

## Collateral 4.7

In spite of whatever thoughts he might have had regarding the form of the hero I had taken — whether they were doubts, surprise, or simple curiosity — Armsmaster did not express them in any open or obvious way. Aside that first glance, he moved past the idea that Arthur was a petite blonde with remarkable speed.

Where others might have at least questioned it, Armsmaster took the whole thing in stride.

He inclined his head to me, just the slightest. It must have felt ridiculous, considering we'd been much, much closer to eye level, the last time we'd talked.

“Apocrypha,” he said in that gruff voice of his, “are you well?”

“As I can be,” I replied, perhaps a little more coolly than necessary. “All things considered.”

*Do you want me to describe to you exactly how agonizing that bomb was? Satisfy your curiosity?* But that was a nasty, unfair thought that wasn't worth voicing. Maybe if I'd still been collapsed on the ground, unable to even stand or talk, it would have been more justified, but not standing there as I was, whole and calm and apparently undamaged.

“Good.” He punctuated this with a strong nod, as though I was a waiter that had just told him his meal would be ready on time. “That's good.”

... That couldn't be all he wanted, could it? Just to check up on me and make sure I was okay? That was something you sent a *get well soon* card for, not something you absolutely needed to ask in person, and most certainly not something you needed to ask a veritable *stranger* in person.

“Miss Militia,” I began slowly, “said you had something you wanted to speak with me about?”

“Yes,” he answered simply. “Yes. I needed to speak with you... regarding the incident earlier this week.”

Artoria's strength and calm allowed me to keep my emotions off of my face, but behind that cool facade, my thoughts raced. An incident earlier in the week... There were really only two things he could be talking about — the bank and Sophia — and neither one of them boded well.

“Incident?” I asked with a composure I didn't feel.

“Armsmaster,” interjected Miss Militia, “is this really the time or place for this?”

“The longer it's left to wait, the greater the odds of an unfavorable resolution,” Armsmaster said. “Better to handle it now, in a timely fashion.”

“But at twelve-thirty a.m. in the middle of an abandoned alleyway?”

“If not now, then when?” was his reply. “After she's encountered Hookwolf? After she's fought Fenja and Menja? After she's confronted Kaiser? Will any of those be a better time?”

For a minute, Miss Militia didn't reply. Then, she sighed. “Fine,” she said at length. “Just, give me a minute, before you go talking about active criminal investigations.”

She stepped around us and to the other side, then reached down and grabbed hold of the paralyzed Bakuda, who I had quite forgotten was even still there. Without pomp, circumstance, or ceremony, she dragged Bakuda further down the alleyway and out of earshot.

“Thank you,” Armsmaster said awkwardly when she came back to us. “I had forgotten...”

“I noticed,” Miss Militia told him dryly.

She walked back around to where she’d been before and stepped out of the way. She said nothing else, and Armsmaster seemed to take that as unspoken approval, because he turned his attention back to me and stared for a long moment, as though he was trying to find out how to start.

“We...” he began haltingly. “We know how...Shadow Stalker died.”

My heart skipped a beat inside my chest — that was what I’d been dreading. I kept my face schooled in a mask of calm. Artoria certainly helped.

“Oh?”

Even still, I couldn’t quite keep the quiver out of my voice. If he noticed it, he gave no indication.

This was not the worst case scenario I could possibly imagine, but since “the worst” was them calling the Triumvirate to take me in and to the Birdcage, that wasn’t saying much.

“We know that you were...involved in her death.”

A nice way to put it. But I didn’t have the patience for dancing around it, just then — if this conversation was going to happen, I didn’t want this drawn out, roundabout nonsense. Best to get directly to the point.

“That I killed her, you mean?”

There was no guilt in me, only a cold certainty. I had no tears to shed over what had happened to Sophia Hess.

“...Yes,” Armsmaster admitted.

“Are you looking for an apology?” I asked quietly. “Some sign of guilt or regret? For me to cry about how it wasn’t my fault, I didn’t mean for it to happen, and that I’m sorry she’s gone?”

“No,” Armsmaster said. “We heard your witness statement. We checked the records at Winslow. Compared the data. We’re well aware that there was...no lost love between the two of you.”

Which meant they knew. *They knew*. To mention Winslow, to mention my witness statement like that, a witness statement that I had given as *Taylor Hebert*...

My jaw clenched. There was something cold in my chest, spreading through my veins.

They knew who I was under the mask.

“So?” My mouth felt like it was moving of its own accord, like someone else was using it to speak through me. “Do you intend to arrest me, then? Put me on trial for murder?”

“No,” he told me. “Given the evidence collected at the scene and on Shadow Stalker’s person, the records of the past two years indicating a pattern of violence and abuse, and the information we have gathered thus far, the PRT has determined this to be a case of self-defense. We do not intend to pursue any charges, criminal or otherwise.”

“Really?” I couldn’t have kept the skepticism out of my voice if I’d tried. “And why should I trust you, now? Now, after everything she did under your nose? Now, after you just admitted that you shattered the unwritten rules and unmasked me?”

