

Collateral 4.4

I waited until I was sure Dad was asleep, until I was absolutely certain that he was tucked away in bed and sawing logs, before I got ready to leave. I made sure to divest myself of anything too important to risk — the phone Lisa had just bought me chiefly among them — and double and triple checked that I had my protective amulet, tucked away under my hoodie.

Then, a few minutes after eleven o'clock, when I was as sure as I could be, I braced myself and entered my base form. In an instant, I was standing in the center of my room, clad in my costume, staring through the lenses of my mask.

For a couple of moments, I fidgeted a little, inspecting my vambraces, picking at the bodysuit, adjusting the fit of the vest to make sure I was comfortable. In reality, I was just procrastinating. I was trying to put off going for as long as possible, because I was more than a little nervous and scared.

Maybe the professional heroes would have been fine and filled with confidence. Me, I could freely admit that I was a bit worried about heading into a fight against someone whose powers I didn't know anything about, especially since she was a *Tinker* who specialized in *bombs*.

Being afraid didn't change anything, though. I couldn't let her go, not to keep terrorizing the city and not to get another shot at killing Dad. I couldn't let her hurt anyone I cared about or tear apart anyone else's lives.

And, in the end, I was a hero. Bakuda was a villain. It really was that simple.

"Okay," I told myself, taking a steadying breath. "Set. Install."

I reached out and through myself and pulled on my chosen hero — if, indeed, you could properly call him a hero in the first place — and a moment later, I had taken on the form of the man swathed in black who had taken down Lung's group of gangers, the Hundred-Faced Hassan.

I wasted no more time and clambered over my bed, sliding my window open so that I could slip out and through the gap with a liquidy, almost serpentine grace. I landed with a soft, almost inaudible thump on the grass of our yard, tensed and waiting.

Several seconds passed, but they felt like hours. An eternity stretched as I listened for the sound of someone rousing, crouched there on the ground, my heartbeat surprising calm and even, but no light flickered on in our house and Dad's voice didn't call out for me. He was still asleep.

I breathed a sigh of relief that sounded like the whisper of Death.

So far, so good.

I started off with a short, running leap, throwing myself over the fence and into the neighbor's yard, then began making my way towards the abandoned, run down warehouse where I had first started practicing my powers what felt like an eternity ago. I moved like a shadow, flitting from spot to spot with an agility that I had not really appreciated, before. I touched down on rooftops without a

sound, silent as the grave. I landed on tree branches with the slightest of wobbles. The only signs of my passing were the footprints I left behind.

I was a ghost.

Lisa and I had agreed that I had no other option but to face Bakuda myself. As she had said, Bakuda was serious about her threats: if anyone but me showed up, if I showed up with anyone else in tow, she would detonate a bomb. Bakuda had never specified *which* bomb or *where* she'd planted it, but if she was willing to skirt so close to breaking the unwritten rules, it was entirely possible that she'd just skip the fanfare and bomb *my house*, with me and Dad inside.

Lisa hadn't put that outside the realm of possibility.

At the same time, Bakuda's preferred ending to our meeting would probably result in me permanently disfigured, tortured, or outright dead. Lisa had told me that Bakuda was an egomaniac with a chip on her shoulder who felt she had something to prove. From the story she'd given me about the Cornell Bomber thing, I was willing to bet she had a far better grasp of Bakuda's character than I did.

And what better way to for Bakuda to vindicate herself, prove how great she was, than to take down the cape who'd beaten Lung?

It was a classic tactic that had shown up a lot in the myths and legends I'd researched. It was a fairly common thing that several of the Arthurian Romance writers had done to show off their new character's chops: pit him up against the greatest knight of the Round Table, Sir Gawain, and make them fight to a draw. Quite a few Knights of the Round Table had been established like that.

The reverse had also shown up in Herakles' myth: pit Herakles up against a bunch of impossible tasks, so that he could never succeed. The fact that he had was part of what made him such a well-known hero, what made his Twelve Labors as famous as they were. He'd been handed quests that no man should have been able to do, and then he'd *done* them.

In this case, *I* was Sir Gawain, *I* was the Twelve Labors, and Bakuda was trying to prove herself by overcoming *me*.

It felt really surreal to think of it like that. Just a week ago, it would have been nonsensical and silly.

The wind that whipped at me as I went tugged on the ponytail that my hair had been magically gathered into when I had Installed Hassan of the Hundred Faces. It stung my eyes through the narrow slots that were cut into my mask, and I had to blink every now and again as they dried out. Somehow, and I had no idea how, I could see as clearly as if I wasn't wearing a mask at all.

There was no one else out, that I could see. The night around me was quiet and still, without even the distant sounds of a shouting drunk or a barking dog. It seemed that everyone had chosen to stay in, tonight. To escape Bakuda, probably. If I'd been a normal, everyday civilian, I doubt *I* would have wanted to risk going out during this fiasco, either.

