

Depravation 8.7

Oddly enough, when the interview was over and I made it backstage, completely empty of any Installs or...I was going to have to come up with a term for when I was just channeling a hero's personality. But by the time I made it backstage, I was just me, no extra bits added, and somehow, I was...calm.

My legs felt like jelly and jolts of nauseous nerves were still shooting through my belly and my hands were shaking like leaves, and even my heart was still beating a little fast, but in spite of all of those things, I felt at ease. In control. The hard part was over, and I hadn't screwed up. Maybe the calming presence of those charismatic heroes had helped me from looking like a fool, kept me from panicking, but I'd still done it. I'd given an interview in front of a live studio audience to a famous talk show host, and I'd done it without any hitches.

Could I do it again? On my own, next time, without Jeanne or Artoria to help? Well... That might be getting a little hasty.

I'd probably have to do it, though. Ugh. Maybe I was just whining, but even though these public appearances might do a lot of good for Brockton Bay, I'd really prefer to actually be *doing* something. There was so much that needed to happen and so much I had to prepare for, and having to smile and wave at the cameras, shake hands with complete strangers, and sign autographs was distracting me from those.

A sigh hissed out of my mouth, and it felt like it took the rest of my nervousness and tension with it.

Like stamping out the remnants of the E88. Or finding out just who had killed Victor and Othala and painted Excalibur on the wall in their blood. Or getting things ready for when the Fallen made their way to Brockton Bay and tried to get revenge for Leviathan's death. Or making preparations for if the Slaughterhouse Nine decided to pay us a visit.

And that was just the stuff that needed doing *now*. There was so much more that I needed to do to prepare for the things to come down the line.

Like the Behemoth fight in New Delhi.

If that even still happened, now. Leaving Leviathan alive might have made it easier to predict those things, but if the course of events had proceeded that way anyway, then Behemoth would have died in the next battle. Killed by Scion. All I'd done was change the order.

It hurt my brain to think about it, sometimes. Just how malleable was the timeline? Armsmaster had avoided the disgrace that had...arguably been the best thing to happen to his counterpart. The Undersiders were essentially gone as a group, having never taken over the city. The city itself was damaged, but in much better shape than it had been in Khepri's timeline. Leviathan was dead. Cauldron and its manipulations was still a secret. The Empire had never had their identities revealed.

But Leviathan had still attacked. I had still fought and "defeated" Echidna and the Travelers. I'd still fought Lung and Bakuda. The Empire had still splintered when Kaiser died. The Undersiders had still robbed the bank. I had still wound up joining the Wards.

Some things seemed inevitable, although they might occur out of order, and some things seemed like they could be changed or even prevented. But which was which? Which was fate, and which was chance or happenstance? Which was destiny, and which was just the right confluence of circumstances? It seemed almost arbitrary.

One of these days, I was going to have to sit down and train up a precognition skill of some kind. Just so I could have a better handle on what I needed to get ready for and what I didn't need to bother with.

There was one thing, at least, I could be sure would happen no matter what. I was just going to have to prepare for that as much as I could and try to handle all of the other things as they came.

“You did well.”

I blinked and looked over at a smiling Legend. He radiated something like reassurance and approval. I wasn't too proud to admit that receiving his praise again felt good.

I hated how much it made me feel young and naive, though.

“Oh. Um, thanks.”

I was still a little jittery. Not all of the adrenaline coursing through my veins had drained away, yet, even if the reason for it was gone.

“I'm honestly a bit surprised. You handled yourself without any trouble at all.”

“I had help,” I admitted.

“Ah.” He nodded. “I remember hearing something about that. Channeling one of your...*legends'* personalities, right?” He chuckled. “It feels a little strange calling them that, considering my name.”

Someone should've mentioned that to Glenn, then.

“Something like that,” I said.

The exact degree still wasn't something I had a solid grasp on, but I could pull on more or less of the personality depending on the situation or how much of the hero I needed. With Medea, back at Winslow, I'd needed her venom and her skill for cutting deep, so what had come out of my mouth had been quite a bit of her. With Jeanne, I'd needed her quick wit and her keen intellect, and so a lot of her had come through during that talk with Piggot.

In this interview? I'd just needed confidence and a calming presence. What came out of my mouth as a result was a lot more of me than her.