I’d had my trust broken too many times, now, to believe in him so easily. Maybe, a week ago, that Monday night, I could have given him the benefit of the doubt.

But not now. Now, Lisa had manipulated me. Now, Bakuda had proven that the unwritten rules only applied to those who chose to follow them. Now, Sophia was Shadow Stalker and she had tried to come into my house in the dead of night and kill me.

I had no generosity to spare.

Finally, he spoke.

“...Are you familiar with the protocols of the Endbringer Truce?”

Endbringer Truce? I’d heard, vaguely, of it, and Lisa had said a few things on the subject a couple of days ago. It was law, she’d told me, complete with legal precedent and ramifications, unlike the unwritten rules, which were more of an informal agreement not to go too far.

But...the subject of the exact mechanics of it and how infractions were punished hadn’t really come up. Lisa herself might not have even known, since I doubted she’d ever been to an Endbringer battle — and, once I thought of it, I doubted Coil would have let her, even if she’d wanted to.

“No,” I told him simply.

“The law built into the Truce is designed to prevent division and promote unity amongst the fighters,” he explained. “The people who fight don’t always...*get along*, normally. Sometimes, rivals or enemies are forced to fight together for the common cause of stopping the Endbringer. In the early days, before the Truce was finalized, there were some...*incidents*. Villains taking advantage of the situation to attack their enemies or discover their identities.”

Oh. Yes, I could certainly see how that was bad. Endbringer battles were uphill enough without including rivalries and backstabbing; if heroes (or villains, for that matter) thought that the guy next to them was going to stab them when they weren’t looking or go peaking under the mask while they were injured, no one would want to turn up at all, would they?

I...didn’t see what this had to do with them finding out my identity, though.

“The Truce was designed to prevent that,” Armsmaster continued. “However, it could not eliminate such occurrences entirely — accident or not, it still occurred. Therefore, a provision exists in the Truce, in the case that one cape discovers another’s identity while it’s in effect. The cape in question can either be sent to the Birdcage...or he can share his identity with the cape he unmasked.”

Armsmaster reached up for his helmet, and my heart skipped a beat. I felt my eyebrows raise a little and my mouth begin to fall open. Was he really going to...?

“Armsmaster!” Miss Militia snapped sharply.

“You won’t convince me not to!” barked Armsmaster back over his shoulder. “*I discovered her identity! Therefore, I must make amends for it!*”

Miss Militia’s brow furrowed, and she looked very much like she wanted to disagree, but rather than argue or debate the subject, she subsided and folded her arms. The pistol she’d been wielding earlier shifted rapidly between an uzi, a handgun, and a wicked-looking combat knife.

When he was sure she wasn’t going to object further, Armsmaster turned back to me and reached back up for his helmet. There was a pneumatic hiss and several clicks as whatever clamps or latches he’d built to ensure his helmet didn’t fall off at an inopportune moment released, and then, he lifted it off of his head.

My first thought was that he was surprisingly handsome, and yet at the same time, utterly normal. His hair, like his beard, was brown and cropped short, and his eyes were an unremarkable brown. His nose was perhaps a little more prominent than his visor might have led me to believe, but not grotesquely large, and the strong jaw was already on display normally, so there was no surprise there.

Oddly, I was both relieved and disappointed. Relieved, because he was only human, in the end, only a man, and yet disappointed, because looking up at him as a young girl, having him as a hero to look up to, it felt like he should have been divinely, impossibly handsome, with a countenance to match the Greek gods.

“Colin Wallis,” he introduced himself shortly.

Well met.

My respect for him rose a few notches. I wasn’t sure I’d ever get back to the level we’d been at on Monday, but that he was willing to go *this far* spoke well of him and his character. *He really is a hero*, was the thought I’d had, back then, and I could almost believe it again. *Almost*. But...

There was just one more thing that stood in the way.

“Taylor Hebert,” I replied quietly. “But then, you already knew that.”

“I did,” he said. Somehow, it sounded like *I’m sorry*, even though he didn’t say the words.

“There’s just one thing I want to know, Armsmaster,” I told him.

“If I can answer it, I will,” he replied, putting his helmet back on. The latches and clasps clicked back into place.

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

His lips pulled into a thin line. I might even have called it angry.

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

I...believed him, I thought. Or at least, I wanted to. It was more appealing than believing that the heroes had knowingly allowed a psychopath to run rampant.

But that led to one more question, equally as important.

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

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

In other words, justice would have been served, and I would have been free of her. Something like relief uncoiled in my belly. The knowledge that I wouldn't have been abandoned, just so that they could have one more hero on the streets, was like a balm to an old scar that would never quite heal.

I almost asked about Emma, too, but she was a normal girl, so she probably didn't fall under PRT jurisdiction.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

It wasn't perfect. Trust was a hard thing to repair, and even with this, I couldn't say I trusted the Protectorate or the PRT enough to consider becoming one of them, now. But...at the very least, I could say that it wasn't malicious, that they had never borne me ill will, that Sophia hadn't been entirely their fault, and that...that was important.

I looked back at them.

“What now?”

Armsmaster shifted, but it was Miss Militia who answered.

