year* last year, and yet so many of them had marched a conga line through Brockton Bay in just under two months. It was like the universe had conspired with fate and destiny to throw as much at him and the city as they could in as short a timeframe as they could, just so they could watch everyone run around like headless chickens trying to figure it all out and not die in some horrible way or another.

Side note, Leviathan had been fucking terrifying. Running around like he'd had rockets strapped to his legs had been exhilarating in hindsight, but all he'd been able to focus on in the moment had been staying alive and not screwing up his part in the plan.

Things had finally started to calm down. An eerie calm that had kind of unnerved a lot of them, like a gentle breeze before the storm, but it had at least been a week or two of nothing really happening at all. A break.

Yes, most of them had been waiting for the other shoe to drop, but there'd still been nothing at all of consequence to have the PRT and the Protectorate scrambling around trying to keep things from snowballing.

And hey, he'd even had the chance to go to his maybe-girlfriend's birthday party and give her a kiss, and then she'd kissed him back (wasn't expecting that, but with all of the shitty surprises he'd had to deal with, this one was a nice one). If Mister Hebert had taken Dennis aside and given him a friendly, but sternly worded warning about boundaries and consent, well, that was okay, too, because Dennis was still figuring out how to do the whole grown up relationship thing and Taylor was the kind of girl who didn't do half-hearted stuff like casual flings. She played for keeps.

But of course, because there'd been one decent day, the next couple had to be complete and utter shit.

“She quit?” Dennis asked, and it felt like someone else was using his mouth. His pulse roared in his ears like thunder, and his head was hot and stuffy, even though he was sure his face must have been white as a sheet.

No small feat, considering Dennis was as Irish as they came and white as the driven snow.

He must have heard that wrong. That was the only explanation that made sense. He was a little too young to be hard of hearing, but hey, when you had PRT troopers yelling in your ear during conditioning and Mrs. Spiegel shouting at you to leg it in Phys Ed, something had to give eventually, you know?

Because otherwise, Dennis had to accept that he *had* heard right and the girl who seemed pathologically driven to be a hero had decided to *quit* being a hero.

“Yesterday,” Carlos confirmed.

Dennis's gut clenched. Yesterday. She'd quit yesterday. The day after her birthday party, where he'd made a total ass of himself and all but forced that kiss on her.

Damn it. Damn it. Why was he such an idiot? (Don't answer that, Chris.)

“Was it because of me?” he asked.

Carlos's brow furrowed.

“You?”

“The other day. At her birthday party. When I...when I kissed her, you know, did that whole dip thing —”

Missy snorted. “Don't be stupid,” she told him. “Taylor's made of sterner stuff than to drop out over something like *that*. Besides, she kissed you back, didn't she?”

“But what if she only did it because it was expected —”

“Give Taylor a little more credit,” Carlos said a little more gently than Missy would have. “She wouldn't just drop out of the Wards without saying anything.”

“Why else would she quit, though?”

Missy's brow furrowed. “Have you been living under a rock?”

His mouth answered before he could think better of it. “Hey, I'll have you know it can be very spacious there if you find the right rock!”

“What Missy means is,” Carlos rephrased it, “didn't you see the news, yesterday?”

Dennis's gut clenched again, for an entirely different reason.

"I was at the hospital all day yesterday," he admitted quietly. "Dad was... He was having a bad day. I..."

I needed to be there.

He was such a fucking coward. If only he'd manned the hell up and asked Panacea for help earlier — hell, Taylor had healing powers, too, maybe *she* could've done it, if only he'd been brave enough to ask — then maybe his dad's cancer would be a thing of the past. No more hospitals, no more bone marrow transplants, no more worrying about whether Dad would take a turn for the worst and he'd get that one phone call that he'd always been dreading.

But it was never the right time. He always had an excuse — Amy was too busy, Amy had enough on her plate, he should wait and ask her when they had a moment alone, he should wait until she'd gotten a good night's sleep, he should wait, wait, wait, wait, *wait*, and when he found the right moment, *then* he'd ask.

