

## Fracture 9.7

My heart was still racing as I set foot back in Castle Avalon's courtyard, and my hand, clutched around the stem of the chalice, shook as the adrenaline started to drain. The breath I hadn't realized I was holding hissed out of my lips.

Fuck.

No swarm to hide my emotions in. It was a small miracle I'd managed to keep myself under control enough not to give away exactly how nervous I was, stepping into that meeting. Especially in front of Alexandria — her Thinker power would have sussed it out in no time. She probably *had* seen some of it.

Not enough to distract her from the fact that I'd showed up in their super secret base.

I took in another breath and let it out slow, then started walking deeper into my castle.

It hadn't been a lie; what I wanted from Cauldron was mostly for them to stay out of my business. There were a few things I was going to need in the future, for the fight against Scion, and I'd have to go back to them then and hope they weren't petty enough to demand favors or something in return, but mostly I'd just wanted them not to weight the scales in either direction just because I was too useful or whatever. When it came time to build my as-yet-unnamed organization, I didn't want them sabotaging it, either. Whether I succeeded or not would, *should*, depend entirely on my own merits.

But it had also been a declaration.

*I know who you are and how to find you.*

It gave weight to the threat I'd made about tearing Cauldron down if they came after Dad or my friends. There was no place they could run to that I couldn't follow, and with this crown on my head, no Path to Victory that would let them miraculously defeat me. If they attacked me where it hurt the most, then I could attack *them* where it hurt the most, and there was nothing they could do about it.

M.A.D. Just like how things were before Scion, when countries kept other countries from using nukes with the threat of using their own nukes.

I hadn't liked using Khepri's tactics and methods, because what I'd just done had very much felt like something she would have done during her days as a warlord, but if I wanted Cauldron to listen to what I had to say, then I had to make them think of me like an equal, like someone whose actions had *weight*. Part of *that* had been letting them know that *I* knew what the endgame was.

"I can't even say I'm not cut out for this sort of thing," I complained to the empty air. "That Khepri exists proves me wrong."

When I got back to the center of the keep, I set the chalice — I wasn't going to use its stupidly complicated name anymore than I had to — on the table with my rings. It wasn't exactly the same as a table around which heroes gathered, in no small part because there wasn't a quick and easy method

of *getting* the actual Round Table, but a chalice from which equals drank would hopefully be close enough.

“Of course,” I mumbled, “I tell myself I don’t want to become Khepri, even if I’ve accepted that she’s a perfectly valid version of myself, and then I set about doing the very things that set her on the path she walked. This time, on purpose, even.”

There was nothing to be done about it, in this case. Strength invites challenge. For Khepri, with the Empire fractured and the ABB all but defunct, so many had smelled blood in the water, from the Fallen to the Butcher and her Teeth to Accord to the Slaughterhouse Nine. They’d smelled it, and they’d flocked to the city, each trying to take their own piece, whether that was a literal territory or a prominent cape.

For me, I was the Hopebringer. Some who would have come would now stay away — the ones who didn’t like the idea of trying to face someone who’d killed an Endbringer. I had to hope one of those was Jack Slash, at least until I’d prepared myself to deal with the Nine. The others, though? They’d relish it, find joy in the challenge, or even just hope to be too small and too insignificant to catch my attention.

When I dealt with the Fallen and turned my sights on the Empire, I didn’t want to have to come back and find that another half a dozen gangs had sprouted up while I wasn’t looking. I didn’t want to spend the next two years swatting flies or driving off every gang with more ambition than sense.

A quote from an Aleph movie came to mind. *“I feel like the maid. I just saved the world! Can’t it stay saved for five minutes?”*

So I was going to do what Khepri did. I was going to draw my line in the sand and let everyone know what it would mean to cross it.

“My line in the sand is just a bit more literal than hers was.”

I turned away from the rings and the chalice and the table and made my way to the nearest tower — the living spaces attached to the main keep — then started up the stairs towards the top. I could have done this from anywhere, of course, because that was the nature of the Noble Phantasm, but this was big, way too big, and I needed to see it happen with my own eyes, needed to see the full impact of what I was going to do so that I never forgot the weight of it.