I landed on another roof, then leapt off and kept going. The quality of the buildings and the streets was starting to drop, a sure sign that I was approaching to poorer section of the Docks, where the ABB had the strongest footing.

I glanced up at the waxing crescent moon and decided that I was making good time. Hassan of the Hundred Faces might not have been the strongest or the most skilled of fighters, but what he lacked in martial ability, he made up for in agility, versatility, and the ability to move quickly and quietly. I knew better, now, than to bring him against someone like Lung, but for this, there were few better.

Regardless of the surrealism, though, that was how it was. Bakuda had chosen *me* as her Mount Everest, her White Whale, because *I* was the one who had defeated Lung.

The trouble was, Bakuda was a Tinker, and one specializing in bombs. By definition, I couldn't fight her the same way, with superior strength or overwhelming firepower, and expect things to go the same way. I had to fight her like one of my casters, like an entrenched enemy who had had time to settle in and fortify a position.

So, that was just what I'd have to do.

I landed with the softest of crunches on the gravel roof of a building just about a hundred yards away from the warehouse where I was supposed to be confronting Bakuda. I was so focused on what I was going to do when I got there that I *almost* missed it, perched atop the corner of the next building over: a security camera, and a new one, at that.

I glanced around at the other buildings around me and solidified my first instinct: it was too new and too modern to have been there before, which made it very likely something Bakuda had set up — so that she could see me coming, probably. In which case...

Yes, when I looked for more, I could spot several, all stationary and pointing down towards the street. Again, they were all too new to have been there for very long, and in this area of the city, where the money would be better spent on fixing the roads or the streetlights, the odds of the mayor or the police department or whoever suddenly springing for security cameras were infinitesimally small.

This presented a problem, though. Bakuda had turned out smarter than I'd expected her to be, if she'd decided to go this far instead of just posting goons as sentries. Goons, I could dodge around, could sneak past, because goons were prone to boredom and making small talk to pass the time, and the human eye could be fooled. A *camera* could not.

Delusional Illusion

"Zabaniya," I muttered.

More of me slid into existence and peeled off without a word. Every time another camera was found, another of myself formed from shadow and vapor and took off to set up behind it. In total, it turned out, there were about twenty. One, two... Twenty-five, to be exact. Twenty-five security cameras, all set up to watch every avenue one could take to the warehouse, at least on the ground.

Once all of myself were positioned, we all reached in tandem and pulled out a small knife, balanced for throwing and sized for concealment. All of myself placed their knives against the cord that ran from the back of each of the security cameras, poised and waiting. I took a deep breath and prepared myself.

There was no way to avoid having to do this. If Bakuda could see me coming, she'd see how I planned to deal with her, and then, she'd either make good on her threats or run away and burrow in somewhere where I didn't know where she was. Maybe both simultaneously.

By the same token, the minute I cut these cords, she'd know I was here and I'd have only seconds to put my plan into motion. Half a minute, at most. A countdown timer. At that point, I'd have no other option other than to commit.

I took another deep, calming breath. Hassan's cool presence in the back of my head helped me to make the decision.

Now.

As one, each and every single cord was cut with a quick, practiced flick of the wrist. Morbidly, Hassan's knowledge told me that slitting someone's throat was even easier.

The moment it was done, all of my duplicates disappeared and I dropped Hassan like a hot rock.

“Set. Include.”

Then, immediately, I picked him back up again —

Delusional Illusion

“Zabaniya.”

— and split myself once more. An instant later, I was looking at another dozen of myself, each wearing the costume of Apocrypha, the heroine who had defeated Lung. Twelve girls with long, dark hair, wearing a purple vest and pants trimmed in gold, crouched together on that one rooftop.

Bakuda's plan was clever in its simplicity. She set up here, in the warehouse where I had once practiced my power what felt now like years ago, and likely set down traps and bombs and whatever she could think of. Pressure plates, landmines, tripwires, motion sensors — I had no idea what her limits were, but at least some of those could be made without a Tinker power using just a few supplies from a hardware store.

Then, she forced me to come here by threatening my Dad and calling me out on live television. Here, where she'd had who knew how much time to do whatever she liked. Here, where she could see me coming and probably had half a dozen ways to really ruin my day if I did anything but what she wanted.

An ambush didn't need to be impossibly complex if you could force your target to go where you wanted her.

That was why the plan I'd be using took advantage of one of the greatest advantages I had: Bakuda didn't know *my* limits, either.

I and ten of my duplicates took off and made our way around, using the rooftops to position ourselves at various angles surrounding the warehouse. One stayed where I'd started, and the last dropped down to the street and started to approach the door I'd used to enter the warehouse that first time in January.

