

Denouement E.3

“I know this is kind of weird. Out of left field. You don’t owe me anything, and... and if you want me gone, I’ll leave. But there’s a lot I didn’t get to say, and you aren’t her, I know that, but... For just a minute, could you...?”

“No,” my companion said, “no, you can stay. I’m...sorry, but this is all just a little...”

I gave her a little smile. “Yeah.”

The woman sitting across from me was familiar, and yet strange at the same time. The hair, the face, the way she had carefully tucked her book away like it was some great treasure that she daren’t risk defacing, they were all things I knew and knew intimately, and seeing them again made my eyes burn in a way that had nothing to do with the glaring sun or the faint smell of onions leftover from the shop’s breakfast menu.

But she was older than I remembered. Aged, however subtly, with a few more lines and wrinkles than my mom had ever had the chance to grow. Still young, but creeping her way into middle age in a way that makeup couldn’t really hide.

There was a profound emptiness in my chest, to realize Mom had already been gone for almost a decade. A hollow loss that didn’t quite hurt, tinged with the wistfulness of nostalgia.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how...?” Annette began.

“Am I here?” I finished for her. My mouth pulled into a mischievous smile, a mimicry of my best friend. “Let’s just say my taxi goes a little further than most.”

“Powers can do that?” Annette asked incredulously.

“If you have the right ones,” I told her. “Or if you know the right people who have them. I have...a bit more in the way of options than most people.”

She glanced at my clothes, at the pantsuit Lisa had somehow talked me into wearing for this. I felt hilariously overdressed, but she’d managed to convince me with some nonsense about making a good impression or whatever.

“You look like you’ve done well for yourself.”

I shrugged, trying to play it off casually.

“This other me, how did she...?”

“Car accident,” I answered. “About nine years ago, now.”

“I...”

She hesitated.

“Is it...weird to offer condolences for my own death?”

I took a sip of my tea. Something in me tickled at my belly.

“You’re talking to an adult woman claiming to be your daughter from another world who came through a magic portal just to visit you,” I reminded her. “Nothing about this situation is at all normal, I think. You could be calling the police right now, after all, to arrest the clearly crazy person.”

Annette’s lips pursed. “Just... When I look at you, if I squint a little, I can see it.”

It caught me unexpectedly, like a punch to the gut, and I had to dip my head a little to wipe away the tears that were gathering at the corners of my eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Sorry,” I said, giving her a tremulous smile. “I don’t... I’m not sure why that got to me so much.”

“If...this is hurting you —”

“No,” I said abruptly, a little more sharply than I intended. “No, just... I guess I’d managed to forget just how much I missed you. *Her*. It snuck up on me.”

She frowned. “This doesn’t seem fair to you. I’ll admit, I’m curious, and I’m way out of my depth, here, but I don’t really know you. Meanwhile, you have a very real, very profound attachment to me — to your mother, and however much I look it, I’m not her. I’m worried...I’m not sure this is entirely healthy, for you.”

I laughed a little. My chest was filled up with a familiar warmth.

“I have an excellent friend who thinks she’s my therapist,” I told her, “and another excellent friend who likes to call herself my primary care physician. I’m also a lot tougher than I look — trust me, there’s nothing you could ask in ignorance that would hurt more than what some people have said to me on purpose.”

Annette looked at me intently. “Friends?”

“Lisa and Amy,” I confirmed.

“Do they...?”

“They both have powers, yes,” I answered. “Neither of them was the one who let me come here, no, although Lisa is the one who encouraged me to.”

“And you?”

“Taylor. I turned twenty-one in June.”

Annette was silent for a moment; I could almost see her doing the math in her head.

“I... Your mother would have been in college?”

“You — *she* was. And then she met a complete dork with a huge heart and enough passion for three people. Dad... She was his whole world, and she... I don’t know. I never got to hear what drew her to him or why they got together, not from her. But I think Dad gave her freedom to be what she wanted at a time when her parents were being controlling, and I don’t think they ever really forgave him for that.”

Annette smiled. “Your father? Is he here?”

“I offered to let him come, but he turned it down. Losing Mom broke him in a lot of ways, it broke both of us, and I think he just doesn’t want to torture himself by coming face to face with what he lost, again.”