When I got to the top, I meandered through the room and stepped out onto the balcony, and from there, I could see out and across the rest of the castle, through the courtyard, over the ramparts, and beyond to the swirling torrent that was the ocean. Above me, the currents thrashed and flowed over the barrier that kept me dry and alive, letting through the barest glimpses of the sunlight above.

The whole thing probably would have been less of a pain in the ass to build if I’d done it in an actual lake, but then it hadn’t taken me all that long to build it in the first place, had it?

I sighed. Now I was just stalling, wasn’t I? Could you blame me? What I was about to do was a pretty big step, big enough that Piggot had almost flipped out when I’d suggested it as a temporary fix.

“Nothing temporary about it this time, though.” I took in a sharp breath through my nose. “Okay. Here we go.”

I clutched at my vest, but the key had long since melded into my costume, perhaps for convenience. My passenger certainly wasn't going to be telling me anytime soon, and it — she? Could I ascribe gender to an eldritch creature that didn't have anything I recognized as being necessarily female? Whatever — was the only one who would know.

One last look out at the barren emptiness of the courtyard, at the swirling sea beyond and above, at the bottom of the bay where my castle lay, hidden and unassailable.

One last look to remind me what I was about to do.

It wasn't enough to change my mind.

“Beneath the lake, there is a kingdom,” I murmured, remembering distantly Nimue's thoughts. “There, I am queen. There, my word is law. There, my castle stands.”

*But no longer. I'm done hiding.*

Fortress Beneath the lake  
“ Castle Avalon.”

The Earth rumbled. The seabed quaked and cracked. The stone beneath my feet trembled and shook.

And slowly, began to rise.

It felt as though the world was ending. The roiling ocean beat against the barrier above my head like thunder, howling, screaming, as though to hammer me and my castle back onto the ocean floor. Everything was shaking, everything was rumbling, and if I could see out past my own castle walls, I was sure the ground would be splitting open and spewing lava as the land around me ripped itself apart.

The rush of the cascading currents. The torrential cries of millions of gallons of water pounding down against my barrier — for a single instant, I was afraid it would fail and the weight of the ocean itself would crash down to drown me.

But it didn't. It didn't, and my castle continued to rise, and the surging waters of the bay continued to part like that barrier was the tip of a spear being thrust up from the depths of the Earth. They spiraled, swirling, spinning as my ascent churned them up.

And then I saw light. The sea above me got brighter and brighter as sunlight streamed through, now that there was less to get in the way.

Finally, it broke the surface, and I felt my breath stolen away. Not because the sky was beautiful, although it was, but because I could see the entirety of Brockton Bay from my perch on that balcony, from the skyscrapers that yawned towards the heavens in the middle to the shorter, squatter apartment complexes further out, down to the residential houses on the outer edges.

Not with any detail, of course. Even with my eyes fixed, at this distance, it was all just vague blobs of color in the shapes of squares and rectangles. Miniature dots in muted browns, dull reds, and pale pastels.

And around that city rose too the walls of my castle, shooting up and up, much as my fake Lord Camelot had during the Leviathan battle. They reached up towards the sky, stretching high enough to dwarf the little houses that now stood in their shadow, high enough to match Leviathan himself twice over, and then they stopped, encircling the entire city.

Dust and dirt fell from the walls that had shot up from the ground. Water streamed down the sides of the walls that enclosed around the bay, casting miniature rainbows about as sunlight streamed through them. The banners bearing Nimue's standard fluttered in the wind, proudly declaring to all who looked exactly who Brockton Bay belonged to.

And the instant it had all settled, I felt something *click* as it all became mine in truth.

That was the true function of this castle. It wasn't just that it was modular and easy to modify. It wasn't just that I could stack basically as many enchantments as I could manage into the walls. It wasn't something so basic as that.

It was that it established the encircled territory as "Nimue's Kingdom."

