

Fracture 9.3

A week had given me perspective.

Or maybe just enough time to cool down and think. Amy and Lisa had been my first priority, coming back to the city in the wake of the attack. After that, I'd had two days where I was just relieved that I hadn't lost them, no matter how close I might have come with Amy. I think if I'd let myself focus on the attack itself and the Empire, I might just have exploded from the clashing feelings of relief and apoplectic fury.

But a week of constant patrols had given me time to focus, to hone my thoughts and really take in the entirety of what had happened. It had given time to sharpen my anger, to temper it and condense it down into an edge, cold and razor-like.

Even like that, however, there was something of a lack of catharsis that came with hunting the Empire down. There was no resolution to the dozen or so of unpowered gangsters and thugs who were brought low by my fists or my feet, no sense of *release* to dragging their broken and bruised carcasses to jail.

There was no *Hookwolf*. No Cricket or Fenja.

It became apparent after the first few days that the Empire at large had gone to ground. They knew the reprisal for what they'd done was going to be extreme, or at least they hadn't expected me to cross two-hundred-and-sixty odd miles in four minutes, and so they were laying low to avoid my attention.

No rallies. No pit fights. None that any of the capes attended, at least, and those that *did* happen were obviously not sanctioned by the rest of the gang, because the guys who got caught admitted to arranging their get-togethers by themselves.

Hookwolf was a thug, a bloodthirsty brawler, and he'd fit right in with the Slaughterhouse Nine for cruelty and bloodlust, but that didn't mean he was stupid. His might have been a crude intelligence, but he was clever enough to know that he needed to be invisible and escape notice after something so high profile and dangerous.

And for all intents and purposes, he and his friends had dropped off the map. Every lead I checked ran cold. Every stone I overturned was barren. Even when I pulled out Sherlock Holmes himself, the only conclusion I'd been able to reach was that they must have left the city — to recruit, likely by contacting their European backers for support, and in the meantime, they would stay in a safe house some distance from Brockton. Fully stocked with nonperishable foodstuffs, bottled water, and a private generator, away from commonly used roads, perfectly isolated and self-sufficient for whenever it was needed.

I had a feeling I could have narrowed it down to the exact address, too, if privacy laws and things like probable cause hadn't restricted what information I had access to. Holmes wasn't inclined to respect such things, and he'd been perfectly willing to break laws to get the information that would tell me exactly where the Empire was hiding, but I absolutely didn't want Hookwolf or his cronies getting off on a technicality like that.

I was going to put them away, and I was going to make sure they *stayed* away.

When Lisa gave Holmes's work a once over, she had come to much the same conclusion. They hadn't even been sighted by anyone on PHO, and with infrastructure still spotty in some areas of the city (and not just in those where it had been spotty to begin with), none of the Empire's goons were talking about the leaders' plans online.

Likely that was because they hadn't even been informed, Sherlock had reasoned. The more trusted lieutenants were passing information on by word of mouth, and only amongst each other. The everyday thugs, their foot soldiers, had been told to cover or remove any markings or articles of clothing that could identify their allegiance.

What it all came down to was me fruitlessly running around the city, stopping petty crime here and there and otherwise doing nothing but being visible.

But contrary to the sudden peace and quiet, I wasn't at all relieved. Instead, the utter lack of action had me wound up, nervous, because it felt like the calm before the storm, like there was something else coming and we weren't prepared for it.

It was only a matter of time until the Fallen got here.

That was probably why I wasn't more furious about missing the Empire. I was absolutely going to stomp them into the dirt when they got back, and they'd be lucky if I was feeling merciful enough not to bind them with half a dozen geasa each by the time it was all said and done, but until then? They just weren't the biggest shit on my radar.

Who the Fallen were going to send... I couldn't be sure. All things considered, Valefor was almost a guarantee, and probably Eligos, too. This time, though, those two would definitely be accompanied by other members of the group. Maybe some members of the Leviathan branch? I wasn't sure. The Fallen weren't a group I had paid particular attention to before now, and Khepri had always been more laser-focused on the Slaughterhouse Nine.