“So you have Installs for full legends and Includes for just their iconic armaments. Have you thought up a term for this, yet?”

I hummed. “Maybe...Inserts? Since it's just inserting their personalities into my head.”

Install, Include, and now Insert. Not exactly the most original of terms, but no one ever said I was all that great at naming stuff. I'd almost picked Valkyrie or Valhalla for my cape name, with the theme of "calling upon the exalted dead" that my powers seemed based on, and then I'd realized what a stupid idea that was with the Empire still walking around and laying claim to anything even remotely Germanic.

Things had been bad enough after I beat Lung, with so many questioning whether or not I was a new Empire cape or just auditioning for a part with them. I could only imagine how many more would have assumed that if I'd gone around calling myself "Valhalla."

"Another 'I' word, huh." He chuckled. "It works, I suppose. You might want to give it a little more thought before using it 'officially,' though. It's my experience that names imagined in the moment tend to be a little unpolished and often ill-considered."

"I'll...keep that in mind."

I didn't see myself changing it, though. It fit, and it worked well enough. Taking a while to mule it over probably wasn't going to make me magically come up with something better.

"In any case, you did do very well, even if you had help," he told me. "There are a couple of things Glenn might quibble over, but I think he'll be very happy with your performance overall. You were charming, relatable, and friendly, and when it comes to public relations, that's the trifecta."

My lips pressed together tightly and I tried not to smile. It was hard, though. Legend might have his faults — and it wasn't like I had any room to go about criticizing all of them — but at his core, he seemed like a genuinely decent person. An all around good guy trying to do the right thing, even if he didn't always manage it.

A hero.

I thought about my first night out, how I'd met Armsmaster, how, back then, I'd been struck by his own kindness and nobility. *He really is a hero*, was what I thought at the time. Echoes of that moment resonated now, and they tugged at the corners of my mouth.

It might have been small, but he *did* manage to drag a smile out of me.

"Thank you."

The band on stage suddenly trumpeted out the show's theme song, a quick, upbeat, jazzy tune, and the crowd roared and clapped. Over the thunderous cacophony, I barely heard the show's host bid the audience a good day.

And then he was walking towards me, smile on his face and hand held out. As I had with Legend the night before, I reached out and took it more on reflex than on purpose.

"Apocrypha," said James Dalton, a steely-eyed, dark-haired man with a lantern jaw. "It really was wonderful to have you on the show. You did beautifully."

"Oh," I said stupidly. "I, uh, thank you. It was...my pleasure?"

He pumped my hand another couple of times before he let go, laughing.

“You don’t sound too sure of that,” he teased me. “I understand, though. Everyone’s a little intimidated, their first time on television. It freaks people out, thinking about the fact that everyone in the country can see you.” He leaned in, grinning mischievously. “Let you in on a little secret?”

“Secret?”

“I spent half an hour throwing up in the bathroom after my first time on air.”

I blinked as he stepped back.

“It’s true,” he said. “I know I seem...suave and professional and utterly at ease with it now, but my first time on, I was a wreck.”

“Some would argue you still are,” Legend said, falling into step next to me.

“Legend! I didn’t see you there.”

Dalton turned towards him and they shook hands.

“For a man who shoots lasers from every part of his body, you sure do know how to blend into the background.”

“If I didn’t know how to turn off the light show, my husband would force me to sleep on the couch every night.”

They talked for another couple minutes, smiling and joking and getting along like friends. I felt kind of awkward standing there, watching them. Like a third wheel. Most of the things they said to each other were references to stuff I didn’t get, parts of their lives that weren’t public knowledge or conversations they must have had at times like these, only where Legend was the one coming on to the show for an interview.

“I’d love to stay and chat,” Legend said, cutting off the conversation, “but I think we need to be getting back to Protectorate HQ before they send out a search and rescue team.”

“Of course,” Dalton said amicably. “Of course. Well, don’t let me keep you. It was good to see you again, Legend. Apocrypha,” he turned to me again, “you really did do beautifully out there. It was wonderful having you come onto the show.”

“Happy to have done it,” I told him, for lack of anything better to say. He probably wasn’t fooled for a second.

Goodbyes said, Legend’s hand came down on my shoulder and he steered me out of the studio, and once we were in the hallways rather than behind the stage, he let go and let me walk on my own.