It sounded simple, didn't it? Uncomplicated, maybe. Like, "that's all?" But that was what made it so incredible, so powerful. *Everything* within these walls belonged to me, now. Everything. Even, to some extent, the laws of physics.

Before, I'd been following in Khepri's footsteps unintentionally. Lung, Bakuda, Coil, Echidna... Without meaning to, I'd been walking her path. I still wasn't sure whether that was fate, or if too much had been in motion for me to have avoided them without leaving the city entirely.

Now... Now, I did it on purpose. Now, I took this step with full knowledge of it.

Now, Brockton Bay was mine. In every sense of the word.

And I had some unwelcome guests to evict.

— o.0.O.O.0.o —

Control of the city by default meant control of the ley lines. It wasn't to say I could *access* them any more easily than before, but it wouldn't be much effort at all to reach them when the city itself was mine, now. There were several methods I could use, although a number of them boiled down to teleportation of some stripe or another.

That meant I had a pretty easy, baked in solution to the Fallen in the city, now that I had Aga-Gira to protect me from their anti-Thinker asset: I could find them, hypnotize them, and make them turn themselves in. That was probably the simplest, quickest, and most effective way of doing things. Completely bloodless, almost guaranteed to succeed, provided none of their passengers managed to find a way to break through it.

Not entirely impossible, when I thought about it, but not something I was incredibly concerned about, either.

That wasn't the plan I spent the next five hours or so working on.

No, because my first act after having raised my castle from underneath the bay was going to say something about how I planned on doing things, going forward. Mastering the cultists from halfway across the city would certainly send a strong message, maybe even a useful one, but it would also tell everyone, "I can reach you from anywhere and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Glenn had taught me too well. Khepri too well. Whatever. The problem with that message was that it would give the ordinary citizens reason to fear me, too, and now that I wasn't a Ward and wasn't theoretically under the government's thumb... Well, the good will killing Leviathan bought me would only last so long. Eventually, people would start thinking of me as a tyrant, a warlord. As it was, people on PHO would be comparing me to Nilbog before the night was out, I was sure.

I didn't want that. Khepri, during her stint controlling a part of the Bay, had been a polarizing figure. Part of that because she was a villain, part of that because she was claiming territory unlawfully. If you lived in the slice of Brockton she called hers, she was the only thing keeping it together and making life bearable. If you lived outside of Brockton, she was a villain usurping lawful authority.

I had to avoid that framing, which meant no Mastering, and that meant I had to get up close, personal, and bring the Fallen down with my own two hands — so to speak.

That was fine. To some extent, I even preferred things that way.

Killing that girl had crossed a line that I wasn't willing to let them get away with.

This wasn't going to be like with Bakuda, where I'd walked into the trap specifically because I'd intended to spring it. I wasn't going to give them the chance to fight back, I wasn't going to give them the opportunity to slip away, I wasn't going to let them call in reinforcements. I was going to come down on them hard, fast, and defeat them before they even knew what was happening.

I was going to crush them.

...Maybe that was a bit too dramatic.

There was no way for me to blitz them and get everyone before they could fight back. Not without Medea — and that was tempting, for how easy it would make it, but it would also swing too far to the "benevolence" side of things. I wanted to be thought of as unbeatable, yes, but I also wanted my enemies to think twice about coming after me.

So I did what I said before: when I needed something and I didn't have it, I *made* it.

By the time I was ready to implement my plan, it was already dark. I'd made sure to wait until after sunset, when everything wound down and got quiet and people started to relax and get sloppy. It wasn't late enough yet to be an obvious time to attack — I had to imagine that the Fallen would be better prepared at three in the morning, when they might expect a middle of the night raid — but it was dark enough. The numbers on my phone showed a few minutes after eleven.

I left my castle then in my base Breaker form, a vial of liquid in one hand and wrapped in the invisibility cloak that had gotten washed into the bay during the battle with Leviathan — I had quite forgotten about it in the aftermath of the Echidna incident, but it had been easy enough to retrieve with Nimue. It stayed snug around my shoulders as I made my way into the city.

