

Fracture 9.4

My return trip back to the PRT headquarters was as uneventful as the rest of my patrol.

Since I could actually make it back within a few minutes as and when I pleased, I took the scenic route on the way and meandered off of my planned path, looking for any more signs of activity from the Merchants or the Empire. Again, though, I found nothing. Nothing I could legally work with, and therefore nothing that was of worth to me as a Ward.

The legal side of heroism, it turned out, was littered with red tape. To be fair, something I'd already known, at least intellectually, but things from Khepri's perspective had always felt like the people running the system had specifically been working to stymie her, rather than all of the restrictions and regulations being a standard thing. Having that misconception proven wrong was about as frustrating as it probably sounded.

Every time I came face to face with that reality, it was hammered home all the more strongly.

I made it into the "secret entrance" the Wards used to come and go without being seen in their civilian identities, only to find it mostly empty, so I swiped my phone over the security panel and spoke my name and ID code and went inside.

The first time I used it, I'd wondered why it didn't have a retinal scanner, the way the Wards section did, but it made sense, when I thought of it in terms of Master-Stranger scenarios. The Wards section was just about keeping out unauthorized personnel. This place here, you had to provide both your PRT credentials and your personalized ID code, because those were much harder to fake than just having a Master's thrall stare into an obvious scanner.

But when I made it inside, there in the hallway, waiting for me with his arms crossed instead of manning the console, was Aegis. Dressed in fatigues and a domino mask instead of his costume, his expression was tight and stony, like a messenger bearing bad news.

Right, I remembered. He was supposed to swap out from console duty with Gallant at the same time Vista and Clockblocker swapped out with me.

"You're past due," Aegis said grimly.

What am I, a library book?

"By about ten minutes," I replied stiffly. "If that."

He shook his head.

"I had to report you," he told me.

Why, was on the tip of my tongue, but the answer came to me before I could voice it and my lips drew into a thin line. Not because he wanted to, but because he couldn't avoid it. My accessing the Wards entrance would be timestamped, which meant it would be officially recorded, which meant

that the Director could find out whenever he pleased, and if Aegis hadn't said anything, his ass would be right up there next to mine and he'd be made to account for it.

If this was Piggot, she might not have said anything. Timelines for a patrol were really supposed to be more like guidelines for when and how quickly you needed to move, to be amended as needed when a crime was being responded to or given leeway for fans who might stop you for an autograph or picture. There was *give* in the schedule designed specifically for those sorts of situations.

If Tagg really thought I was trying to subvert the PRT or the Protectorate, however, there was no way he would be that reasonable, not for me and not for the people I was supposedly "Mastering." Any deviation, no matter how small, could be taken as me plotting or putting my plans in motion, even if I had a perfectly legitimate reason for my tardiness.

I took a deep, slow breath and forced myself to calm down.

"I'm sorry," he added.

"It's fine," I said to Aegis. Some of the tension bled out of his shoulders and he let out a quiet sigh. "Vista and Clockblocker?"

"They've already left," he answered.

I nodded. To be expected, really. If Tagg thought all of them could be under my control, then he was likely being an equal opportunity hardass, so it was better for them to leave when they were supposed to than delay to wait for me. Especially when, now that I thought about it, that could be taken as them waiting for *my* orders about what they should be doing and whether they should actually go on patrol.

Ugh, this paranoia shit was really getting twisty.

Nothing I could really do about it, though. Not without "confirming" his suspicions.

God, I hoped Piggot would come back when she'd recovered from the attack. Or maybe let Miss Militia take the helm, like she had in the aftermath of Alexandria's death — but this wasn't anywhere near the situation that had allowed something like that to happen, and I wasn't about to gut the PRT and Protectorate just to get a more reasonable Director.

"Tagg will probably —"

My phone chimed. *Priority One Alert*, read the text heading. *Apocrypha, your presence has been requested in the Director's office immediately.*

"Speak of the devil," I said humorlessly.

"Sorry," Aegis apologized again.

"I already told you it's fine. I understand."

He grimaced.

I'm not going to bite your head off for doing what you need to do, I thought.