“So,” he said conversationally, “the New York Protectorate has you for the rest of the day, and your plane back to Brockton Bay leaves later tonight. If you’d like to see more of the city before you go

back, I could pull a few strings and have you go on a ‘foot patrol’ with one of the New York City Wards teams.”

My lips pursed. ‘Foot patrol,’ he called it. Really, he was just giving me an excuse to get out of the Protectorate HQ and take a tour of the city. Making friends with some of the NYC Wards was probably just supposed to be a bonus.

I wasn’t sure I cared enough. The idea sounded fun enough, and it *did* seem like kind of a waste to come to New York City and *not* see the sights, but I wasn’t here as a tourist and I hadn’t come to visit Broadway or anything, either.

Plus, I had serious doubts I’d be able to take three steps without someone recognizing me and drawing in a crowd. It wasn’t fun in Brockton, it wouldn’t be any more enjoyable here.

“Or,” he went on, as though he’d read my mind, “if you don’t want to risk being swamped by fans the entire way, you could go out in your civilian identity and see the city without the trappings of being a hero.”

“By myself?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“You’d have to take one of the Wards with you, at least,” Legend admitted. “I’m sure the director would prefer if it was two or three of them. But you wouldn’t have to worry about being recognized.”

I considered the idea. It...might be fun, just letting loose and touring the city. Being a normal girl for a while, taking a minute to decompress before the litany of problems I’d have to face when I got back home. If she were here, Lisa would probably tell me to take it and just enjoy the vacation, even if it only lasted for a day.

On the other hand, Glenn would probably tell me to go out on the patrol. Double up on things, capitalize on the momentum from the interview, walk about, be seen, and interact with all of the people who now wanted to get as much of me as they could. It would increase public favorability, he might say, which would lead to more tourism, which would help out Brockton’s economy and get it back on its feet faster.

I didn’t much relish the idea, but I could see its merits.

Ob. An idea struck me. *And I could do that, too.*

“Actually,” I began, “about going out on patrol...”

Legend looked at me.

“Yes?”

“There’s a specific Ward I think I’d like to go with me...”

— o.0.O.O.0.o —

New York City was busy, in a way that Brockton Bay simply wasn't. Some of it, undoubtedly, had to do with just being so much *bigger* than Brockton was, with something like six million people packed inside of it compared to Brockton's two-hundred-fifty-thousand or so. Some of it probably came from not being hit as hard by economic downturns the way Brockton had been.

Six of one, right?

Whichever the case, it meant that the streets were a whole lot more crowded in the middle of the day than they would have been back home. It also meant, it seemed, that people had a whole lot less time to stop what they were doing and freak out about seeing me walking by on patrol, too busy with their lives to pay me any attention at all. At the very least, seeing heroes out and about on foot patrols was probably a common enough sight that no one batted an eye.

That was fine by me. I was trying to kill two birds with one stone, going out on patrol like this, but I wasn't going to get upset if no one noticed me at all.

It was just the two of us as we walked, with none of the other New York Wards out with us. That was the way I'd asked for things to be arranged, so that we could have a little privacy to talk — as much as we could, anyway, with the streets as crowded as they were.

Now if only I could figure out what to say.

Maybe if I'd had some time to sit down and plan this all out... But the idea had come to me while talking with Legend and I was mostly playing this whole thing by ear. Step one was easy enough: get her out here with me all by ourselves, without the other Wards or the Protectorate listening in. Legend had been all too happy to arrange that, although he might have been reading something into it that wasn't there.

Whatever. If he asked or started pushing, I'd correct him, but otherwise, let him think whatever he wanted.

Step two... That was a bit harder, because it was essentially blank.

How exactly did you explain to a girl that you were trying to play matchmaker between her and the woman she'd fallen in love with in another life? Without freaking her out and sending her running for the hills? Not at all, apparently, because I couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound creepy, strange, or some unhelpful combination of the two.

"So," said Flechette, breaking our awkward silence, "I know I missed your introductions last night, but I didn't realize you wanted to meet me so badly you asked Legend to let us go out like this."

"It's not really about that," I admitted, still trying to come up with an answer.

"I thought so."

"I *did* ask for you, specifically, and I *did* ask for them to send us out alone together, but it's not... There *is* something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yeah, I figured that out, too," she added.

“The thing is, it’s not an easy thing to talk about and I’m trying to think of a way to explain it without freaking you out or something.”