Once I made it far enough, I leapt up onto the nearest rooftop, wind whipping the cloak about me, and crouched down. As quickly as I could, I pulled off the crown and the cloak and the ring, setting them aside.

“Set. Install.”

Between one breath and the next, I became Hassan of the Hundred Faces, like putting on an old pair of clothes that somehow still fit. It felt like it had been forever since I last used one of my assassins, and compared to how often I used the likes of Medea, I suppose it had been.

When the changes had finished and I'd gotten sufficiently used to the lean, almost gangly body of Hassan again, I scooped up my supplies and slipped the crown back onto my head, then slung the invisibility cloak over my shoulders. It felt a little weird with the mask in the way, but there weren't any problems.

Likely, there wouldn't have been anything wrong with just trusting Hassan's stealth to get me where I needed to go unseen, but the invisibility cloak would make sure of it.

Sufficiently equipped, I set about again, navigating my way through the city to the place where the Fallen had decided to hide themselves.

I'd been surprised, at first, when I realized they were holed up inside the cathedral, one of the oldest buildings in the city — had been around since before the city was even a city, as far as I knew. Used to be, the church would hold Mass there every Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday, and then somewhere along the line it had become every Sunday, and then Leviathan came and like most things, the cathedral had been closed down pending inspection.

When I thought about it, though, it made some twisted degree of sense. I didn't totally understand the Fallen's belief system. I knew they were a cult that worshipped the Endbringers, but I didn't know if they'd slotted that into some previous religious belief or made a new one based around them.

Whatever the case, where else would you find a religious fundamentalist group other than a church?

It took maybe ten minutes to get there at my speed, hopping rooftops. The cathedral straddled the border just outside the city proper and the outer, shorter area of the city among places like the post office and the residential district, sandwiched between Downtown and Old Town.

I arrived to find it guarded. Not obviously, at least not so obviously that it would draw attention, but there were several people milling about outside on frankly obvious patrol routes. To a normal person, I imagine they wouldn't really have looked it. But Hassan's eyes were trained to spot it, and so I saw it anyway.

And there, sitting in the bell tower, was a man in an armored costume. Blackened, with clawed gauntlets and horns that swept back over his head.

Eligos.

If I'd needed any kind of confirmation...

Delusional Illusion  
“ Zabaniya .”

My shadow stretched, grew, and split, and in an instant, several more of me slid into existence like ripping away the veil of reality. As with Bakuda, there was one for each lookout, but now, one more for each to make sure there were no surprises.

“Go.”

They scattered, each towards their own target, and I raced forward under the cover of my invisibility cloak, scaling the cathedral one leap at a time until I reached the top.

Eligos looked much as I expected him to, up close. Like Khepri remembered him. Blackened armor, clawed gauntlets, horns of obsidian that swept back over his head. It was a decent likeness of Behemoth, although I wouldn't have said a dead ringer.

I could tell immediately that he was bored and a little chilly, standing at the top of the bell tower. Probably wishing he could be downstairs inside, instead of standing watch in his costume.

Might have been better for him, too. But this was more convenient for me.

I leapt from under my cloak like a spider — by the time he turned to check the noise, I was already on him, my legs wrapping around his arms and pinning them to his sides, my arms wrapping around his neck as I applied pressure to his carotid artery. It would only take a few seconds to put him out like a light.

A heartbeat passed as he struggled, unable to lift his arms and too panicked to fight back. He collapsed back, half an attempt to make me let go, but I weathered the floor slamming into my spine as though it was nothing.

Another heartbeat. His struggles weakened. A gust of wind burst out from his skin, but it was too anemic to force me off.

“Sleep,” I breathed into his ear.

Another heartbeat. A little gasp. Eligos went limp in my arms.

Carefully, I unwound myself from around him, checking to make sure he was still alive. When I leaned in close, his breath rattled inside of his mask.

Good. He wasn't getting off that easy.

I sat down and waited, keeping an eye on Eligos in case he stirred. In hindsight, I probably should've prepared a sleeping potion to knock the guards out, since methods like this were far less reliable for keeping someone out for an extended period of time.