"I'd better get going," I said instead. "Before the Director starts to think I've been corrupting you or something. Converting you to my wicked ways."

That got me a smile and a snort.

"The only corrupting influence in the Wards is Clockblocker," he joked.

I smiled back. "I'll tell him you said that."

Tossing a wave over my shoulder, I turned and headed for the elevator. To my back, Aegis called out, "Go ahead! He'll agree with me!"

The doors of the elevator closed shut and I was alone. A ride on the smoothest elevator in existence did not mean it wasn't an elevator, so I was stuck impatiently staring at the numbers denoting the floors as they passed, arms crossed and foot tapping.

I should probably have been dreading this meeting, but right then, I couldn't find it in myself to be anything but frustrated and annoyed. Frustrated and annoyed, because this was stupid and a waste of time, and I was about to be in the same room with a man who probably thought I was the worst thing since the Simurgh.

...Maybe that was too much of a hyperbole. Valefor might be a better comparison, although probably one made in poor taste, considering. Canary, then? Teacher? Did it even fucking matter?

Whatever. Maybe it was just because I'd had that conversation with Armsmaster less than an hour ago, but my patience was a lot thinner than it had been a week ago.

The elevator chimed and the doors whooshed open, and I stepped out into the hallway and made my way back to the Director's office — the new one again, because apparently Tagg had no intentions of moving into Piggot's old office, just yet. Whether it was a matter of courtesy for his predecessor or comfort because he'd settled in and felt safest there, I didn't know and I suppose it didn't really matter.

Two PRT troopers in full kit were still stationed outside the Director's office, standing stoically at attention with confoam sprayers in hand. They didn't even acknowledge me as I strode up to the door as I had a week before and opened it.

Tagg was waiting for me on the other side. He didn't even need to look up — he was staying straight at me as I came in.

"Apocrypha," he began without preamble, "you were late."

"I took the long way back," I said obtusely.

"I see."

He spun his computer screen around, and I got a view of a map of the city, with a red line meandering through the streets — the GPS data from my phone, showing where I'd gone throughout my patrol. I chewed on the inside of my cheek to keep from saying anything; as PRT Director, he was well within his rights to access that data, as far as I knew. If he'd done it while I was off duty, *then* I might have a legitimate complaint to make, but since he'd done it while I was on the clock...

"You deviated from your patrol route."

"There was nothing happening, so I went a little out of my way to make sure."

"And that necessitated visiting one of the FEMA camps?" he asked pointedly. "The one that the Protectorate team just so happened to be checking in on at the same time?"

"I touched base with Armsmaster," I answered. "To make sure nothing had happened on their end, either."

"Armsmaster and Miss Militia are adults and professionals," he said. "They're perfectly capable of doing a routine patrol without the Endslayer checking in on them."

"And that's exactly why the Empire might consider them an easier target," I shot back. "They attack me directly, that gets them in trouble, because I *am* the Endslayer. If something happened to me and they were responsible, the whole country would fall down on them like a ton of bricks."

Tagg's eyes flashed. "Don't overestimate your importance."

"Don't *underestimate* it, either," I retorted before I could think about whether it was a good idea. Then, because I'd already gone that far, I continued, "Whether we like it or not, what I did against Leviathan has given a lot of people hope who didn't have it before. A lot of people would react badly to losing it again. The Empire can't afford to risk hurting or killing me."

Hence why they'd gone after my friends and the PRT instead. It was something of a catch-twenty-two: they couldn't afford to actually attack *me*, not for reasons of public opinion and not for simple fact that I was being compared favorably to *Eidolon*, but if they really believed that I'd had something to do with Victor and Othala's deaths, or worse, that the PRT had sanctioned it as a hit job and sent *me* to carry it out, then they couldn't afford to just let it pass, either.

Although how they'd *really* come to that conclusion, I had no fucking idea. The PRT did a lot of shady things, and I didn't necessarily have to agree with all of them, but conducting *actual* assassinations wasn't on the list. Doubly so if the supposed assassin was a Ward.

"*No one* is indispensable," he snapped back.