“I don’t think it’s that big of a deal,” Flechette replied casually. “Just say what you want to say. It won’t freak me out, I promise.”

Somehow, I doubt that.

It still freaked *me* out, sometimes, and I’d mostly come to terms with Khepri and everything she was. I’d specifically *avoided* showing Amy what her future self had become, because it might have ruined her or made her think that she was destined to become the person Khepri’s Amy had turned into.

And if there was anything I’d learned, it was that the people in my life, in the world I lived in now, didn’t *have* to become the people in Khepri’s life. They *could*, but they could also escape the fate laid out for them in that alternate future.

Part of my conundrum, here. Because Flechette had arguably been *happier* in Khepri’s timeline than she was here in mine.

“It’s not as easy as just saying that, though,” I told her. “It’s not that simple. If some random girl came along, asked to meet with me, and then started telling me this kind of stuff, I’d definitely freak out.”

“Hey, you don’t need to worry about it,” she said reassuringly. “The worst thing I can do is say no, right?”

I glanced in her direction. “The worst you can do is say no, huh?”

That... Maybe she had a point? I might have been making a bigger deal out of things than I really needed to, when I looked at it like that. Her reaction might be as mild as telling me she didn’t want to have that decision made for her and she was fine where she was.

On the other hand...

“I’m not so sure about that.”

She could also run back to HQ and try to report me for Master-Stranger screening or something.

“You’re making a bigger deal out of it than you need to,” she said. “Would it be easier if I went first?”

“What?”

Easier if she went first?

“I’m gay, and I think you’re cute,” she proclaimed as though commenting on the weather.

My brain ground to a halt.

“What?”

“I’m gay, and I think you’re cute,” she repeated. “See? It’s not that hard.”

My mouth flapped soundlessly for a few seconds, before the implications of what she was saying sunk in.

“*That’s* what you think I wanted to talk to you about?”

“Well, yeah,” she said simply. “Isn’t it? I mean, you asked Legend to send us out alone together so we could talk privately. That’s going a little far to tell someone you have a crush on them, but I guess some people just have a hard time getting up the courage normally, so...”

“That’s not what I wanted to —”

“Apocrypha!” a voice shouted.

My mouth clicked shut and cut off what I’d been about to say, so I changed it to, “We’ll get back to that in a minute.”

“Apocrypha!” the voice shouted again. “Apocrypha!”

I turned towards it, and a little boy raced along the sidewalk towards us, grinning broadly. He was alone, without any sign of his parents in sight. The people around him spared him a momentary glance, but most of them just kept on walking. Bystander effect, right?

“Apocrypha!” the boy squealed as he reached us, breathless. I paused a moment, then leaned down on my knees so I was closer to his eye level.

“Yes?”

He giggled and pumped his fists. “I got your name right! I got your name right!”

I offered him a smile, for lack of a better idea of what I should do. “Yes, you did.”

“I was scared I wouldn’t, cause it’s a really big name!” he told me excitedly. “But I got it right! Wow! It’s really you! Apocrypha!”

Fuck, fuck, how to deal with kids, how to deal with kids...

I glanced at Flechette, but she was trying to hide a grin behind her hand, so she wasn’t going to be any help. Ugh.

“Yes, it is. I’m Apocrypha, all right.”

Artoria? No. This kid was already starstruck, best not to risk it with anyone with high level charisma. Atalanta? Also no. She had a thing about kids, but I didn’t want to hit one of her buttons by accident, and an “abandoned” child would be mashing her biggest one with a sledgehammer. Medea? Hell no. Whatever you wanted to say about her, it didn’t change the fact that one of the versions of her legend had her *killing* her own kids out of spite.

“I saw your inner-view,” the little boy chattered away. “An-an’ you were *so cool!* An’ I had to practice your name, cause it’s a really hard name, and Mommy had to ‘splain some of the stuff you said, but is it really true you can turn into other heroes?”

Most of the rest of my usual repertoire also wasn’t anyone I wanted to risk exposing to a kid this young. Medusa? No. Flat out *no*. Nicolas? He was too much of a genius; there was no way he could interact with a kid patiently, not when he hadn’t even had the patience to train an *apprentice*. Most of the Round Table was also out, *especially* Lancelot, although Galahad might work in a pinch. Ditto the Ulster cycle, with particular concern for Aife and Cúchulainn (Connla, enough said). A lot of Greek heroes were out the window, too —

Ah. Except that one, maybe.