Once we were all ready to go, I connected myself to my alternate on the ground — I decided to call her DeeCee to cut down on the confusion, because she was my decoy — and closed my eyes so I could more clearly experience what she was seeing and hearing. When things really got started, it'd probably be harder to focus on what she was doing, but I only really needed to have that at the beginning.

My decoy was a decoy, yes, and yes, that was obvious, but that was only part of what I needed her for. As for the rest...

Well. Her most important job would really be just giving me an idea of who was where inside the warehouse.

DeeCee opened the door to the warehouse and stepped inside and into the dark.

"Bakuda!" she shouted. "I'm here! Show yourself!"

...So maybe I'd watched one or two too many superhero cartoons as a child.

A moment later, the lights flickered on — new lights, hanging from new fixtures, at that — and standing upon a catwalk not quite at the far end of the building was the woman I'd seen in the video sent to BBNN: gasmask, red goggles, long black hair. A bandolier and several belts, all lined with deceptively simple-looking canisters and grenades, hung from every possible place on her torso, from her shoulders to her hips.

"You're late," Bakuda's voice rasped from her mask.

Before DeeCee could say anything, Bakuda's head twitched and she shifted her weight around, and in the distance, there was a sonorous boom that jolted me, the real me, out of my concentration. I whirled around towards the source of the noise, and there, far off towards the center of downtown, I could see a black haze rising into the night sky.

Bakuda had set off another bomb.

How, I didn't know. I hadn't seen her press a switch or anything, so for all I knew, she had some kind of futuristic interface wired into her goggles or something. Hell, maybe she'd rigged it to go off at this time *anyway*, regardless of whether or not I showed up. A woman like Bakuda — *a crazy bitch*, I thought in the privacy of my own head — might have done it just because she *could*.

I felt my hands curl into fists. All the more reason why I needed to stop her.

“— do that?!” DeeCee was demanding when I focused back on her. “I’m here! I came, just like you said!”

“Why not?” Bakuda’s mask turned her chuckle into a metallic stutter.

“You...!”

“I’m the one in control, here,” she said. “I have all the power. I can do *whatever the fuck* I want. Who’s going to stop me? You?”

DeeCee took a step forward, snarling, but Bakuda shifted, bringing her arm around and swinging...a rocket launcher. She swung a *rocket launcher* into view.

Suddenly, the belts and bandoliers, carrying all of those canisters and grenades, that were slung all over Bakuda’s torso made sense. She didn’t throw them at people or set them down as traps, she *shot* them from that rocket launcher. Depending on if or how much she’d modified the thing, hell, depending on whether her Tinkertech was limited to bombs or if she could make other stuff, that rocket launcher drastically increased her range.

That...made this both easier and harder. Easier, because if I got close, it’d probably all be over in a punch or two. Harder, because until I *did*, her options for what to hit me with and how hard were *much* more numerous.

“Ah-ah-ah,” she tutted. “See, the way this works? *You do what I say*. If you come too close, if you do something I don’t like, if you try and be clever, hell, if you even fucking *breathe* in a way that I find offensive, then I’ll pick one of these beauties at random and see which of the whole fucking *host* of ways your corpse gets to repaint this warehouse. And then, just for fun, I’ll detonate one of those bombs I promised.”

Bakuda patted one of her bandoliers, tapping her fingers against a shiny, silvery canister. They weren’t labeled, at least not in any way that DeeCee — and by extension, I — could see, but Bakuda almost certainly had some way of telling them apart. I couldn’t rely on her screwing up or making a mistake; I had to assume that she would never use anything but the one she intended.

DeeCee stepped back, fists clenched.

“Good girl,” Bakuda mocked.

“Now what?” DeeCee asked. “You’ve made an enemy out of half the city, you shattered the unwritten rules, you’ve got me here... What, you gonna gloat?”

She made a show of looking around, head swiveling as she gave me and all of my other selves a perfect view of all of the goons Bakuda had brought along and where they were all placed. *Good girl, DeeCee*, I thought as we adjusted our positioning. The whole plan hinged on being able to get everyone at once.

“You certainly brought a large enough audience for it.”

Bakuda laughed, a wheezing, stuttering noise that sounded more like Dad's truck on one of its less cooperative days than something that came out of a human mouth. "Oh, they're not here to watch me gloat," she said. If I could have seen her mouth, I imagined she'd be showing all of her teeth. "They're here to watch me... Well. Do whatever it is I decide to do with you."

She ran her fingers over the edge of one of the silver canisters.

"See," she went on, "Lung taught me *a lot* about respect and fear. He gets it easy enough, he's got the reputation for it. All he's gotta do is remind people every now and again why the ABB managed to last as long as it did with just him and Oni Lee against the Empire and their fucking *army*. Burn a few fuckers when they screw up, so they know not to do it again. Most figure out pretty quick not to cross him, and those that do... Well. If they're still around afterwards, then they've learned firsthand why Lung is fucking *Lung*."