I pinned him with a cold stare. It might have been more effective if he could see my eyes. "Not even you."

I didn't know what his actual endgame was. I didn't know what he actually intended to accomplish. But even if he had the best of intentions, there was only so much I was willing to put up with from

him before I *did* start filing complaints with the other directors. Even if Alexandria nixed all of them personally.

He looked like he wanted to say something acidic and nasty, but with visible effort, he reined himself in. His voice was still forceful and heated when he demanded, “Why did you deviate from your patrol route?”

“Because the worst I saw on my route was a couple of guys in rags who might or might not have been Merchants loitering,” I replied immediately. “I figured you’d understand being proactive, since you told me that’s the entire point behind sending me out there. It’s just a waste of everyone’s time if all I’m doing is waving the flag.”

He looked as though it physically pained him to have to concede my point.

“And your visit to the FEMA camp with Armsmaster?” he asked, having lost some of the fire.

“I wanted to see if he’d had any more luck than I did. He didn’t.”

For a long moment, Tagg stared at me, as though searching my face (what little he could see of it) for the lie. I had no idea what he was expecting to see or how he expected to catch me out, especially since I wasn’t actually lying — whether he’d had any encounters with the Empire *was* one of the things I’d talked with Armsmaster about.

Then, his brow furrowed and his lips drew tight, and he had to concede my point again. To deny me would be to deny what he’d told me in that first meeting a week ago, to say that he’d been *wrong*, and even for his paranoia, Tagg wasn’t willing to contradict something he actually, wholeheartedly believed in.

Grudgingly, he said, “I’ll overlook your...indiscretion this time.”

I grimaced. Why did that sound more like I’d been caught making out in an alleyway than going off my patrol route?

I didn’t comment on it. It wasn’t a battle I cared to fight, and protesting too much might get me more attention than I wanted.

Plus, I couldn’t think of a response that didn’t sound sarcastic or childish.

“If there wasn’t anything else?”

“There is, actually,” he said. “Regulations say you have to have a specific amount of time off at minimum per hour you spend on patrol or working the console. Since neither of us wants any oversight programs getting in the way of things, you’ll be on mandatory leave this weekend and next weekend. During that time, you’re to be anywhere except this building or the Rig and doing anything except hero work.”

My mouth twitched, but I didn’t say anything about that, either. Some part of me had expected him to completely disregard those regulations and keep working me as long and as hard as he could get

away with, but it seemed there were some things even Tagg wasn't willing to risk running afoul of, and oversight programs looked to be one of them.

Irony of ironies, the one regulation Tagg wasn't going to push the limits on was the one I probably would have agreed with him on.

"I understand."

He waved his hand towards the door. "Dismissed."

I didn't give him the respect of a salute; I turned around and left without another word.

One more week, I promised myself. One more week for him to get over himself and start cooperating. If he was still being a paranoid jackass by next Saturday, then I'd start making phone calls and pulling whatever strings I could find.

That was the limit of my reasonableness.

— o.O.O.O.o —

For the first time in the better half of a month, I left the PRT building after my shifts ended for the day in the late afternoon and started walking back towards home. Things were finally starting to settle back down, and now that neighborhoods were being opened back up for resettlement, I could actually go back home, to my own house, and sleep in my own bed, rather than the mass produced thing that passed for one in the Wards section.

God, was I looking forward to it. It felt like I hadn't gotten a decent night's sleep since the thing with *Noelle*, that was how long I'd been cooped up in the PRT building every night.

Of course, the schools were going to be opening back up soon, too. Maybe another two weeks or so? *That* I wasn't looking forward to, so maybe it would just be better to study up and get my GED or something. It worked for Lisa, right? Although there might be some kind of regulation that said Wards couldn't do that, now that I thought about it. Tagg probably wouldn't be willing to bend the rules on that, especially if he was technically sending me out on patrols I shouldn't be going on.

The one thing he was useful for, and he couldn't even be as useful as I wanted him to be.

There was just so much stuff I needed to do, and it felt like I simply didn't have time to waste going to school and pretending I was a normal teenage girl instead of a superhero. The system, it seemed, or at least the Wards program, was determined to stop me.