If I'd had more time, maybe. But five hours had barely been enough to finish all of the things I *had* done for this.

One by one, my other selves reported in their success, and the other guards were taken down, including two more capes I didn't immediately recognize but who had been taken out the same as Eligos — more Shakers, or maybe Masters, given which sect of the Fallen I was dealing with. I wished I had a better place to put them rather than just dragging them all into the alleyways and hiding them out of sight, but anything else I did would get me noticed by the cultists inside the cathedral and utterly defeat the point.

*That's all of them.*

I left my other selves out to keep an eye on things, then picked up my cloak and the discarded vial with it and opened the hatch of the bell tower to descend into the cathedral itself. I crept along, sticking to the shadows, until I found myself on the upper floor of the cathedral main hall, and when I leaned out to look down, I found the entire ground floor absolutely *crawling* with Fallen cultists.

Five, ten, fifteen, twenty... There had to be at least thirty or forty people down there. How had they managed to sneak this many into the city?

Tourism, I realized a second later. Tourism, from all the people who wanted to see the city of the Hopebringer. I had no idea on the numbers of how many people had actually made a "pilgrimage" to Brockton after Leviathan, but it wouldn't surprise me if it turned out to be thousands.

I looked back down. The pews had all been moved aside, where they could, to make way for tables and chairs. The entire hall buzzed with the sound of their conversations like the cafeteria at Arcadia. I could see guns, assault rifles with sleek, black, military bodies, hunting rifles with polished wooden stocks, even a pistol or two strapped to thighs.

No one else who screamed "Cape!" the way Eligos did. Valefor was probably in one of the back rooms.

That was fine. I wanted to handle him personally anyways.

I leapt off of the balcony and landed with all the grace of a ballerina on the beam of the rafters, quietly tiptoeing until I'd gotten myself into a good position. Then, I pulled out the vial and looked down.

Here we go.

The stopper on the vial popped off with ease, and for an instant, I stopped, worried that someone might have heard the sound echoing off the cavernous walls, but the people down below gave no sign that they believed anything amiss. I took a deep breath and held it — more out of an abundance of caution than anything, since the crown likely would have protected me in any case — and then tilted the vial on its side and poured out the contents.



The viscous purple liquid inside slithered down the glass, serpentine and insidious, and dribbled out towards the floor far below. It made it about fifteen, maybe twenty feet down, and then it diffused into the air, transforming from a thick, syrupy liquid into a heavy purple mist, drifting down onto the people below like sand in an hourglass.

For a moment, no one noticed. By the time it made it to the ground floor, the mist had dispersed enough to be nothing more than a glimmer reflected whenever the light hit it just right, a wet chill in the air that clung to the clothes and the skin. But as more and more came out of my vial, it gathered around their feet and ankles and slowly wafted upwards, to be breathed in.

“H-Hey, what’s going on?”

“What is this stuff?”

“What the fuck? Where is this coming from?”

“Are we under attack?”

“Someone get Valefor!”

And by then, it was already too late.

“Ah — AAAAAH!”

“Get away! GET AWAY!”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Please don’t hurt me!”

The room below descended into madness.

Faces twisted into fear and terror, the cultists dropped their guns with a raucous clatter and scrambled to get away — fleeing a phantom, a ghost, an apparition created solely from their minds. They were no more threat to me.

Silent as the grave, half of my work done, I put the stopper back in the empty vial and moved, repositioning to another spot for the next part of the plan. My feet had barely touched down on my new perch before the door leading back to the offices and the priest’s private quarters slammed open and a new man, reed thin and almost feminine, raced into the room.

“What’s going on?” he shouted at the screaming, groaning mockery of an evening Mass. “Is she here? Is it the Protectorate?”

Like a pouncing lion, I struck.

My cloak of invisibility was flung off — the better to reduce drag, so that I wasn’t slowed.

My legs uncoiled, propelling me downwards to the floor.

My dirk appeared in one hand, point poised to pierce.

And I streaked past Valefor, cutting apart his mask with a precision slice, to land behind him.