She tilted her head down. The way the light hit her goggles at that angle made them seem almost to glow.

"Me, I'm not that fucking generous. Someone crosses *me*, they don't get any second chances." She gestured vaguely at her masked face with one finger. "Kinda hard to try again, when you don't have a head. I like it that way. Quick, easy, and people learn *fast* why you shouldn't try and *fuck with me*. These boys caught on real fast, too — I only had to demonstrate *once*."

Demonstrate...? A queasy feeling rolled around my stomach. Did that mean that she had... *blown* one of her *own guys* up? For *kicks*? I... Well, they were *thugs*, yes, but *still*. Who *did* that kind of thing? Even the peoples that had practiced *ritual sacrifice* had done it to appease their gods and ensure a bountiful harvest, not because they got a laugh out of it.

I probably shouldn't have been as surprised as I was, since Lung had proven he was perfectly willing to murder a bunch of teenagers over what amounted to petty thievery.

"You *bitch*," snarled DeeCee.

Bakuda only laughed, like it was some great joke.

"Now, you," she said, "see, I can't be that nice, with you. It was *real fucking tempting* to just blow you to pieces and be done with it. No muss, no fuss, just get rid of you like the fucking *speedbump* you are. Honestly, the E88 are a bigger concern. I'm more worried about *Hookwolf* than your scrawny, little ass. The problem is, *you beat Lung*. Left him *limbless and naked* in the middle of the street. That means I have to get *flashy*. I have to show everyone in this *whole damn city* why you don't mess with the ABB, why you don't *fuck* with *Bakuda*."

She reached down and tore one of the canisters free from her bandolier.

"And I think I've found just the right way. I *thought* about giving you a firsthand show of just what *spaghettification* feels like. *That's* a sufficiently grisly way to die, don't you think? Being stretched out like a noodle by gravitational forces, until your entire body is nothing but a string of molecules? But that's not enough of a *show*. I need a *spectacle*. Something for people to point to as a cautionary tale for the next, oh, say...maybe fifty thousand years?"

Suddenly, DeeCee started to chuckle.

“What?” Bakuda snapped. “What’s so funny?”

“You really are small-minded, Bakuda,” DeeCee scoffed. “All of this, just for *reputation*? To...what? Impress Skidmark and all of the other rejects? Everyone *else* already thinks of you as the little girl who threw a tantrum just because she didn’t get an A in math class.”

I bit my lip and hoped that Lisa’s plan didn’t blow up — and in this case, it could even be *literally* — in my face. I also hoped that my decoy’s acting skills were sufficient enough to hit all of the points Lisa and I had talked about, earlier today.

The plan didn’t necessarily rest on what DeeCee was doing now. It probably could have worked without it. However, the more distracted Bakuda was, the easier it would be to deal with her and the less chance she’d have to react or think up a counter. If she had a plan for me — or someone else, for that matter — coming through the warehouse windows and roof, then I needed her to not have a chance to enact it.

Perhaps a little ironically, DeeCee would be channeling *Emma* to do her part.

“Shut up!” said Bakuda. “You have *no idea* — ”

“Did you think you could erase that, if you blew up enough stuff?” DeeCee cut across her. “Like everyone would just forget, if you blew up city hall or did something big enough? Maybe once you made a name for yourself, no one would even remember that the whole thing started when you flunked out of Cornell?”

Bakuda took a step forward, stomping one foot down. “Bitch!” she howled. “I said, *SHUT UP!*”

“That’s what it’s *really* about, isn’t it?” DeeCee goaded. “You made a stupid decision, and now you’re making a *whole bunch* of stupid decisions, each *dumber* than the last, all so that you don’t have to face up to the fact you’re not as smart as you *thought* you were. Tell me, Bakuda, *is* there even a grade lower than an F?”

Bakuda was trembling, I could see it through my decoy’s borrowed vision. I thought I could see her jaw working, but she wasn’t talking at all.

“How *petty*,” said DeeCee. Her lips curled into a sneer I had been seeing almost every day for the past two years. “Here I am, trying to make a difference, trying to help pick this city back up off of its knees, and all you’re concerned about is making yourself *feel better*, like it’ll *change* anything? Really?”

DeeCee shook her head. A throaty sound of disgust passed between her lips.

“*You’re* the speedbump, Bakuda,” she spat. “All you’re doing is getting in my way. I don’t have time to waste playing your games or repairing your inflated ego. I have *real* problems to deal with.”

Bakuda swung her rocket launcher up and aimed it at my decoy, anger written into every line and angle of her body.

“You really need to learn when to shut the fuck up!” she snarled.

“Funny,” DeeCee said casually, “I was about to tell you the same thing.”

“*Now*,” I whispered into the night, and all of the rest of me *moved*.