Did any of the other Wards feel this way? I wondered. In Brockton Bay, at least, none of the others really felt to me like they were as dedicated to the idea of heroism as I was trying to be. Vista, maybe, but the others almost treated it more like a job or an obligation, rather than following their convictions and beliefs.

Which, teenagers, I supposed. Not exactly the most well-known for their ardent idealism.

Although they *had* requested further training from me, hadn't they? Maybe I was just reading them wrong, then. How well did I know most of them, anyway? Apparently not well enough that they couldn't surprise me.

I was halfway to the bus stop when my phone — my private one, that Lisa had bought me what felt now like a lifetime ago — chimed, and speak of the devil, she'd just texted me.

Smug Bitch: Watching the boats as they go sailing ~♪

I rolled my eyes and smiled a fond, exasperated smile. Lisa and her codes and oblique references. One of these days, I was going to have trouble figuring out what she was trying to tell me, and then she'd complain that the joke wasn't funny when you had to explain it, and I'd just sit there and smile until she wound down and started laughing at herself.

Queen of the Castle: I'm on my way. Be there in ten.

I changed course and walked a few blocks away from the PRT building, then ducked into an alleyway and transformed. In my base Breaker form, I leapt up and took off over the rooftops, heading towards that old meeting place in the Docks, where I had first shown Lisa Castle Avalon.

When I got there ten minutes later, Lisa was half dressed in her costume, and she wasn't alone.

I landed in front of her with a soft thump, bending my knees to bleed off the impact, and managed a vague approximation of the stereotypical three-point-landing. Some of the group startled, but really, were they expecting me to show up jogging in my civvies?

“What's all this, then?” I gestured to the others. “I thought it was just going to be you and me.”

“The Beardmaster contacted me, told me about the plan you two came up with,” Lisa said, grinning. Armsmaster twitched and grimaced; he couldn't be very happy with the nickname. “Said we should set up a meeting and get some training in. I figured, why not today? No time like the present, right?”

“No time like the present, huh?”

I looked around the people arrayed before me, my small crowd of loyal disciples, here to learn more. Vista, Clockblocker, Aegis, Armsmaster, the squad of troopers I'd been training (Tom, Janice, Edward, Connie, Tyler, Nick, and Leon), and Lisa and Amy.

“Don't you guys have patrols?” I asked the Wards.

“I asked Gallant and Browbeat to cover for us,” said Aegis, “in exchange for taking double shifts tomorrow.”

I turned to Armsmaster.

“I have several personal days to make use of that I had no need for before,” he explained. “The Director allowed it, on the condition that I find someone to handle my second shift, later today. Assault was accommodating, once I explained what it was for.”

Leon, next, shrugged. “Our squad is off duty, today. We didn’t really need an excuse to come out here when Armsmaster suggested the idea.”

“Where *is* here, anyway?” Connie added.

My lips quirked a little. “It’s not here that’s special, it’s where it leads to.”

Lisa chuckled. *Glad you’re happy that you’re rubbing off on me.*

I turned at last to Amy.

Because she was the one I expected least. Everyone else? In some form or another, they’d expressed interest in learning what I could teach them through Aífe, whether it was martial arts or superhuman detective skills. Amy? She hadn’t even asked to learn how to throw a proper punch.

“...During the attack,” she began at length, “I couldn’t do anything. Cricket...picked me apart like I was a fucking fly. Maybe I’m... I don’t think I’ll ever be the kind of hero that goes around punching bad guys in the face. But...”

She looked at me, eyes shadowed and expression grim, but there was something like determination that shone across her face. “I don’t ever want to be that helpless again.”

I felt myself smile. Something akin to pride flickered in my chest.

“Alright,” I said. “Hang on a second, though. There’s one last person who needs to be here.”

I pulled out my phone and dialed up the number, listening to it ring.

Khepri had always regretted it, how things had fallen apart. They’d managed to pick things up after the end, repair the relationship that had always fractured but never completely broken, but her life as a cape had always pushed them apart.