“What —”

I didn't give him even a moment to get his bearings; the instant I'd bled off my momentum, I spun and tackled him to the floor, pinning his chest to the carpet with my knee and pushing his face down so that he couldn't use his power.

Leaning forward so he could hear me over the crying of his flock, I whispered in his ear, “Hello, Valefor.”

“Who...”

He tried to turn his head, but my grip was too strong and I forced him back to the floor, pressing his forehead down a little harder to make sure he got the message.

“Rude of you,” I said, “not to recognize me, after you went to so much trouble to invite me here.”

It took him a moment, but he did manage to put the pieces together. “You're... Apocrypha?”

“Were you expecting me to come at you using King Arthur?” I chuckled, even though it wasn't funny at all. “Really? You thought I'd give you a fair fight? After you *murdered* a girl for the crime of looking vaguely like me?”

He chuckled too, like he wasn't concerned at all about the position he was in. “Well,” he said, “we needed to get your attention somehow.”

Asshole. Like that girl's life didn't mean anything at all.

“Oh, you did.” I pressed my knee harder into his back, taking a firmer grasp of his long hair until it had to have hurt. I brandished my knife. “And I'm going to make sure that you regret it.”

He cackled, and it was a thing victorious, not entertained.

“Look!” he crowed. “Look at their *Hopebringer* as she reveals her true self at last! Nothing more than a *murderer*, indiscriminately killing men and gods alike!”

I laughed now, too, low and sinister, hoping that it sent shivers down his spine. I was going for the most cliché cartoon villain laugh I could manage, something that sounded ominous and foreboding just to hear it, all the more to drive it home.

Hassan's knowledge of interrogation and intimidation came in handy, just then.

“You think I'm going to kill you, Valefor?” I asked him. “Oh no, not at all. That would be too *easy*. An end, an *escape*. You don't get out of this like that. No, you get to *live*. You get to live and watch, watch as I kill the other Endbringers, watch as I build something grand from the ashes of this broken world, watch as I drag Earth Bet into the future — kicking and screaming, if I have to.”

I took hold of his hair and *yanked*, forcing him to crane his neck back painfully. A yelp tore itself out of his black lips.

“You’re going to live and watch as I tear apart everything that you believe in and prove your sick little religion *wrong*.”

And with a single swipe, I sheared off the long, well-kept hair that he must have been so proud of, and the silky blond locks came away in my hand as his face fell back to the ground with a painful thud and a muted crack that told me his nose may have broken. I couldn’t bring myself to care and tossed the severed strands to the side.

His shoulders started shaking and his chest heaved, and a muffled sound came from his mouth. My brow furrowed and I leaned forward again, bracing my hand against the back of his neck to keep him down. It sounded like...

“Are you...crying?”

Really?

All of this and losing his hair makes him break down?

*You fucking killed a girl, you bastard! What right do you have to cry about your stupid hair?*

“How can you change the world,” Valefor said, and it was laughter, not sobbing, I realized, “when everyone believes you’re a mass murderer?”

“What?”

His arm swung around and he elbowed me in the ribs, and it was surprise more than pain that loosened my grip and knocked me off balance. He pushed himself up as much as possible from his position, looking out at the people who were still moaning and screaming in the throes of whatever illusion my potion had made them see.

“Everyone!” he shouted. “Kill each —”

*CRACK*

The bones of his shoulder snapped like cheap plywood under my knuckles, and the order he’d been about to give cut off into a strangled scream as I pushed him back down. My dirk was stabbed through the fabric of his costume to pin him to the floor, and more dirks appeared, each used to secure him more completely.

I took a breath and stepped away, but only long enough to let Hassan go and drop back into my normal Breaker form. The dirks I’d used to pin Valefor down vanished, and he tried to rise, groaning, but my heel pressing down on his broken shoulder convinced him otherwise. He crashed back to the floor with an agonized yelp.

“You went too far, this time, Valefor,” I said coldly. “And you picked the wrong fight.”