“Now,” she said, “we wait for the containment team to get here. Once Bakuda has been foamed and loaded up, she'll be taken back to PRT headquarters to await trial. Ordinarily, if she's found guilty,” — not that any of us actually doubted that — “then she'll be sent to a prison with security to match her threat. For Bakuda, however...”

“She'll get the Birdcage,” Armsmaster grunted. “Considering the severity of what she's done, the threat she poses —”

“The flagrant violation of the unwritten rules,” Miss Militia added.

“— the judge and the DA probably won't want to take any chances.”

Oh. That was right. *Bakuda* knew who I was, too, didn't she?

To allow the enemy a grave advantage is to lose the battle before it has begun.

And she could tell *anyone*. Anyone she liked, as much as she liked. With a personality like hers, so much like Morgan le Fey, so jealous and hungry and *petulant*, I didn't put it past her to tell even her worst *enemies*, if it meant she could get back at me. Not after I'd taken her down, broken her leg, and beat her at her own game.

And if, by some cruel twist of luck, she managed to escape? If she and Lung managed to free themselves, or if Oni Lee — crippled though he was — managed to get them loose, somehow? Lisa had once called the PRT cells “revolving doors,” and whether that was a remark about the quality of the PRT's cells or the capacity of villains to break out of all but the most secure of places, it didn't matter. If she was right, and the PRT couldn't hold onto Bakuda and Lung?

Then Dad and I would be in danger again, because Bakuda could just tell him where we lived.

“Release.”

I let Artoria go — and *staggered* at the sudden weakness.

“Apocrypha!” two voices cried, and I held up a shaky hand to ward them off.

“I'm...I'm okay,” I said a little unsteadily. “Just...wasn't expecting to lose that much strength.”

I *should* have, though. I was *not* Artoria. I *didn't* have an already incredible healing ability, further augmented by a sheath that healed all wounds, to compensate for the final remnants of that pain bomb.

When I managed to steady myself and look back up, both Armsmaster and Miss Militia were watching me, tense and concerned, as though ready to swoop in the moment my knees so much as wobbled.

“I'm okay,” I reassured them, standing straight. There was only the slightest quiver in my left leg.

They relaxed, but only a little.

I turned around and started down the alleyway towards Bakuda.

“Apocrypha?” Miss Militia asked as she fell into step behind me.

“I've got one last thing to finish,” I told her.

Bakuda remained just as I'd left her, wrapped up in that tarp. Miss Militia obviously hadn't seen any reason to unravel it, so there she remained, limp and virtually motionless, making low, distressed crooning sounds in the back of her throat. If she'd been able to talk properly, I had no doubt she'd be cussing up a storm.

I reached for the hero I needed, just to be sure.

“Set. Install.”

I shrunk five inches. My hair receded up into my head, becoming a short, almost pixie-ish cut. My costume morphed into a coarse, thick fabric, hardier and more durable than modern cotton. Black shirt, black pants, maroon vest, loose maroon chaps, lined with golden trim. Leather boots, a skirt of golden scales. A single spaulder on the left shoulder.

Aife the Handsome. Aife the Indomitable.

“Apocrypha?” Miss Militia said again.

I didn’t answer. I dropped to my knees beside Bakuda, pressed one gloved thumb against her forehead, and drew out a series of runes in the surface of her mask with nothing by my own raw power.

Then, I began the process for a second, more permanent binding.

A geis.

“Suidigidir.” *Set.*

There was more than one form of geis. The easier form was the one I had used twice, now — an agreement, an oath, a vow — and it was easier because it was voluntary, because the ones making the oath made it willingly. Enforcing a promise was less difficult when it was a promise that had been entered of your own free will.

“Thrice do I bind thee, in word, in spirit, in deed.”

But there *was* a second form.

“Thrice do I take these boons, by right of conquest, over you, over your master, over your servants.”

The form used by Grainne to bind Diarmuid against his will. The form by which she had forced him to run away with her, or else face the dishonor and misfortune that came from breaking it. The form of a curse, a taboo, where you *made* someone follow your will, regardless of whether they agreed to it or not.

And it was nearly impossible to actually use.

“Thrice do I offer these prohibitions.”

Unless you had some form of authority over your target. Goddess, queen, princess, *victor* — the more authority you had, the more powerful you could make your geis.

And I had beaten Bakuda. I’d beaten her, I’d beaten her underlings, I’d even beaten her boss, Lung. I held the ultimate authority over her — her *life*.

And just to hedge my bets, I’d brought out Aife.

“That thou shalt keep the secret of the truth of mine self. That thou shalt keep the secret of mine family. That thou shalt not act to reveal these secrets in any knowing manner.”

The runes blazed. The curse took hold. The authority I had over her, as the one who spared her life, as the one who had beaten her, forked and settled, and she had no right to argue.

“Íadaid.” *Close.*

When it was done, I stood back up and looked down at the woman who had done her best to kill me, who had, with the help of Oni Lee, come even closer than Lung had.

*She is no threat to me.*

Now, she was no more dangerous to me than a particularly ornery rabbit.