She nodded, and then she frowned, lips pursing.

“I’m...” she started. “I’ll admit, I’m starting to come up dry. There’s a lot of things I could think to ask, about you and about your life, but it doesn’t feel like I have any right and you’ve already answered most of the stuff that I really wanted to know. I... It feels like I should say something...meaningful or profound, but I can’t think of anything that doesn’t sound cheap or cliché.”

“That’s fine,” I reassured her. “You don’t need to do anything like that.”

“It would be easier if I knew what you wanted,” she added. “If I had some idea of what you were expecting.”

“I’m not,” I told her. “Expecting anything, I mean. Well, maybe that’s not entirely true, but... I really just wanted to see your face, again. Her face, I mean. Hear your voice. Remind myself what...what Mom was like.”

“But I’m not your mother,” she replied.

“No, you’re not,” I agreed, “but in some of the most important ways, you’re my mom. Who she could have been, who she might have grown into, if she’d had the time. I guess I just needed that. To borrow some of her strength, for what comes next.”

“What comes next?”

I took a sip of my tea as I got my thoughts in order, and I realized something that, in hindsight, I should’ve thought about sooner. “Ah, right. Things never got that bad, this time. The tragedy of Gold Morning just...never happened.”

“This time?” Annette asked, bewildered.

I shook my head.

“I’m sorry. It gets kind of confusing, doesn’t it? Thing is, it’s a really long story. There are parts of it I’m not sure I’m brave enough to tell, and parts of it that I don’t think would make sense no matter

how hard I tried to explain it. We could sit here all day, and all I'd do is twist your head around into knots."

"You could try."

Somehow, I found myself smiling.

"I guess the simple version is, Mom died, and everything started to go downhill. Had a hell of a time in high school, came face to face with all of the ugliest parts of myself, and spent way too long running away from them, because I didn't like what they said about me. You could say I was crippling myself by refusing to face them head on and accept it all, and I had to learn to just...let it go."

If only I'd managed to figure that out sooner. I would've saved myself a lot of trouble.

"Did you?" Annette asked.

I shrugged.

"It's something of a work in progress."

I didn't think I'd ever see completely eye to eye with Khepri. There were decisions she made that I would always disagree with, and no amount of introspection would change that. But I could at least accept her as a version of myself, as someone I could have become, under different circumstances.

"Along the way, I made a few friends, figured out what I could and couldn't stand for, and decided who I wanted to become. I've done some things I regret, too, but I think...everything turned out okay, in the end."

"But you're not finished, yet," Annette concluded. "You still have more you feel you need to do, right? Something hard?"

"Arguably, you could say I did the hardest, most important thing I could ever have done already," I said, and it was really true, when I gave any thought to the weight of what Scion's death actually meant. "Nothing else I do with my life could measure up to that. But..."

"But?"

I allowed myself a short laugh and a self-deprecating smile. "I don't really know how to retire. I don't think I *could* just sit back and let everyone else handle things. It's not in me. I think that's something I picked up from you — from Mom. Or maybe I got it from both my parents. Neither of them was particularly good at standing back and watching when they saw stuff that should be fixed."

Dad with the Dockworkers and Mom with her days in Lustrum's group. Both had seen a problem in need of fixing, and both had thrown their all into fixing it.

"Is that why you came to me?" Annette asked. "To get my approval?"

“Maybe a little?” I shrugged again. “I guess... I guess I just wanted to hear my mom tell me she was proud of me. You know? Validation. A lot happened since she died, and I...”

The words choked off in my throat as my brain caught up with my mouth, and I swallowed thickly against the sudden longing in my gut. My eyes told me she was right in front of me, but my brain told me it wasn't true, just an illusion, and the reality of that slamming home so suddenly and so violently was like a spear straight to the heart. My hair swayed as I shook my head.

“Sorry,” I said a little hoarsely. “I’m putting a lot on you, and you really don’t owe me anything. You’re just... You’re a complete stranger, but I look at you and I keep forgetting, and that really isn’t fair. To you or her. Just... We both have places to be, and I think I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

I stood awkwardly, trying to find something better to finish the whole thing with than a lame and simple goodbye.