How was that working out?

Carlos shifted. The expression on his face was weird, like he was trying to find a way to deliver bad news in a way that didn't totally suck.

"It was all over the news." Eventually, he just gave up and laid it out. "The Fallen finally launched their first move against Apocrypha. They *executed* a girl. Decapitated her and sent the video with an ultimatum. Called Taylor out specifically. Well, Apocrypha, I mean."

"They must be absolutely crazy if they didn't think heads would roll after a stunt like that," Dennis muttered.

Carlos winced. "Dude. Not cool."

Dennis grimaced.

"Sorry."

"It's not just that," Missy said. "It's the last... Fuck, ever since Tagg took over."

"Language," Dean said, but it was hollow and half-hearted. Missy waved it off.

"Whatever. Look, I'm not the only one who's noticed it, right? How he kept sending her off on solo patrols and never let her out of sight if he could help it? The cancelling of all her extracurriculars on-base? Hell, he shut down our martial arts lessons with her!"

"No," said Dean, frowning. "You're right. Ever since Director Tagg took over, he's been keeping Apocrypha at arms' length. Like he doesn't trust her. The paranoia floating around his head is...frankly, it's hard to describe it. Sharp and thin and cold. Tentacles of fear and dread that touch everything around him."

Dennis couldn't say he'd had the same impression, but then he'd only met the man all of once or twice and exchanged, at best, a handful of words.

"What does that have to do with why she quit?"

"The Fallen called her out," Vista explained slowly, like she was talking to a toddler. "On national television. And executed a girl by chopping off her head. A girl who happened to look a lot like Taylor. You think she'd sit back and let the 'adults' handle things after *that*?"

"Well, no," said Dennis. "But she's also, you know, the *Endslayer*. What kind of idiot would bench her when someone like the Fallen comes a-knocking?"

"Tagg," Dean, Missy, and Carlos said at once.

"I heard she marched straight up to his office and demanded to be in on it," Missy added.

"Of course Tagg said no," Carlos said. "I don't blame him. I know I wouldn't want to go up against her if Valefor managed to get his claws into her. Might as well just surrender Brockton and leave."

"You really think Taylor wouldn't have some kind of method for getting around that?" Missy asked dryly. "She killed a fucking Endbringer, Carlos. She's basically Eidolon. *Of course* she has a way to block Master powers."

"Like walling off the city?" Carlos countered.

Whoa, wait, what?

"Hang on," Dennis interjected. "What's this about walling off the city, now?"

The other three turned to him like he'd grown a second head.

"There's no way you missed the giant walls that were around the city until just a little bit ago," Carlos said.

"You'd have to be fucking blind," Missy agreed.

"Language," Dean muttered again. He went ignored.

Of course not. You really would have to have been living under a rock not to see those giant walls that surrounded the entire city, all gleaming white brick with trceries of gold and fluttering banners. Hell, he wouldn't have been surprised if they were visible all the way from New York City.

"That was her?"

Who was he kidding? There was no one else it could be. There were maybe a handful of Tinkers who could build stuff on that scale, and none of them could have done it without being noticed long before they finished. Taylor was a Trump with access to "magic." She'd already proven she could make a magic castle to protect the city from Leviathan. What was an actual castle compared to that?

The other three gave him a weird look.

“Right. Yeah. Stupid question.”

“The walls did come down, though,” Missy pointed out. “Maybe she just didn’t want the Fallen escaping the city before she caught them?”

“And she couldn’t have done that without basically showing that she could have declared Brockton her own personal fiefdom whenever she liked?” Carlos asked heatedly. “Fuck, I don’t agree with how Tagg has been treating her, but that wasn’t the way to handle things, Missy.”

“Guys,” said Dennis, “guys. Can we get back to the main point? Taylor left the Wards, why?”