Knowing my luck, the entire fucking cult was going to pick up and make a pilgrimage here, just so they could try and take me down.

Wasn't I just so fucking lucky?

I let out a disgusted scoff and thumbed my microphone. "Console."

"*Console here,*" said Aegis's voice. "*Go ahead, Apocrypha.*"

"I'm at the farther end of my designated route," I told him. "Everything's quiet, here. No incidents since my last check-in."

My eyes scanned the Docks, what had once been ABB territory, now abandoned and left to whoever wanted it. There were a few people who might have been Merchants and might just have been homeless, and they sat on sidewalks and in the mouth of alleyways in the shadow of the buildings that hadn't been knocked over by Leviathan, but aside from them, there was no sign of any gang presence. Not a single swastika or green and red bandanna.

Like I said. The calm before the storm, and it was unsettling.

“Still no sign of the Empire. I’ve seen a couple of guys who might be Merchants, but I’m not too worried about them, so I left them be. Any news?”

There was a momentary pause, and I was half excited at the idea that there might be something meaningful that he had for me to tackle. A week of what was probably more normal patrols had left me antsy and anxious just because they were kind of boring, too. The handful of unpowered thugs I’d taken in weren’t exactly the most effective way of undermining the whole gang.

“All’s quiet,” said Aegis. *“The Protectorate teams will be finishing up their patrol through the relief camps soon, and there haven’t been any disturbances there.”*

Unsettling.

Where were the Merchants trying to shake down the camps for supplies? Where were the homeless and the druggies making a nuisance of themselves trying to cut to the front of the lines? Where were the fights over territory, now that the capes were all gone, one way or another? Where was the chaos that Brockton Bay had struggled with for the better part of twenty years?

It was like the whole city could feel the charge in the air and everyone had hunkered down to wait for the storm to pass.

Or maybe I was overthinking it and the gangs were still pulling themselves back together in the wake of Leviathan. Maybe it was even simpler and they were all a little nervous about doing anything visible with *me* in the city.

Yeah. Right. The Empire had rarely ever risked a direct fight with Lung, as far as I knew, anyway, but that hadn’t stopped them from getting into turf wars with the ABB on the regular. Why would the Hopebringer be any more of a deterrent than the guy who had gone mano-y-mano with Leviathan as an entire island was sunk around them?

Maybe it was the simplest answer of all: the ABB was all but defunct and the Empire was out of town, so there was no one for the Merchants to scuffle with.

“You’re a little over halfway through your allotted patrol time,” Aegis went on. *“You should probably start making your way back to base. Vista and Clockblocker will be gearing up to replace you shortly.”*

I considered it for a minute, but nothing around me had changed. The Docks were still the Docks. Old Town was still Old Town. My nose wrinkled — ugh, except *that*. I didn’t know whether any of the buildings out here had working plumbing, but surely there was a better place to do *that* than against the wall in a dirty alleyway.

“I think I’m going to check up on one of the camps on my way back,” I decided. I turned away from the man pissing on the wall and consulted my mental map of the city. “Where’s the Protectorate team’s next stop?”

Another pause. He might have been asking whoever was supervising him whether or not I was allowed to do that. I hoped it wasn't Tagg; Tagg might just say no, because it didn't follow the "strict orders" he'd given me about going off on my own.

Why he was giving me solo patrols in that case was a question I probably wasn't meant to know the answer to.

And now his paranoia was starting to make *me* paranoid.

"Okay, I've got the location," Aegis said. "*You're on... East 21st Street, right?*"

"Pretty sure, yeah," I replied. I glanced around for a signpost, but the nearest one was so worn down that the lettering was indistinguishable from the peeling green paint. A quick glance at my PRT issue smartphone was much more reliable. "Yeah, East 21st."

"The Protectorate team's next stop is about ten blocks northwest of you. It's a little ways out from your patrol route, so I'll lead you there from here."

"Got it."

"First, you need to head west and make the next left. From there, go straight for two blocks until you reach the intersection..."