“I... Sorry to burden you with all of my baggage.”

I turned to leave, but a hand found my wrist, and as I turned back around, Annette surged out of her seat and — oh.

Oh.

I’d... I’d forgotten what this felt like.

“I can’t say I understand it all,” Annette said into my hair. “I think...even if you told me the whole story, there are things that I still wouldn’t be able to wrap my head around.”

She was smaller than me. Shorter. I had several inches on her, because I’d inherited Dad’s gawky frame.

And yet somehow, I felt tiny. Childlike. Like she towered over me and could envelop the entirety of my world in her arms.

I closed my eyes against her shoulder and took in a deep, shuddering breath. Against all odds, she wore the same perfume, and it wafted into my nose, fresh and strong and achingly familiar.

“But if she was anything like me, I think your mother would be proud of you, Taylor. I know it.”

Somehow, I managed to swallow the sob that tried to make its way out of my throat. My eyes were wet.

After a long moment, I gently pried myself out of her grasp, and she let me go. Her face still awoke feelings of longing and loss in my chest, but they were blunted, now, sated in a way that I hadn’t realized I’d been missing before today.

The Mom-shaped hole in my life hadn’t been filled. But it had shrunken a little, and the edges were softer than they were before.

“Thank you,” I told her quietly, my smile watery, and then in a louder, firmer voice, “but I wasn’t lying about us both having places to be.”

“Okay.” Annette smiled. “I wish I could give you more than this. But this is just... The hardest thing I’ve had to deal with as a mother is a skinned knee. I don’t know how to help you.”

I smiled back. “I’m not expecting you to. And I think...you helped me more than you realize.”

“We could talk again, if you like. When we have more time.”

My smile grew wider.

“I think I’d like that. Yeah. And if you still want to hear the whole sordid story, I’ll tell it to you then.”

We said our goodbyes, and I turned away from her table and walked away. The pang in my chest was almost indescribable — I wanted nothing more than to turn back around and race back into her arms, to sob and cry and tell her how much I missed her, how much I’d needed her and she hadn’t been there.

But I wasn’t that twelve year old girl, anymore, and no matter how much I squinted or how similar they looked, that woman back there wasn’t my mother. She hadn’t been there for all of the baby teeth I’d lost, the knees I’d skinned, my first word, my first steps, my first day of school. She was a stranger with my mother’s face, and she didn’t deserve me trying to pretend she was something she wasn’t.

I stepped off into an empty side road, away from prying eyes.

“Door me.”

A rectangle described itself in the air, and between one step and the next, I’d returned to Earth Bet and the carefully regulated air of my office in my “new” castle.

Lisa and Amy were waiting for me.

“How did it go?” Lisa asked.

I tried not to smile, but my lips didn’t quite cooperate, and it came out as something like a grimace. As always, I couldn’t hide that from Lisa, and she grinned.

“That good, huh?”

“Yeah, it really was.”

Amy, contrary to my expectations, didn’t shoot anything sarcastic and snarky at Lisa. Instead, she looked at me, something like understanding in her expression, as though she knew exactly how cathartic it had been to talk to my mom, alternate universe version or not. Maybe she did; as an adopted child, she must have dreamed for years about meeting her real parents, especially as miserable as it seemed she’d been with the Dallons.

“She invited me back to talk some more, actually,” I revealed. “I’m...not sure where exactly everything’s going to wind up going, there, but I think I’ll take her up on it.”

Both of my friends gave me a smile.

“Anyway!” I clapped my hands. My abrupt pivot was not missed by either of them, but neither commented on it. “Are all the simulations finished? Physical exams?”

That jolted them into action, and Amy picked up a tablet from my desk that she handed to me. A flick of my fingers woke it up from standby mode.

“I had a look at each of the passing candidates,” Amy reported. “There were a few minor issues that were easy to clear up, but otherwise there weren’t any physical health problems that I think we need to worry about.”

“They’re about to start orientation, actually,” Lisa cut in. “It’s almost time for you to give your big speech, Chief.”

I nodded, already skimming the medical reports Amy had compiled for the potentials we’d spent the last year researching and collecting. “We’ll walk and talk.” I turned and started towards my door; Lisa stepped in front of me to pull it open. “Were there any problems with compatibility matching?”