Some of that came down to him just not being able to be involved in the cape side of things. Some of it had to do with existing problems that neither of them had been able to fix.

Learning from Khepri’s mistakes... This was one of the things I could do that she never had.

The phone clicked as the other end picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” I said. “I need you for something. Think you could take the rest of the day off and make it to that old pier you showed me years back? The one where it’s technically illegal to fish?”

“For you? Of course.” A pause. “*I think I could make it there in...maybe ten minutes? Fifteen?*”

“That’s fine.”

“*See you then.*”

“See you.”

Click.

When I ended the call and stuffed my phone away, it was to find Lisa grinning at me.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she shook her head. “Just... Wow. You know, most teenage girls are trying to get *away* from their dads, not involve them more in their lives.”

I crossed my arms, maybe a little defensively. “I learn from my mistakes.” *Mostly*, I didn’t add aloud. “I want him to be a part of my life. So as long as he’s willing to try, I’m going to try, too.”

Lisa held up her hands in the universal sign of surrender. “Just saying.”

I rolled my eyes, but took no real offense. Lisa had a talent for pushing people’s buttons, even without her powers. Developing a thick skin was an essential skill for being her friend.

True to his word, Dad showed up about fifteen minutes later — on foot, so either he’d walked the whole way or he’d parked his car a little ways away to avoid attention. I wasn’t sure which, because it had been quite a while since I was last at the DWU HQ in the Docks, so I didn’t remember exactly how far it was from this place.

He came up at a jog at first, but once he caught sight of everyone arrayed around me, he slowed down and hesitated, then strode forward, much less at ease than before.

“Is something going on?”

“It’s a conspiracy!” Lisa joked. Amy and Armsmaster both sent her a dirty look.

“I’ll explain everything in a minute,” I told him, ignoring her.

Dad didn’t look totally convinced, but he trusted me enough to let it slide, because he gave me a cautious nod.

Set. Install.

An instant later, I was Nimue, and several of the others reacted with surprise. Guess they hadn’t really seen me transform before, not with their own eyes. It was probably quite different that seeing it on tv, through a camera. Or maybe it was just an effect of Nimue’s supernatural beauty.

I am the fairest in all of Britain, after all.

It didn’t really matter which, in the end.

“Gather around, everyone,” I said to them in her voice. “We’re going to take the express route.”

Lisa grimaced. “Wait. The express route? You mean I’ve been taking the long way this entire time?”

“You’ve been taking the easy way,” I told her. “The one that doesn’t require me to bend space-time over my knee like a naughty child.”

Although technically... But that was a distinction without meaning. There was a vast difference between compressing space — hello, gravity — and making it do something like momentarily overlap.

This was more like the latter, tricking the world into thinking we were in one place by making it overlap with another, and we’d exist in two separate places at once — a paradox, and reality hated those. Like a rubberband, we’d snap into place without ever actually having moved, simply because the world had decided we were there all along.

On some level, it still boggled my mind that you could rules-lawyer the fabric of reality itself. But then, I’d been doing that one way or another since I got my powers, hadn’t I?

Amazing, isn’t it? How much you can do with a little ingenuity.

I lifted my arms. Magical energy surged through me like a torrent, like a wave, and for a single instant, I glanced another world, a perfect world, a paradise where there was no sin, no vice, no death —

Fortress Beneath the Lake
“ Castle Avalon.”

Ghostly blue walls arose around us, jutting up from the bay, translucent and insubstantial. They surged upwards, towards the sky, towards the clouds far above, banners fluttering, stonework groaning, passing through buildings and wood beams as though they weren’t even there.

And then, between one blink and the next, we stood in the courtyard of my castle.

“Whoa!”

“Wow!”

“Holy shit!”

“What the fuck?”

They all startled, heads whipping back and forth as they took in the ramparts and the banners and the strong stone walls around them that hadn’t been there mere moments before. Gone was the city and the Docks, with their decrepit warehouses and rundown shanties, and in its place...

“Welcome to my castle.” Nimue’s lips curled into a secret smile. “The one and only fortress of the Lady of the Lake.”

“Wow,” said Clockblocker. “Hey, is this the castle you used to try and keep Leviathan away?”