I followed his directions as he guided me through the city to the next aid camp. There was some irony when I realized I was heading towards the old Medhall building, where the camp had been set up in the spacious parking lot across the street from where the company's building had stood — back before Bakuda had blown it up and taken Kaiser down with it, that was.

How appropriate, now, that in its shadow was a relief camp giving aid equally to everyone who needed it, and without even meaning to, spitting upon the Empire's entire message and everything it was built upon. Lisa would probably get a kick out of it when I told her, if she didn't already know. At the very least, I'd get a snort out of Amy and maybe a wry comment about the uselessness of Nazis.

When I came upon the camp, I approached it obliquely from an angle, trying to avoid notice from the people inside of it while I scanned for Armsmaster and Miss Militia. As much as I understood the shot in the arm my mere presence could be for people now, I still didn't really like being swamped by supporters and well-wishers and fans, and especially not fans, because the more enthusiastic they were, the more likely they would do something like throw their underwear at me.

No, I still wasn't over that. It was gross, of course I wasn't.

After a minute or two of looking, I sequestered myself away in an inconspicuous spot behind a parked car, the closest thing to privacy I was likely to find, and contacted Aegis again.

"Aegis, I'm at the camp," I told him. "I don't see the Protectorate team. Did something happen?"

"You just got there a few minutes ahead of them," Aegis assured me. "They should be there soon. ETA... maybe three minutes?"

I took a breath. *Stop being paranoid, Taylor.*

Of course, that was half the problem: it wasn't paranoia when you really *did* have a cult out to kill you.

Three minutes passed like an eternity. I stood off to the side, out of immediate sight of the camp, waiting, fidgeting impatiently. At last, though, a pair of motorcycles rolled in at a leisurely pace — Armsmaster and Miss Militia — and as they dismounted, I stepped out from my little hiding spot.

They noticed me immediately. Hard not to, when the road here wasn't really busy and I was the only one in purple and eye-catching gold.

Can we talk? I mouthed, trusting that Armsmaster's helmet had some sort of program that read lips for him.

They shared a glance, and then he muttered something that only she could hear. The skin around her eyes tightened, but she gave a nod and peeled off from him to enter the camp alone. I hadn't really talked to her since that meeting in Piggot's office, so I didn't know exactly what she thought of me or what I'd done since, and I wasn't sure I wanted to ask.

When Armsmaster had made his way over to me, I stepped back into my little hiding place with him, to give us some degree of privacy. I made sure my mic was off before speaking.

"Anything?" I asked him lowly.

"No," he rumbled in that deep voice of his. "It is as you surmised with Sherlock Holmes. The Empire has gone to ground and left no obvious clues as to where. Watchdog has only confirmed that they are most likely no longer in the city."

As I also concluded with Sherlock, I finished for him in my head. They'd just added more weight to what I'd already found on my own. I'd call it a waste of time and manpower, but there was a joke in there somewhere about that being law enforcement in a nutshell.

"And the murders at the Towers?" I asked now. "Anything new there?"

"No," he repeated. "We have not been able to narrow down a suspect, only that, at present, the murderer is no immediate threat to the Protectorate or the Wards." Watchdog again, no doubt. I wondered what kind of strings they'd had to pull to get two different consults with the government's Thinker oversight division. "At this time, our most likely theory is that the perpetrator is a fresh trigger, someone who has had their powers since no earlier than the Leviathan attack. There is simply a lack of evidence to support any other hypothesis."

A problem that might have been solved if I'd been allowed to involve myself — and Sherlock by extension — in the case. Or, more pertinent to him in particular, if he had the training from Sherlock to find the evidence himself.

I think I was beginning to grasp his personality better, now. The me of two months ago would never have picked up that subtext.

“Your request?”

“Denied,” he answered, lips pulled tight. “The Director has refused my request to receive training from you.” His mouth tugged to one side. “As he has other requests to receive training of any kind from you. The squad you were training filed a formal request to continue your sessions. They, too, were denied. As too were the Wards.”