From my pocket, I produced a leather blindfold, purchased from a...certain kind of shop that I was going to do my best to avoid for the rest of my life. I leaned forward, uncaring if I put more pressure on his broken shoulder, and I roughly secured the blindfold around his eyes.

Self Seal Apocryphal Temple  
“Mold Gorgon .”

The blindfold snapped tight, winding around his head until it fit snugly over his eyes and covered them completely. Complete darkness, from now onwards, and with it, his powers would be sealed.

Maybe, someday in the future, I'd be merciful enough to take it off of him and he could have his sight back.

Fat chance of that.

“This is your world, now,” I told him. “You'd better get used to it.”

I let up on his shoulder; he was no more threat to me, anymore. I turned my attention, instead, to the cowering masses, the collection of cultists who had been affected by my potion of hysteria. They had, for the most part, calmed, in the sense that there was no more screaming and shouting and most of them were cowering, now, guns and weapons forgotten as they stared wide-eyed at nothing, huddling in on themselves.

What were they seeing? I had no idea. If I had to guess, they were seeing what would have frightened them the most at the moment I dosed them: a vengeful Apocrypha on the warpath, mowing down each of them like wheat before the scythe. Or maybe their leader, punishing them for failure.

In the end, it didn't really matter. When it wore off and they came back to reality, it would feel like nothing more than a fever dream, a nightmare. A shock, to be sure, but nothing that would scar them irreparably.

Hopefully, if there were any of Valefor's victims in there instead of real cultists, they'd walk away none the worse for wear. As for the actual cultists? A part of me *did* want to hurt them, punish them for the life taken.

But that wasn't my place. I was a hero; my job was just to stop them. The police, the courts, the PRT, prosecuting the guilty and punishing them for their crimes was *their* duty.

“...ma.”

I stopped, turned back to Valefor. “What was that?”

“Mama,” Valefor said louder. “Mama! Mama, where are you? She's here! She's here! Look at what she did to me!”

Silence greeted him. I looked around, swept my gaze across the hall, waiting for something to change, for someone to lunge out at me from the crowd. Nothing came.

“Was that supposed to do something?”

His face twisted, first with surprise, and then with betrayal and dismay.

“But she’s here, Mama!” he cried. “Can’t you see her? Can’t you? I’m not lying!”

*Mama...*

My heart skipped a beat.

“Mama...Mathers?”

Which would make her...the matriarch of the Mathers sect of the Fallen?

“See?” Valefor crowed. “She’s here! You’re supposed to be watching! Why can’t you see her?”

Suddenly, the pieces started to click together.

The Fallen had an anti-Thinker asset. The asset’s anti-Thinker properties propagated memetically — that is, they could be transmitted through the sharing of information. The more information you had on the anti-Thinker asset, the more effective it was against you. And Valefor’s...mother, I supposed, was supposed to be observing this whole thing as it happened, except apparently she couldn’t see *me*.

I’d been working under the assumption that the asset could be a piece of Tinkertech. Tinkers were bullshit, after all. But what if it wasn’t? What if it was a person? A cape?

A cape that powerful would only ever be in one of two positions: leader, or *tool*.

I wasn’t done with just Valefor and his groupies, I realized. There was another, arguably larger, threat to handle.

I reached down and grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt. He gasped and groaned as it jolted his broken shoulder, but I didn’t care as I dragged him through the hall, reaching into my pocket with my other hand to pull out my cellphone.

It answered on the second ring.

*“Hello, PRT Emergency Hotline, how may I assist you this evening?”*

“I’d like to report a parahuman incident at the Old Dutch Cathedral...”

Ten minutes later, I was sitting on the steps outside the cathedral’s doors when Armsmaster appeared on his bike — impressive timing. I wondered how many traffic laws he’d had to ignore in order to make it here that quickly.

He dismounted cautiously, not like he had that first night that seemed now like a lifetime ago, but like he was approaching a dangerous animal he wasn’t quite sure how to handle. His mouth was pulled into a grim line, and he came up slowly, as though he was trying not to spook me by making sudden movements.

“Apocrypha,” he greeted me solemnly.