“Parts of it, at least, yes,” I answered.

“My daughter owns a castle,” Dad mumbled. “I thought I knew what that meant, but *this*...”

“Wait,” said Vista. “Then doesn’t that mean…”

“Yes.” My finger pointed upwards at the ‘sky,’ which roiled and surged and rolled as the water above us pressed down on the barrier that kept it from drowning us. “The surface of the bay is a few hundred feet that way.”

Everyone else stopped and froze and looked up as they realized what that meant. Everyone except Lisa, who had already known and was grinning at them with sadistic glee.

“That’s right, boys and girls,” she said. “You are now officially on the seabed. The sand beneath your feet? That’s the bottom of the ocean. The ‘clouds’ up above us? *Millions of gallons of saltwater.* How are we not all crushed beneath the weight of it and frantically trying to reach the surface before we run out of air? *Magic.*”

“Stop tormenting them,” I chided.

Release.

Once more, I was myself.

“You didn’t exactly take it in stride yourself.”

She laughed. “Sorry. It’s just a lot funnier being on the other side of exactly how bullshit your powers are.”

“...This is so cool,” Clockblocker whispered.

“Sure you still want to try dating her?” Aegis muttered back, not quite quietly enough to avoid my hearing.

“Are you kidding me? She has her own *castle!* Where am I gonna meet another girl as awesome as her?”

I felt my cheeks burn as Lisa cackled and coughed into my hand to try and cover my embarrassment.

“Anyway,” I said, changing the subject and trying to regain some of my authority. “Armsmaster, Dad, Lisa, Amy, you’re with me. Everyone else, start your warmups and we’ll pick up from last lesson in a few minutes.”

They didn’t move right away. Vista and the troopers were still marveling at the magic castle and the fact they were underneath the bay. I pulled Aífe into myself, just barely enough to have her presence, her sternness. “DID I STUTTER!”

They all jolted and their heads spun to face me.

“MOVE! THE LAST PERSON WHO FINISHES GETS TO RUN EXTRA LAPS AT THE END!”

Immediately, they all jerked into motion and ran off to a more open section of the courtyard to go through the warmup routines I'd drilled into them — some, it became obvious, more successfully than others. Only the four I'd singled out stayed behind, although Lisa had started to follow them before her brain caught up with her.

“You know,” Amy said quietly, “for all that you're a hundred-and-twenty pounds soaking wet and thin as a rail, I have to admit, that was actually pretty intimidating.”

“Reminded me of my father,” Dad agreed.

Great. There goes embarrassment again.

“Anyway,” I said. “Follow me. There's something I want to share with you guys.”

“We won't begin training immediately?” Armsmaster asked.

“No. This is more important. We can work on your training regimen while I'm instructing the others later.”

He didn't seem to like it, exactly, but after a moment, he nodded his acceptance, however grudging.

I led them out of the courtyard and into the castle proper, and then took them deeper in and out of the common areas and the hallways. I led them deep through the corridors, through the redoubts and the chokepoints and into the most secure, the most important and best defended position in the castle: the keep.

Finally, I took them to a special room, a circular room that looked like a meeting hall of some kind. Banners hung from the walls, displaying sigils and coats of arms, and intricate reliefs were carved into the stonework, depicting knightly figures committing great deeds. Circular patterns decorated the floor and the ceiling, vaguely Celtic looking, with strange, unearthly letters interspersed throughout. Warm, soft lighting gave the entire place a reverent feel, like stepping into a church or cathedral.

And sitting in the center of the room, covered by a cloth sheet as though to hide it away, was a large, round table.

“Taylor,” Dad asked quietly, “what is this?”

“It's something I've been thinking about for a while,” I said. “I only just started to plan it out seriously last week, after the attack.”

I strode to the table and pulled the cloth away, revealing my secret project beneath.

“Holy fuck,” Lisa breathed. “Are those what I think they are?”

“They're my backup plan,” I answered. “For if or when the situation changes and I have to quit the Wards.”

Sitting on my round table, glittering in the light, were a set of ten golden rings.