They had? Huh. I...hadn't expected that, honestly. Maybe I should have. Aside from the grumbling about how hard the workouts were, they'd taken to it like a sponge to water, and there hadn't been any of the personality problems that I might have feared from a group of grown men and women taking lessons from a fifteen-year-old girl.

Armsmaster tilted his head slightly. “Director Tagg is isolating you,” he observed.

I nodded. I'd noticed the pattern, too. How my contact with everyone was being minimized, how even when I did interact with the Wards or the PRT troopers, it was usually through a degree of separation — radio, intercom, telephone, just generally things that avoided letting us be face to face. Even the solo patrols served to reduce direct interaction with the other Wards, which was probably why he was sending me on them in spite of his strict “don't go off on your own” thing.

“He doesn't trust me.” He'd said as much.

Armsmaster made a noise of agreement.

“He's afraid of your influence.”

“Over who?” I asked wryly. “I'm not in any sort of position of authority. Aegis is still the leader of the Wards, for the moment. Clockblocker takes over for him in about two months, and Gallant a month or two later. Alexandria trusts me about as far as she can... about as far as Vista can throw *her*. I've never even *met* Eidolon, and the closest thing I've got to a friend at the top is Legend.”

And I had no idea how far he'd be willing to go for me. Even for a guy as good natured as he was, there was a limit to the strings he'd be willing to pull or the rules he'd be willing to break for my sake. I wouldn't want to put him in that kind of position anyway.

Plus, even he would have to go through Rebecca Costa-Brown — through Alexandria, and she wasn't exactly my biggest fan.

“You're the Hopebringer,” he pointed out. “All you have to do is go find a reporter and tell them how dissatisfied you are with Director Tagg's decisions and he would be out of that chair before the day was through.”

I frowned.

It wasn't that the thought had never crossed my mind. It was tempting, sometimes, too.

“That defeats the point, though.”

“What point?” Armsmaster pressed.

“The point of being a Ward,” I answered. “The point of letting you and Piggot and Dad sign me up for this whole thing. I’m supposed to be learning. How not to screw up, I mean, like I did with Noelle and Khepri. I’m supposed to have a support network to let me reach the places and the crimes and the fights that I might not be able to on my own. I’m supposed to be relying on you guys to teach me how to be better and to fill in for my weaknesses.”

That was what had convinced me, in the end. All of the other points had been valid to some degree or another, but the one that had won me over was simply that the Protectorate and the PRT had resources that I didn’t. They could help me get to where I needed to be and let me know when I needed to be there. They could make me more effective.

Leviathan wouldn’t have gone anywhere near as smoothly if I’d been on my own for it. Who even would I have given those pendants to? The Dockworkers? Lisa and Amy? I loved them and they were my friends, but neither of them was sure of heart enough to make up for six other people, professionals who had been fighting Leviathan for *years*.

“If I throw a tantrum or start throwing my weight around every time the Director gives an order I don’t like, then why am I even in the Wards?” I finished.

Of course, that didn’t mean things were going exactly as I’d hoped they would, either.

“That may be what has the Director so unnerved,” Armsmaster said. “You *could* throw your weight around, but you don’t. You don’t even threaten to. The question he likely asks himself — why? And the obvious answer he would come to — because you have a much subtler method of achieving what you want.”

It took me a moment to see where he was going with that.

“Mastering, you mean.”

“Aífe’s ability to grant others powers has little precedent,” he agreed. “By the standards the Protectorate is aware of, the powers granted by a Trump tend to be temporary. Fleeting, even. Those that last more than a few minutes have been shown to exhibit deleterious side effects on the mental state or personality of the...victim.”

“Like Teacher.”

He nodded.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t known that going in. It was why I’d been nervous about even mentioning the idea to Piggot, back before Leviathan. The track record for power-granting Trumps wasn’t exactly stellar.

I chewed my bottom lip. “You think he’s worried I’m trying to Master the Wards and the PRT out from under him.”