The both of them grimaced and exchanged a look.

“It’s not like this is a sudden thing,” Dean cut in. “She might be a bit fuzzy to me most of the time, but... Taylor’s been slowly simmering ever since Tagg took over. Bubbling just under the surface. Frustrated. Impatient. Like she was only going through with it because she thought she had to, you know?”

He chewed on his next words a moment.

“Stifled,” he decided on. “She’s been stifled. Like she knows she can do more but no one is letting her and she just has to take it.”

No one needed to clarify exactly why she would feel that way. The Empire’s attack was still fresh in all of their memories.

“And the Fallen were just the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Missy concluded. “Being told she had to sit it out after they killed a girl who...who was probably one of the body doubles they roped in when she transferred to Arcadia a month and a half ago.”

Oh shit. That was fucked up. He hadn’t considered that angle — and from the looks on their faces, neither had Dean or Carlos.

It wasn’t like he could say he blamed her. He was a little disappointed, maybe, because Taylor was a pretty interesting girl and maybe he was going somewhere with her, and hey, the Wards were already a sausage fest, so more girls on the team was always a welcome thing.

But if all of this was true and Tagg had been targeting her because he was afraid of...what, exactly? That she was super special awesome and too amazing to be contained to something so pedestrian as basic Wards patrols? Dennis wasn’t sure, but if it was bad enough that Taylor had been that frustrated then...then maybe he could understand why she’d decided to quit the Wards. Could accept it, even.

Because then it would mean she hadn’t quit because he’d been a creep the other day.

“So where does that leave us?” Dennis asked. “We just supposed to sit here while the grownups figure things out? Because my swiveling skills aren’t really up to that.”

Carlos and Missy shared another look. Dennis groaned.

“Oh, fucking... Okay. What *else* did she do?”

“Armsmaster came in last night,” Missy explained slowly, “after answering a call that the Fallen had been apprehended at the Old Dutch Cathedral. Specifically, Valefor, Eligos, and... I think it was two other capes?”

“Four in total, I’m pretty sure, yes,” said Carlos.

Dennis felt his mouth flap open.

“She handled them all by herself in just a few hours?” he squeaked. “I... I feel like I shouldn’t be so surprised, I really do, but... Seriously? These guys managed to evade the PRT and the Protectorate for how many years, now, and she brings them in *just like that?*”

Missy’s lips quirked to one side. “Your girlfriend is a certified badass, Clock.”

Yes, because that was what he needed, now, a reminder that the girl who might or might not be his girlfriend could snap his back like a twig if he pissed her off badly enough. He’d heard that relationships were labors of love and that it took a lot of back-breaking work to make them function without imploding, but the back-breaking part wasn’t supposed to be *literal*.

“Armsmaster was put in quarantine the minute he arrived back,” Carlos said, and immediately the mood plummeted again. “The official report is that Apocrypha was already gone by the time he got there, but...”

“Tagg thinks he covered for her,” Dennis concluded.

If you’d asked him whether Armsmaster could be that much of a bro, then he would’ve said no just a few weeks ago. Now, they were in strange times, indeed.

“I don’t think there’s an arrest warrant, yet,” said Carlos, “but at the very least, there’s probably quite a few people who want answers about those walls and what they did. It’s... I hate to compare Taylor to someone like Nilbog, but there’s already been some talk online about Brockton becoming the next Ellisburg.”

A chill swept down Dennis’s spine.

Ellisburg was, in many ways, the worst case scenario for a city, the only thing worse than a Simurgh Containment Zone. At least with one of the SCZs, things could go on relatively as normal and you could still have a somewhat normal life. Most people, he had even heard once, never traveled all that far from the city in which they were born. So you might be locked in for the foreseeable future, but life wouldn’t necessarily change for you *too* drastically, and there was even some hope of one day rehabilitating those who had been under the Simurgh’s influence for too long.