“Yes, I can.”

The little boy squealed again. “So cool!” he chanted, dancing from one foot to the other. “So cool!”

“Say,” I began, “what’s your name?”

“Arthur,” he told me, grinning so broadly his face might split in half. “Arthur Kingsley! I’m your biggest fan!”

There was some kind of irony here, I could just feel it.

“And how old are you?”

“Seven and a half!”

“How would you like to go flying with one of my heroes, Arthur?”

“Wait,” Flechette jumped in, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Wow, can I?”

“Yes,” I told him. Over my shoulder, I added, “It’s fine. We’re not going very high.”

“I’m gonna go flying!” Arthur crowed.

“Okay, Arthur. I just need you to take a few steps back...”

Almost visibly vibrating with his excitement, Arthur all but leapt five feet back, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. It gave me enough room, in any case.

Set. Install.

In an instant, I grew up and out, putting on dozens of pounds of muscle. My hair grew wild. My costume became a skirt and a thick cuirass. I was Herakles once again.

Why him, in particular? Because he might have killed his own kids when Hera cursed him with madness, but that was easily the worst moment in his entire life. Outside of that? He’d *adored* his

children, in ways and to degrees that a lot of my other heroes simply didn't. The loss of them had marked him so completely that he was fiercely protective of a child in need.

If I was looking for a father who knew how to interact with a young child, there weren't any in my current roster who were better suited.

"Wow," Arthur breathed. "That's Heruh... Um... Herka... Um..."

"Herakles," I corrected him gently. I had to bend forward and crouch down on my knees, and I was still almost twice his height. "So, are you ready to fly, Arthur?"

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!"

He held his arms out eagerly, like he was expecting me to attach a pair of wings to them so he could fly like an eagle. Herakles's amusement drew a chuckle out of me, and even knowing how much he cherished children, I was honestly surprised at how much warmth and affection he had for a complete and utter stranger. Just a random kid off the street.

Sorry, Arthur, but there won't be any actual flying involved.

"Then, *up* you go!"

I took hold of him under his arms and lifted him up, making sure to be gentle as I spun him around and around. Vague airplane noises came out of my mouth, only they sounded much more realistic with Herakles's rough, booming voice, and Arthur giggled and whooped and hollered all the while.

There was something in my chest that didn't belong to me, a feeling of complete and utter joy that could only have come from Herakles, and there was a moment where the world blurred, and the little boy in my hands was curly-haired and olive skinned, dressed in a tunic rather than a tee-shirt and jeans. The cityscape vanished from around us, replaced by towering marble constructs, and out of the corner of my eye, I thought I glimpsed a woman in a purple gown smiling fondly.

Then, Herakles reeled the memory back and I was back to swinging Arthur around. The contented feeling in my chest was still there, only not as strong and "full" as it had been before.

But as that memory faded, I felt incredibly silly. All the more so when our antics — and my Install, probably — drew in a crowd. What they must be thinking, to see this giant of a woman, so very obviously a cape, playing with a kid this young like he was her son or her little brother.

Herakles didn't care, and that helped me not to care, too. I could freak out about how ridiculous this all was later on, in the privacy of my room in the Brockton Bay PRT HQ.

After spinning him around a couple of times, I lifted Arthur up and over my head.

"Alright, Arthur," I said as I settled him in on my back. His hands took hold of a few locks of hair for balance, but I barely felt it or his weight across the back of my neck. "What do you say we go and find your mother, hm? I'm sure she must be looking for you."

“Okay,” Arthur said happily, like he wasn’t worried about being lost at all. He pointed back the way he came. “Mommy was over there.”

There was no one there, or at least, no thirty-something woman frantically searching for her missing son, which meant that she was much, much further back than just around the corner. Exactly how far had this kid followed me from?

“Okay, Arthur. I’m going to need your help, so I want you to try and remember where you last saw her. Think you can do that for me?”

“Yup!”

I started off in the direction he’d pointed out at a sedate pace, because there was no sense in rushing and startling the kid, but with Herakles, even my “slow” walk still had Flechette following beside me at a steady jog. Each step ate up half a dozen of hers, even when I tried to deliberately take shorter steps so she didn’t have to work as hard to keep up.