“He might not believe it intentional,” Armsmaster hedged. I snorted.

He obviously didn't know Tagg that well. The man *had* been to containment zone after containment zone throughout his career. He'd be especially wary of Master effects, since he'd had a close up view of the handiwork of the most subtle — and yet also the most blatant — Master in the world.

“No, I'm almost certain he does. His mind was made up before he was even appointed; I wouldn't be surprised if he'd *asked* to be stationed here as Director, out of some sense that he's the only one who can see through me or something.”

And that was likely the point of pushing me like he was: he wanted me to snap and start moving against him “blatantly,” so that he could be proven right. In the meantime, he had a weapon he could aim at the gangs while he watched for the slightest sign of subversion.

“As Director, he *would* have access to the unredacted reports on the Echidna Incident,” Armsmaster remarked.

“Which wouldn't elevate his opinion of me in the slightest.”

Although how deep he thought the rabbit hole went... I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

“If you wanted to confront him on the issue directly, I would support you,” Armsmaster told me.

I shook my head.

“That's exactly what he'd be worried about, isn't it? If you're in my corner, wouldn't that mean I'd already succeeded in Mastering you?”

There was a moment's pause, and then very slowly, Armsmaster inclined his head, conceding the point.

“Short of that, I'm afraid I'm not aware of how you might resolve this.”

My mouth quirked to one side.

“I told myself I'd give him a chance...”

“To?” Armsmaster prompted.

To prove that he wasn't a reckless asshole.

“To be better than the Tagg that Khepri knew.”

Another moment's pause. Then, “And if he failed?”

“I'm not sure,” I admitted, because I hadn't made up my mind myself, yet. He nodded.

“Would you quit the Wards, then?”

He asked it bluntly and without preamble. There was no judgement or derision in his voice, only dispassionate curiosity.

“Maybe.” Although it felt like a waste. A month was probably the shortest Wards career ever. “But I think I’d prefer not to. My problem, Khepri’s problem, with the Protectorate and the PRT was never the organization as a whole nor the ideals it was founded on. It was always the few assholes who were undermining them.”

That was the other reason why I was trying so hard to make this *work*. The PRT, the Protectorate, they were necessary to keep society together, to keep us on the verge of collapse rather than actually collapsing. I *wanted* them to work, and I knew that might mean swallowing my pride and doing some things that made me uncomfortable.

But in the end, I was a hero, and Khepri wasn’t an entirely different person than me. I wanted to make the world a better place, and that might not be something I could do as part of the Wards or the Protectorate.

“Do you intend to simply accept his terms and conditions, then? If you remain with the Wards, then his prohibitions remain. You’re forbidden from using your powers to train others.”

And therein, as the Bard would tell it, lied the rub. If I left the Wards, then his rules had no meaning anymore and I could continue to train people — all of no one, except Lisa, because the Wards would need his permission to learn from me and so would the troopers. If I stayed with the Wards, then I still couldn’t train anyone except Lisa, because he still had the authority to tell them no.

If he had any real authority over Lisa, he might have tried to forbid *her* from training with me, too, but she was my friend, not his subordinate.

An idea struck me. “Am I? As I recall, he only told me that I wouldn’t be continuing my training sessions while on the clock as a Ward.”

Armsmaster’s lips pulled tight. “You have an idea for how to get around his restrictions?”

“He said that I’m basically free to do whatever I like on my own time,” I answered slowly, piecing my plan together as I talked. “As long as I’m not on the clock, I can hang out with my friends as much as I like, and as long as no laws are broken, I’m not his — or the PRT’s — concern.”

I gave Armsmaster a smile, lacking in humor or warmth. I didn’t imagine it was a very nice smile.

“So that’s exactly what I’m going to do. What do you think, friend?”

Armsmaster didn’t respond for a moment, he just looked at me, scrutinizing me, as though he could divine the entirety of my plan through my expression. A part of me feared he might turn around and reveal it to Tagg, that his dedication to his career and the Protectorate would compel him to turn me in.

Then, slowly, he smiled, too.