To get the Ellisburg treatment meant that you were beyond all hope of saving, and everyone — from the lowliest clerk to the highest echelons of government — had left you for dead.

Missy rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. That’s the biggest crock of bullshit that I’ve ever heard!”

“You’ve gotta admit, Missy, it’s not that unfair a comparison,” Carlos pointed out. “I mean, it’s not like we have that many examples of capes who’ve taken over a city and had the power to make it *sick*. All of them are S-Class threats. Most of them are horror stories.”

“That’s stupid and you know it.” Missy scoffed. “I mean, nobody complained when she put up walls to protect the city from Leviathan, but now that she’s doing it outside of an Endbringer fight, she’s suddenly a warlord? I mean, seriously. It’s not like she’s been riding around in a chariot with a crown and a scepter declaring herself the king of Brockton Bay!”

“Funny story about the crown part,” Carlos muttered, so quietly that Dennis almost didn’t hear it.

“Maybe,” said Dean, “but that doesn’t mean people aren’t scared. And they have a pretty good reason to be, too. I mean, Brockton Bay has always been crazy, but the Fallen just executed a girl on tv with a promise of more, and the girl who killed an Endbringer surrounded the city with castle walls that tanked *Leviathan* like she was claiming ownership. I think that maybe everyone *is* overreacting a little, but I can understand why they’re so concerned.”

“She just killed an Endbringer,” Missy said mulishly. “And she’s a Ward, or at least she *was* until yesterday. And she also took out Lung and the ABB basically singlehandedly. You’d think that’d be more than enough for people to cut her a little slack.”

Not to mention her killer interview, Dennis added to himself. That thing had been loads of fun to watch — or would have been, if, you know, the Empire hadn’t decided that the PRT HQ needed a makeover right when it was airing. Guess they’d been watching too many of those flip or flop shows on daytime television and decided to try their own hand at it — Martha Stewart probably offended Hookwolf on a fundamental level.

Cooking was so *pedestrian* for a white supremacist, you know.

“And there are a lot of people who think that means she’s getting high on herself,” said Dean reasonably. “I mean, that’s not an unfair assumption to make, is it? Loads of people let fame get to their heads.”

“And that’s enough reason to start talking about her like she’s Moord Nag or Nilbog?” Missy demanded acidly. “Like she’s just some warlord out to cut her own little fiefdom out of the country or something?”

Well, if there was someone who could manage it...

Should Dennis find it awesome or terrifying that the question wasn’t whether his maybe-girlfriend *could* take over the city, but whether or not she *would*?

“You’re really passionate about this, Vista,” Carlos said shrewdly. “I didn’t realize you’d become such good friends with her.”

For a moment, Missy grasped for something to retort with and visibly came up short.

“Whatever,” she finally said. “You guys can believe what you want to believe. Me? I’m not about to start passing down judgement until we get the order to evacuate and abandon the city to Apocrypha.

Until then, I'm going to *do the right thing* and give her the benefit of the doubt, like a proper teammate and *friend* should."

And with those parting words, she stood and left. A moment later, her door slammed shut. The silence that followed in her wake was deafening, and it was a long, tense minute or two where the three of them sat there as though afraid to break it.

"Do you really think it's gonna be like Ellisburg and the PRT is going to condemn the city?" Dennis asked quietly.

Carlos, tellingly, took a few seconds to word his answer. "I think the higher ups and the head honchos — both here and in Washington — are taking this whole situation as seriously as it needs to be. Whatever they end up deciding will be a measured, deliberated response appropriate to the circumstances."

Dennis shook his head at the political double talk. Carlos had really gotten better at that since he'd become the leader of the Wards.

There was no way Brockton was going the way of Ellisburg. Things weren't that bad, they just couldn't be. That was just the conspiracy nuts on PHO overreacting, like they usually did. Give it a few days for everyone to calm down and this would all blow over, and a few years from now, everyone would look back and laugh at how silly they'd been about this thing.

Right?