It was quickly made obvious that Arthur hadn’t been paying any attention to where he was going when he chased after us, because in short order, we’d looped around about three different streets and seemed no closer to finding his mother at all. After almost twenty minutes, the only thing we had to show for our trouble was the giant circle we’d walked in and a somewhat out of breath Flechette.

A hum vibrated in the back of my throat as I considered the streets with an eagle eye, head and shoulders and then head and shoulders again above everyone else. There was still no sign of Arthur’s mother.

That was when a thought occurred to me. The taping had been done earlier, but my interview itself would only have been aired maybe an hour or so ago. So where had he seen it, that it was so fresh in his mind?

“So, Arthur,” I began, “you said you saw my interview, right?”

“Yeah!” he giggled. “They played it on the jumboton —”

“The jumbotron, hm?” I said.

This kid followed me all the way from Times Square?

“What was your favorite part?”

“When you turned into King Arthur!” Arthur said. “Cause he has the same name as me, so that means he’s really cool!”

I chuckled.

“Yes, King Arthur is very cool.”

“I thought he was a boy, though. But when you turned into him, you were still a girl.”

“And Herakles isn’t?”

Arthur took a moment to think about that.

“Well, I thought Heracles was a boy, too, but I guess he must be a girl, since you’re a girl.”

“You’re half right,” I told him. “You see, Arthur, I’m a girl, and I like being a girl, so when I transform into one of my heroes, I stay a girl, even if the hero was a boy. Does that make sense to you?”

“I guess so,” he said dubiously.

I hummed. “Alright, Arthur, I think I know where your mother might be. Let’s go see, shall we?”

“Okay!”

Of course, I still didn’t really know my way around New York City, so Flechette had to lead the way, and a few minutes later, we stepped out into one of the city’s busiest and most famous sections: Times Square.

If I’d thought the rest of the city was packed, then Times Square blew everywhere else out of the water. It still boggled my mind, really, that any place could be so bustling in the middle of the day on a weekday, when I would’ve assumed most of these people would either be at work or school. But no, hundreds of people filled the streets, and each and every one of them was so preoccupied with their own lives that most of them didn’t even bother to look in my direction.

“Well,” I said, “do you see your mother, Arthur?”

“Um,” he hedged. “I don’t... see... There she is!”

He slapped the top of my head with one hand and pointed out into the crowd with the other, and when Heracles’s eagle eyes followed his finger, sure enough, I could see a harried-looking woman frantically trying to push through the throng of passersby.

“Mommy!” Arthur shouted into the cacophony of honks and horns and hollering that drowned the street, leveraging himself up with one hand on my head as he waved wildly with the other.

“Mommy! Over here, Mommy!”

I had no idea what, exactly, singled us out — who am I kidding, I was *nine feet tall* — but the woman saw us, and her struggle through the crowd gained direction. I started over towards her, too, and the throng parted around me. Those that didn’t were simply pushed out of the way by my stride, but evidently decided discretion was the better part of valor, because none of them tried to pick a fight over it.

“Arthur!” the woman shouted back. “Arthur!”

“Mommy!”

Arthur pounded on my head, bouncing up and down on my shoulders, so I knelt down, lifted him off, and set him back on his own two feet. Instantly, he raced off and leapt into his mother's arms.

"Arthur!" she cried, holding him tight. Something in my chest ached. It felt like longing. "Oh, thank God. Oh — Arthur, do you have any idea how worried I was? I was looking all over for you! Where did you go, you silly boy?"

"But Mommy, I saw her!" Arthur protested. "I saw 'pocrypha!"

"You saw Apocrypha?" she repeated, somewhere between relief and disbelief.

That was about when she finally realized I was there, and her mouth dropped open as she looked *up* into the chiseled perfection of Herakles's face.

"You're..."

"Herakles can be a little intimidating, I know," I said, not unkindly.

Release.

"So maybe this'll make things a little easier?" I went on, back to normal.

"Aw, Heracles is gone!" Arthur whined.

"Thank you for bringing him back to me," his mother said after a moment. "I'm sorry if he bothered you at all, he's just been so excited all morning..."

"It wasn't that big of a deal, honestly." I gave her a reassuring smile. "Herakles was happy to indulge him."