“Armsmaster,” I returned politely. “Got a present for you.”

I toed lump by my feet, sprawled across the steps. I’d put him to sleep with Medea specifically to cut off Mama Mathers’ ability, because I had to assume that it could only work if Valefor was awake to spread it.

Armsmaster looked down at the lump. “Valefor?”

“The one and only.”

Armsmaster made a noise in his throat. “Alive?”

“Sleeping,” I said. “So that he can’t alert the anti-Thinker asset and subvert you. Eligos and another two capes are inside, along with a bunch of cultists. They were out here keeping watch while Valefor was inside.”

Armsmaster nodded.

“He attempted to subvert you?”

“Attempted. Failed.” I tapped my crown meaningfully. “I took precautions.”

He accepted it without skepticism. “Sensible of you.”

“Yeah.”

I stood with a sigh, rolling my shoulders. “I’ll leave them all to you and the PRT, then.”

“You’re leaving?” he asked.

“Gonna tie up the loose end,” I answered. “Take care of their anti-Thinker asset. The Fallen should be much easier to mop up with it off the board.”

His lips pursed. I could almost see the wheels turning in his head.

“It’s a cape?”

Almost against my will, I felt my lips pull into a smile. “You *have* been learning.”

His lips drew into a frown. He opened his mouth to ask, but I cut across him, “Better if you don’t know anything else about it, right now. Propagates memetically, remember?”

Still the most ridiculous fucking power I’d heard of, but then I channeled the powers and personalities of dead heroes from across time and space, so maybe I didn’t exactly have room to talk.

His mouth snapped shut, and instead, he said, “How do you intend to handle it?”

I...didn’t have an immediate answer. Because there weren’t a lot of ways I *could* handle it, considering the sheer breadth and depth of her power.

“I’ll figure it out,” I told him. I started to walk away; I’d wait until I was out of sight to use Doormaker. “I’ll see you later, Armsmaster.”

“I’ve been ordered to detain you for questioning.”

I stopped and turned back around. He wasn’t looking at me.

“If necessary,” he went on, “arrest you for sedition.”

I glanced out towards the bay. Impossible to see it, right now, but my castle stood out there.

“The castle?”

He gave me a jerky nod.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t expected it. I honestly would have been surprised if I *wasn’t* called in to answer for it.

But having that conversation with Tagg would be counterproductive at best.

“The walls will go down tomorrow,” I told him, “when this crisis is officially over.”

It wouldn’t change anything. Whether the walls were visible or intangible, what had been done couldn’t be undone. Brockton Bay was now officially my kingdom — conceptually, if not legally or in fact. Even if I never took advantage of it, that was just how it was.

“Will it change anything?” he asked shrewdly.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have one that I thought would be good, because I didn’t think it was a good idea to tell him the truth and a bad lie was even worse.

My silence was probably answer enough.

“I see.” He nodded. “I’ll inform the Director that you had already left by the time I arrived.”

...I was a little ashamed to admit I hadn’t expected that. Not from Armsmaster, of all people, and fuck if it didn’t make me feel like an ass for not believing he’d take my side. Maybe some part of it was just the lingering remnants of Khepri’s difficult relationship with her version of the man, but that felt like a paltry excuse when this one had never given me a reason to doubt.

I couldn’t not repay that faith.

“Do you remember the rings, Armsmaster?” I asked at length.

He paused and gave me a slight nod.

“I told you that they’re a part of a plan I was putting in motion,” I went on, “a plan for if or when I might have to quit the Wards. It’s part of a larger plan I’m putting together for the future. It’s not ready yet, but... When the time comes, there’s a place for you in it, if you want it.”

He stilled, and then after a moment, he gave me another nod. "I see."

He turned towards the cathedral fully, presenting his back to me.

"The PRT squads were a few minutes behind me," he said. "They will be arriving shortly. If you intend to avoid being accosted, it would be best if you were gone before they arrived."

I took it for what it was and left, leaving Valefor and the rest of the Fallen behind for him and the PRT to process.

I had a loose end to tie off.