“For the most part, no,” Lisa answered. “CHRETIEN managed to find a compatibility match of at least thirty percent for most of the candidates. We did have to arrange to borrow some of the required catalysts, though. We didn’t have all the ones we needed for all forty-nine candidates.”

“Any troubles there?”

“Well, some of them are family heirlooms, and some of them are museum pieces. Dragon managed to negotiate a reasonable price for a loan, but our budget for this year took a bit of a hit in the process...”

The journey to the auditorium passed in that vein, with us going over the last few relevant details that I needed to be caught up on. It was kind of amazing how much could happen in an organization like ours in just the few short hours I’d been away. How quickly some things had changed.

I think Lisa sensed that I was trying to keep my mind off of where we were going and what I was going there to do, because she filled the empty spaces with unnecessary chatter and tangents that were only partly related to the subject at hand. It let me focus on something other than the fact that I was about to give a speech to a bunch of strangers who were all expecting me to be some confident badass, and, well...

Public speaking had never been my strongest suit.

She couldn’t put it off forever, though, and eventually we reached our destination: a medium-sized room designed for giving presentations. “Auditorium” might have been a bit too generous a term for its size — it was really more of an observation booth, and it had maximum seating for about sixty people — but it fit for its general purpose.

And it was filled.

Forty-nine people of various ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, even nationalities, all sat together, muttering to each other as they waited for the mysterious Director to show up. Their voices were barely audible through the door, but in my mind's eye, I could see them, sitting impatiently in their seats and gossiping.

I stopped and closed my eyes, took a deep breath to try and calm my suddenly racing heart.

This was it, our inaugural team, the first strike force built not of Camelot's founding members, but of carefully selected candidates disconnected from anyone else in the group. Right now, there was nothing holding them together, and it was my job to bind them all to a common purpose and point them in the direction we needed them to go.

It was my job to turn these men and women into heroes.

No pressure, right? No pressure at all.

"Hey." Amy reached down and gave my hand a squeeze. "You got this."

I smiled at her. "Yeah."

"And if you get too nervous, just imagine they're all Dennis in the nude," Lisa added.

"Lisa!" Amy hissed, sputtering.

I disguised my laughter by pretending to cough into my fist. Lisa had no such qualms and laughed openly at Amy's indignation.

Feeling better, I reached out and pressed my palm to the scanner next to the door; an instant later, it beeped, and the door whirred open.

Immediately, the room beyond fell into silence, and I gathered myself, squared my shoulders, straightened my back, and tried my best to exude confidence and surety as I stepped forward. I felt four dozen sets of eyes on me the entire way, but I managed to keep myself from giving in and glancing at them and instead kept my eyes straight ahead.

Only once I'd gotten to the front of the room did I turn to face my new comrades. They all stared back without a word, waiting with bated breath.

"Welcome," I said into the silence, "to the Camelot Security Organization. My name is Taylor Hebert, the Director of this organization. You may know me better by my alter ego, Apocrypha."

Excited murmurs broke out, and I gave them a short moment to get it out of their systems.

"Look to your left." They hesitated a moment, then did as I said. "Now your right." They did. "You are, each of you, here as potential candidates for our field teams. Your job will be to go out there and fight the fights that no one else can, against the threats that no one else can face. You will be the vanguard against the dark, the tip of the spear against anything that threatens mankind's future.

“Some of you are parahumans with powers. You can bench press a car or fly. Some of you aren’t. You can barely bench press your cat and couldn’t fly if I strapped a jetpack to your back and threw you off the roof.”

They looked at each other nervously, like they weren’t sure if they were allowed to laugh or not. Or maybe they thought I actually *was* going to strap a jetpack to them and see if they could sink or swim.

“None of that matters,” I said firmly. Instantly, their attention was on me, again. “Powers or not, parahuman or not, you are all here because you have something others don’t, a rare potential that has nothing to do with whether or not you have a pair of benign nodes in your brain. In the coming days, we’re going to tease out that potential and make each and every one of you into something the rest of the world can only dream of.”

My lips pulled into a tight grin.

“Welcome to Camelot, ladies and gentlemen. Together, we’re going to save the world.”