She didn't quite look like she knew what to make of that, but she didn't press the issue or start backing away like I was crazy, so I didn't let it bother me, either.

"Thank you," she said again.

"Have a good day."

She let out a frazzled chuckle. "I think you made his *year*."

I couldn't do anything to that but smile, and she turned away, scolding the boy in her arms, "Goodness, Arthur, what have I told you about running around like that? I'm going to need to get a leash at this rate!"

"Aw, but Mom!"

My good deed of the day done, I left back towards the street I'd come from, where Flechette was waiting for me, arms crossed and grinning like a loon.

"So?" she asked. "How's your biggest fan?"

The look I sent her could not possibly have conveyed exactly how unimpressed I was.

“I get enough of that from my best friend, so don’t you start, too.”

She held her hands up in surrender, chuckling. “Okay, okay! Consider my lips zipped.”

A sigh hissed past my lips.

“Anyway.”

“Right. You were saying, earlier?”

I chewed on my bottom lip, trying to figure out how to phrase this.

“So...my powers come with lots of different skills and knowledge and abilities.”

“Right, you’re a Trump.”

“Eidolon style, yeah. A...kind of precognition comes with some of them, so I’ve seen a few...we can call them ‘possible futures.’ Things that might have happened, in a different life.”

She made a noise of understanding. “So you *weren’t* trying to confess to me or anything like that. Come out of the closet or whatever.”

“No. Sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any misunderstandings.”

“I’m guessing, then, that I featured in one of these possible futures you’re talking about?”

“Yeah.”

“...Did I die?”

“What? No, no, nothing like that!” I rushed to assure her. “Just... You found someone. When you got transferred to Brockton Bay.”

She gave me a strange look. It might have been easier to puzzle out if I could see her eyes.

“I...found someone,” she repeated slowly.

“Someone you cared for a lot,” I clarified. “Enough to quit the Wards for her.”

“O...kay. Did...did *she* die?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “No, she didn’t die either. It’s not... I honestly don’t know how serious you guys got. Will get? Would have gotten. Ugh. Anyway, you got serious enough to quit the Wards so you could stay with her.”

“I’m...still not seeing what the problem is.”

“The problem is that I might have prevented you from ever meeting entirely on accident,” I told her. “And I’m...trying to do something about that, now.”

She eyed me with another weird, hard to parse look on her face.

“So...you’re trying to set me up with the girl who you think might be the girl of my dreams.”

“Basically...?”

Flechette shook her head, chuckling. “Wow, this is not at *all* what I expected when I came out here, today. I thought you wanted to get me alone so you could ask me out yourself.”

I grimaced. “No.”

“Ouch!” she clasped her hands to her chest. “Shot down, just like that!”

I shook my head.

“No, it’s just...” I sighed. “A lot of the things I’ve changed about those possible futures, they’ve been really positive things. But what happened to you...”

“And I wouldn’t have known if you hadn’t said anything,” she told me. “You’re going out of your way for this, and you didn’t really need to, you know. I would’ve been fine.”

Maybe so. Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference in the long run and she would have found someone else, even someone better, somewhere down the line. Just because Parian and Flechette had connected and gotten so close in Khepri’s timeline, with the circumstances as extraordinary as they were, didn’t mean that they were compatible in a time and place where those stressors didn’t exist to push them together.

Hooking up in the face of the end of the world didn’t make you soulmates.

Even so...

“...I just wanted to make you happy.”

“You already have,” she said fondly.

Naturally, that was when our radios interrupted us.

“Wards team — Apocrypha, Flechette, come in.”

My hand shot up to my microphone. Across from me, Flechette’s hand went to hers.

“I’m here,” I said.

“We hear you, Console, go ahead,” said Flechette.

“You’re being recalled, effective immediately. Get back to base ASAP.”

“What?”

“Why?” I asked.

“There’s been an incident.”

My mind raced with the possibilities. A riot? The Fallen? The Teeth? No, no, it should still have been too early for either of them to make it all the way down to Brockton Bay. Was I about to get pulled into the assault on the Adepts, here, as Khepri had been, only a month or two earlier than expected?

“An incident?”

“There was an attack on the Brockton Bay PRT HQ. The casualties are still being accounted for.”

My heart froze in my chest.

“What?” I asked faintly.

“Director Piggot has been confirmed among them.”